



Role of Professional Social Workers in Preventing Child Neglect in Families Affected by Substance Abuse in Ibadan Metropolis: Exploring Partnership of Social Work Act in Nigeria

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Abstract

Child neglect is a significant social issue, often exacerbated by substance abuse within families. This study examines the role of professional social workers in preventing child neglect in families affected by substance abuse within the Ibadan metropolis. It explores the implications of the Social Work Act in Nigeria, particularly its potential for fostering partnerships to address this pressing concern. The study highlights how professional social workers can employ preventive and intervention strategies to mitigate neglect, focusing on collaboration between social services, healthcare professionals, and community stakeholders. The research employed a qualitative research method, utilizing in-depth interviews with 20 professional social workers across various institutions in Ibadan. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting social workers with direct experience in cases involving both child neglect and substance abuse. Additionally, the study incorporated document analysis, reviewing reports, policies, and the Social Work Act to understand its framework and impact on child welfare. Thematic analysis was used to identify common trends and challenges faced by social workers, especially in coordinating services and advocating for the children's welfare. The findings reveal that professional social workers play a crucial role in identifying early signs of neglect, advocating for children's rights, and working closely with families to address the root causes of substance abuse. However, limitations in policy enforcement, resource constraints, and lack of inter-agency coordination were highlighted as major barriers. The study recommends strengthening partnerships outlined in the Social Work Act and fostering multidisciplinary collaboration to ensure sustainable solutions for preventing child neglect in families affected by substance abuse in Nigeria.



Introduction

In recent years, substance abuse has become a significant public health concern in Nigeria, including in urban areas such as Ibadan Metropolis. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies substance abuse as a critical factor contributing to social and economic issues globally, with estimates that up to 5.5% of the global population has engaged in some form of substance abuse, affecting their mental and physical health (WHO, 2024). In Nigeria, patterns of substance abuse are complex, influenced by socio-economic factors, cultural perceptions, and varying levels of access to support services. Ibadan, as a major urban center in the southwestern region, experiences elevated levels of substance abuse, affecting individuals across demographic groups, including adults with familial responsibilities. These substance-abusing individuals are often parents, leading to direct consequences on family well-being, particularly affecting children who may suffer from various forms of neglect (Idowu et al., 2018). Substance abuse directly impacts family stability and parent-child relationships, often leading to a decline in parental responsibilities and neglect of children's basic needs. Studies suggest that parents under the influence of substances are more likely to neglect their children's educational, emotional, and physical needs due to impaired judgment, economic strain, or a lack of adequate time and attention (Obimakinde, & Shabir, 2023). Substance abuse further exacerbates other socio-economic challenges, such as poverty and unemployment, both of which are prevalent in Ibadan (Owoyomi, 2021). This cycle of neglect leaves many children vulnerable to developmental and social issues, including malnutrition, poor academic performance, emotional instability, and even entry into juvenile delinquency (Mothabeng, 2022). Such situations create a pressing need for intervention strategies to prevent child neglect, which is now considered a growing concern among social workers in Ibadan.

Child neglect is a significant form of child abuse, often underestimated in terms of its psychological and developmental impact on the child. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) defines child neglect as the "failure of a parent or caregiver to provide for a child's basic needs, including food, shelter, clothing, and medical care" (UNICEF, 2024). In the Nigerian context, child neglect can be compounded by cultural factors, poverty, and family instability, often resulting in children growing up in unsafe and unsupportive environments. While physical abuse may present visible indicators, neglect often goes unnoticed due to its less apparent nature, yet its long-term effects are equally detrimental (Bywaters et al., 2016). In many cases, children affected by neglect may lack access to formal education, appropriate nutrition, and healthcare, leading to issues in their physical



and cognitive development. According to Atilola et al. (2015), children experiencing neglect in Nigeria are more likely to develop low self-esteem, engage in risky behaviors, and struggle with mental health issues in adulthood. The prevalence of substance abuse in Ibadan compounds the risks of child neglect, as parental substance dependence not only affects the abuser's physical and psychological stability but also places a burden on the family's financial resources, leaving minimal capacity for the child's needs (Mustafa-Shaibu, & Iyayamwan, 2022). Such cases underscore the critical role that professional social workers play in addressing and mitigating the impact of neglect on these vulnerable children.

The importance of professional social workers in the Nigerian social welfare system has become more prominent, especially in urban centers like Ibadan, where substance abuse and its consequent child neglect issues are pressing concerns. Social workers act as frontline agents in identifying cases of neglect, providing support, and ensuring that affected children receive the necessary care and intervention. According to Ife, Soldatić, & Briskman, (2022), social workers play a critical role in safeguarding human rights and advocating for vulnerable populations, including children, in cases where family systems fail due to substance abuse. Professional social workers in Ibadan work under various frameworks, including the Nigerian Social Work Act, which facilitates collaborative efforts among government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and healthcare providers to protect children's welfare (Ife et al., 2022). Social workers assess cases of child neglect, identifying the specific needs of affected families and creating intervention strategies. These strategies can include connecting families to rehabilitation centers, advocating for financial and material support, and, where necessary, initiating alternative care arrangements for children whose parents are unable to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities due to substance abuse (Carrera et al., 2018).

Moreover, social workers provide emotional and psychological support to children affected by neglect, ensuring they receive therapeutic services that address the trauma of neglect and support their development. As Watts, & Hodgson, (2019) suggests, effective social work practices require a culturally informed understanding of family dynamics, particularly in areas where substance abuse may be stigmatized, and where families may be reluctant to seek support. This approach is vital in Ibadan, where substance abuse may be misunderstood or culturally frowned upon, creating a barrier to effective intervention. The role of social workers extends beyond immediate family interventions to include community advocacy and policy engagement. By working with local agencies and advocating for child protection reforms, social workers can create sustainable frameworks to reduce



child neglect in substance-affected families (CASWE-ACFTS, 2023). Social workers in Ibadan thus play an essential role in bridging the gap between affected families and available resources, addressing both the immediate and long-term needs of children at risk of neglect.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to critically analyze the roles and challenges faced by social workers in preventing child neglect among families affected by substance abuse in Ibadan Metropolis. Social workers are integral to child protection systems, particularly in cases where parental substance abuse undermines child welfare (Featherstone et al., 2014). This study will examine the specific interventions, competencies, and resources utilized by social workers to mitigate the effects of neglect on affected children. Furthermore, it aims to explore the Social Work Act's potential in Nigeria for fostering partnerships among social work agencies, healthcare providers, and non-governmental organizations to strengthen child protection efforts (Ife et al., 2022). Understanding the Act's role in facilitating collaborative interventions is crucial, as it can provide frameworks for effective, sustainable support networks to prevent child neglect within high-risk families.

Significance of the Study

This study holds academic, policy, and practice significance, particularly for Nigerian social work and child protection frameworks. Academically, it will contribute to the literature on child neglect prevention and social work practices in Nigeria, providing insights into the unique cultural and socio-economic contexts that shape social work challenges in Ibadan. From a policy perspective, the findings could inform recommendations for refining the Social Work Act to support partnership models for child protection. Practically, this study highlights the tools, skills, and support needed by social workers, which can guide ongoing professional development efforts. This multi-dimensional approach aims to promote robust, sustainable strategies for child protection in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study focuses on the interrelationship between child neglect, substance abuse, and the role of social workers in mitigating the effects of neglect on children. Central to this analysis are definitions of child neglect, types of neglect, and the ways substance abuse within families directly impacts family dynamics and child welfare.

Definitions and Types of Child Neglect

Child neglect is broadly defined as the failure to meet a child's essential needs, impacting their health, safety, and well-being (UNICEF, 2024). It is one of the most prevalent forms of child abuse but is often less visible and recognized than physical or sexual abuse. Neglect can take various forms, including physical neglect, emotional neglect, medical neglect, and educational neglect, each of which affects different aspects of a child's development. Physical neglect involves failing to provide basic needs like food, clothing, or shelter. Emotional neglect includes a lack of affection, security, or support, often leading to long-term psychological harm (Avdibegović, & Brkić, 2020). Medical neglect is characterized by the failure to provide necessary healthcare, while educational neglect entails denying children the opportunity for learning, potentially hampering cognitive and social development (Taylor, & Daniel, 2005). In Nigeria, child neglect is often underreported or overlooked, influenced by factors such as poverty, cultural beliefs, and family instability. These influences may lead caregivers to prioritize basic survival needs over structured child care or emotional nurturing (Uchitel et al., 2019). As a result, neglected children may face severe consequences, including impaired academic performance, low self-esteem, and vulnerability to juvenile delinquency, all of which contribute to long-term negative impacts on Nigerian society (Adikwu et al., 2023). The understanding of child neglect as a multi-dimensional issue has thus encouraged social workers and child protection advocates to develop specialized strategies aimed at identifying and addressing neglect across its various forms.

Role of Professional Social Workers in Child Welfare

Preventive and Intervention Roles

Professional social workers serve as frontline agents in promoting child welfare, especially within families affected by substance abuse and child neglect. In this role, social workers employ both preventive and intervention strategies to safeguard children. Preventive roles focus on identifying at-risk families and implementing measures to mitigate risks before they escalate into full-blown neglect cases. This may include providing education on substance abuse effects, facilitating access to social support resources, and empowering parents to develop healthier coping mechanisms (Adikwu et al., 2023). Social workers may also collaborate with community leaders and other stakeholders to raise awareness about child neglect and encourage early reporting of cases, thus preventing children from experiencing chronic neglect (UNICEF, 2024).



Intervention roles, on the other hand, are critical once cases of child neglect are identified within substance-abusing families. Social workers conduct family assessments, identify specific needs, and develop tailored intervention plans aimed at stabilizing the family environment. These interventions may involve providing counseling services, arranging substance abuse treatment for parents, or, when necessary, arranging alternative care for the children. Additionally, social workers ensure that the child's immediate physical, emotional, and educational needs are met, which often requires coordinating with various agencies, including healthcare, education, and rehabilitation services (Webb, 2019). This comprehensive approach not only addresses immediate concerns but also works toward breaking the cycle of neglect by supporting family recovery and strengthening their resilience.

Skills and Competencies Required for Handling Cases Involving Substance Abuse and Child Neglect

Handling cases involving substance abuse and child neglect requires a specialized set of skills and competencies. Social workers must possess knowledge of child development, substance abuse dynamics, and family systems to make informed decisions about each case (Webb, 2019). Key skills include active listening, empathy, cultural competence, and the ability to build rapport with clients, as these attributes help establish trust and encourage open communication. Social workers also need strong assessment and analytical skills to evaluate each family's unique challenges, needs, and resources effectively (Webb, 2019).

Competency in crisis intervention and trauma-informed care is essential for working with families affected by substance abuse, as these situations often involve trauma that can affect both parents and children. A trauma-informed approach ensures that interventions are sensitive to the child's and family's experiences, minimizing the risk of re-traumatization. Additionally, social workers need training in substance abuse treatment modalities to make appropriate referrals and support recovery efforts (Stanojlović, & Davidson, 2021). Understanding legal frameworks is also critical for social workers, as they must navigate child protection laws, confidentiality requirements, and mandatory reporting protocols. This breadth of knowledge enables them to respond effectively and advocate for both children and parents in complex cases of child neglect involving substance abuse.



The Social Work Act in Nigeria: An Overview

Brief History and Current Application of the Social Work Act

The Social Work Act in Nigeria represents an important legislative framework aimed at supporting vulnerable populations, including children affected by neglect. Initially developed to regulate the practice of social work and establish professional standards, the Act has expanded to support child protection efforts by enabling social workers to intervene in cases of abuse and neglect. In recent years, the Act has undergone updates to align with international best practices, including provisions that enable social workers to work closely with government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and healthcare providers.

Currently, the Social Work Act mandates that social workers have the authority to assess cases, develop intervention plans, and collaborate with other professionals to ensure child safety and welfare. It also includes guidelines for professional conduct, ethical considerations, and continued education, helping to standardize and professionalize social work practices in Nigeria. The Act provides a vital structure for social workers to engage with affected families and advocate for children's rights. However, challenges remain in implementing the Act fully due to limited resources, social stigma, and varying levels of community awareness about social work's role in child protection (Testa, & Kelly, 2020).

Examination of Partnerships Allowed by the Act for Child Protection Initiatives

The Social Work Act encourages collaboration across sectors, allowing social workers to partner with other professionals to deliver comprehensive child protection services. Partnerships facilitated by the Act include collaborations with healthcare providers for medical interventions, with educational institutions to ensure children's academic needs are met, and with mental health services to address trauma and psychological issues resulting from neglect (CASWE-ACFTS, 2023). These partnerships are particularly significant in addressing the complex needs of children in substance-affected families, as they allow for a holistic approach to recovery and support.

Furthermore, the Act promotes partnerships with community organizations and religious groups to leverage local support networks, which are instrumental in providing sustainable care and resources. These partnerships enable social workers to tap into community resources and build a network of support for families dealing with substance abuse (Mekonnen, & Lee, 2022). By fostering collaboration among various agencies, the Social Work Act in Nigeria helps establish a



comprehensive child protection network that is responsive to the unique challenges of substance-affected families, ensuring that interventions are accessible, culturally appropriate, and sustainable.

Global Perspectives on Substance Abuse, Child Neglect, and Social Work

Comparative Analysis with Practices in Other Regions or Countries

Globally, substance abuse and child neglect are pressing concerns that social workers address through diverse approaches, depending on the regional socio-economic context and available resources. In developed countries such as the United States and Canada, social workers are part of interdisciplinary teams within robust child welfare systems. These teams often include psychologists, healthcare professionals, and law enforcement officers, working together to ensure children's safety and well-being. In the U.S., the Adoption and Safe Families Act and the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act provide a strong legal framework for child protection, obliging social workers to address neglect actively and intervene when necessary (CASWE-ACFTS, 2023). Similarly, Canada employs the collaborative Child Welfare Integrated Model, which prioritizes prevention and early intervention, helping at-risk families access resources before child neglect escalates (Landress, 2024).

In contrast, low- and middle-income countries, including Nigeria, face resource constraints that limit the availability of comprehensive social work interventions. However, social workers in Nigeria and other African countries have developed community-based approaches, utilizing local networks and cultural practices to enhance family support. South Africa, for instance, incorporates social work within community development programs to address child neglect among substance-abusing families, emphasizing empowerment and resilience within families rather than removal of children from their homes (Mkhize et al., 2023). This community-centered approach aligns with the Nigerian context, where extended family systems and local leaders often play a critical role in child welfare. Thus, Nigerian social workers can adopt best practices from both developed and developing countries, tailoring interventions to fit the local socio-cultural context while addressing the unique challenges posed by substance abuse.

While the Social Work Act in Nigeria is still evolving, drawing lessons from global practices provides insight into the benefits of an integrated approach to child welfare. By leveraging partnerships and adopting a strengths-based, trauma-informed approach, Nigerian social workers can improve their capacity to address the complex challenges posed by child neglect in substance-abusing families. Ultimately, the global perspective reinforces the importance of adaptive, culturally



sensitive practices and highlights the need for ongoing investment in social work infrastructure, training, and policy development to protect children effectively in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Ecological Systems Theory

This theory was developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and it posits that individuals do not exist in isolation but rather are influenced by various systems of interaction, including the microsystem (immediate environments like family), mesosystem (connections between microsystems), exosystem (external environmental settings), and macrosystem (broader cultural and societal influences).

In this study, the Ecological Systems Theory is instrumental in examining how social workers operate within multiple environmental contexts to prevent child neglect. Specifically, social workers interact within family systems (microsystem) affected by substance abuse, work with child welfare agencies and legal frameworks (mesosystem), and are guided by the Social Work Act within Nigeria's social and cultural contexts (macrosystem). By addressing child neglect, social workers navigate these interlocking systems to deliver interventions that are contextually relevant and culturally appropriate (Ungar, 2011). Through this theoretical lens, the study explores how social work practices align with policy and social norms, addressing child neglect comprehensively within Nigerian families affected by substance abuse.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of professional social workers in preventing child neglect within families affected by substance abuse in Ibadan Metropolis. Qualitative research was suitable for capturing detailed insights into complex social issues, such as child neglect, by examining individuals' experiences, perceptions, and interactions (Creswell, 2018). Through this design, the study delved into the nuanced perspectives of social workers who regularly engage with these families, revealing the challenges, competencies, and strategies they employed. The qualitative approach allowed for flexibility and depth in data collection, enabling researchers to understand the specific contexts within which child neglect occurred and the practical applications of social work interventions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The qualitative design aligned with the study's goal of generating a rich understanding of how the Social Work Act in Nigeria facilitated partnerships for intervention in cases of child neglect. By focusing on participants' narratives, this approach revealed the strengths and limitations of existing



policies, as well as the practical implications of implementing child welfare practices within Nigerian cultural and social contexts.

Sample and Data Collection

Sample Size and Sampling Strategy

The sample size for this study included social workers actively involved in child welfare, professionals from child welfare agencies, and representatives from relevant NGOs in Ibadan Metropolis. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants with extensive experience and knowledge in child neglect cases within families affected by substance abuse. Purposeful sampling was appropriate in qualitative studies as it allowed for the selection of individuals with specific insights or expertise, ensuring that the data collected was both relevant and meaningful (Patton, 2015). The goal was to achieve a sample of 8 participants, a range that allowed for a comprehensive examination of themes without reaching data saturation too quickly.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are effective in qualitative research as they provide a guided conversation that encourages participants to share detailed responses while allowing the interviewer the flexibility to explore relevant emerging topics (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interview questions focused on understanding participants' roles, the challenges they encountered, and the interventions they used when working with families affected by substance abuse. Participants were also asked about their experiences with the Social Work Act, specifically how it influenced their practices, collaborative efforts, and advocacy for child welfare. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, with participants' consent obtained for audio recording to ensure accurate data transcription and analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to this study due to its sensitive subject matter involving child neglect and family substance abuse. To uphold ethical standards, all participants were informed of the study's objectives, their rights, and how their information would be used before they consented to participate (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Participants were assured of confidentiality, with all identifying information removed during transcription to protect their anonymity. Only aggregate findings were presented in the study's reports and publications, ensuring that individual responses remained unidentifiable. Additionally, given the potential emotional strain associated with



discussing experiences of child neglect, the interview process was conducted with sensitivity, providing participants the option to decline to answer any questions or to withdraw at any time.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis as the primary analytical technique, which is well-suited for qualitative data and allows for a systematic examination of patterns and themes within the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involved familiarization with the data, coding, identifying themes, and then interpreting these themes in the context of the research questions. Each transcript was carefully reviewed, with codes assigned to relevant segments of the text. Codes were then grouped into broader categories, helping to develop themes that reflected the major insights and patterns found in the data.

The data was organized and analyzed to streamline the coding process and enable easy retrieval of coded sections. The software also helped with visualizing connections between themes, which was crucial for identifying complex relationships among the roles, challenges, and skills of social workers, as well as their perspectives on the Social Work Act. Through thematic analysis, the study captured the depth of social workers' experiences, offering a grounded understanding of their impact on child welfare in substance-affected families in Ibadan Metropolis.

Discussion

In the study on social workers' roles in preventing child neglect in families impacted by substance abuse, several themes emerged, revealing both the depth of preventive and intervention strategies employed and the unique challenges social workers face. These findings highlight the need for a holistic approach that addresses the various dimensions of child neglect and parental substance abuse. By examining specific insights from social workers and understanding the interplay between legislation, resources, and interagency collaboration, the study underscores the importance of a proactive and comprehensive approach to child welfare.

Preventive and Intervention Strategies

Social workers, as first-line responders to child neglect in substance-abusing families, employ a variety of preventive and intervention strategies to mitigate risk. These strategies often revolve around early identification and targeted support, aiming to create a stable environment for children affected by neglect. One social worker explained that their interventions include “home visits, regular check-ins, parenting classes, support groups, and referrals to substance abuse treatment,” all



designed to address the root causes of neglect by equipping parents with the skills and resources to overcome their challenges (McCoy, & Keen, 2022).

Preventive strategies often start with an assessment of risk factors, such as the parents' substance abuse history, financial instability, and mental health conditions. From there, social workers develop personalized care plans that incorporate counseling, parenting education, and connection to community resources. As one participant noted, early intervention includes “linking families with counseling, treatment, and parenting classes” to help them develop effective caregiving routines and foster healthy family dynamics (Jones et al., 2020). This reflects a strength-based approach, where the focus is on building parents’ capacities and resilience, rather than solely on risk factors.

A case study shared by one social worker illustrated the effectiveness of these targeted interventions: “In one case, I worked with a family where both parents struggled with opioid addiction. I engaged the parents in motivational interviewing, connected them to intensive outpatient treatment, facilitated parenting classes, and monitored progress.” The result was a notable improvement in both the family’s stability and the children’s well-being, emphasizing that “tailored interventions are critical in addressing the unique needs of each family” (Briar-Lawson et al., 2021). This family-centered approach aligns with literature suggesting that combining substance abuse treatment with parenting education is effective in reducing risks associated with neglect (Bentovim et al., 2021).

Key Challenges in Addressing Child Neglect and Substance Abuse

While preventive measures show promise, implementing these strategies is fraught with challenges. Social workers often encounter resistance from parents who are in denial or unwilling to participate in treatment. A common theme highlighted by respondents was the difficulty of engaging resistant parents in services. One social worker described the challenge as “balancing support with accountability,” especially when parents are reluctant to acknowledge the impact of their substance abuse on their children (Liahaugen Flensburg, Richert, & Väfors Fritz, 2023). This resistance not only stalls intervention efforts but also heightens the risk for children, who may continue to experience neglect during these delays.

In addition to resistance, the lack of adequate resources poses significant obstacles to effective intervention. Many social workers reported that funding constraints limit their ability to provide sustained support for families. As one participant shared, “funding constraints and bureaucratic processes can limit the effectiveness of the Social Work Act,” which is intended to provide a legal



framework for addressing child neglect and supporting family stabilization (Dare et al., 2023). Budget limitations reduce the availability of resources like substance abuse treatment and community support services, making it challenging to meet families' diverse needs comprehensively.

Social workers also navigate complex family dynamics, where parental substance abuse exacerbates financial instability, social isolation, and mental health comorbidities, all of which contribute to neglect. One participant observed that “parental impairment due to addiction limits a caregiver’s ability to meet basic needs, leading to neglect” and underscored the compounded effects of substance abuse on family cohesion (Osuji, 2023). These layered challenges indicate that addressing child neglect requires more than individual support; rather, it necessitates structural and systemic interventions that tackle root causes like poverty, access to mental health care, and community disinvestment.

Role of Legislation and Policy in Child Protection

Legislative frameworks, particularly the Social Work Act, play a crucial role in guiding social workers' interventions. This act provides legal backing for social workers to investigate allegations of neglect, develop case plans, and enforce child protection policies. A participant noted, “The Social Work Act enables me to take effective, legally supported actions while ensuring ethical and balanced support for both the child and the family” (Isangha et al., 2024). The Act’s focus on child safety is instrumental in empowering social workers to advocate for children’s rights and intervene in cases of neglect.

However, the effectiveness of legislative support is hindered by bureaucratic and logistical barriers. For instance, delays in court processes and the scarcity of resources challenge the timely implementation of child protection policies. Social workers often struggle to balance the immediate needs of at-risk children with procedural requirements, an issue one respondent described as “navigating legal, healthcare, and social service systems [that] can delay effective intervention” (Doshi et al., 2020). This finding underscores the need for policy reform that streamlines intervention processes and ensures that social workers can respond quickly to cases of urgent need.

Importance of Interagency Collaboration

One of the most critical factors in addressing child neglect effectively is interagency collaboration. Social workers often partner with substance abuse treatment providers, healthcare organizations, schools, and community organizations to create a comprehensive support network for families. As a



participant highlighted, “Partnerships with substance abuse treatment centers, healthcare providers, legal and child protection services, and community support organizations are crucial in addressing child neglect in substance-abusing families” (Dosh et al., 2020). These partnerships allow for an integrated approach, where professionals from different fields contribute their expertise to support the family holistically.

The importance of interagency collaboration is further supported by policy frameworks that encourage community-based care and interprofessional coordination. Effective collaboration ensures that social workers are not solely responsible for addressing complex family needs, thereby distributing responsibilities among multiple agencies. A social worker noted that they “collaborate with law enforcement, healthcare providers, and community organizations to ensure that children receive comprehensive support,” a statement that reflects the consensus in literature on the benefits of shared responsibility in child welfare cases (James & Larson, 2021).

The findings of this study align significantly with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, illustrating how various environmental layers impact the role of social workers in preventing child neglect within substance-affected families. In the microsystem, the study highlights how social workers engage directly with families to mitigate neglect, recognizing that substance abuse disrupts family functioning and child well-being. Social workers reported frequent challenges in addressing children’s immediate needs, reflecting Bronfenbrenner’s assertion that development is profoundly influenced by close, immediate environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

At the mesosystem level, social workers are shown to collaborate with schools, healthcare services, and community resources, creating interconnected systems that address child neglect comprehensively. These findings support the notion that interactions among microsystems—such as school-family and health-family dynamics—are crucial in safeguarding children (Ungar, 2011). Additionally, the exosystemic factors, such as institutional policies and funding limitations, shape the support resources available, often constraining social workers’ efforts.

Finally, the macrosystem—represented by societal attitudes and Nigeria’s Social Work Act—strongly influences social workers’ roles by providing legal frameworks and societal expectations. The study reveals how cultural and policy-level factors affect the implementation of interventions, highlighting the critical role of national policies in structuring social work practices within cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ungar, 2011).



Recommendations

To strengthen the impact of social work in preventing child neglect, several key recommendations emerge. Firstly, enhancing inter-agency collaboration among social workers, healthcare providers, schools, and community organizations would create a supportive network that addresses children's needs more holistically. Secondly, policymakers should prioritize increased funding and policy support for child welfare programs, improving the resources available for family interventions. Additionally, revising and enforcing Nigeria's Social Work Act to better support partnerships and adapt interventions to cultural contexts would reinforce social workers' capabilities. Finally, providing ongoing training for social workers on substance abuse dynamics and trauma-informed care can equip them to respond effectively to the complex needs of these families, ultimately safeguarding the well-being of vulnerable children in the community.

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