

Impact of Covid-19 and Covid-19 Lockdown on the Socio-Psychological Welbeing of Children: The Nigeria Experience

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Abstract

COVID-19 has catastrophic impact on the wellbeing of people around the globe. Children are not left out of the negative impact of this novel virus. Not less than 3 million children have been infected by COVID-19 and 1.2 million children have died as a result of the virus. Different measures were adopted by different country to tackle the menace of the pandemic. One measure which was prominent in Nigeria was lockdown. This study was therefore designed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 and COVID-19 lockdown on the socio-Psychological wellbeing and development of children in Nigeria. This study adopted descriptive approach and the use of secondary data to support study argument. The result of the study shows that so many children in Nigeria have lost parent and guidance to the COVID-19 pandemic, infected parents and guidance are unable to take care of their ward; children were the most vulnerable group. The study also discovered that COVID-19 lockdown exposed children to sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Children were locked down in the same homes and environment with their abusers. Not less than 1000 cases of rape have being reported in Nigeria since the index case of the virus and the consequent lockdown. The study therefor recommends that social workers should advocate for stronger legislative actions that will make stringent laws that will punish and deter child abuse offenders. Social workers should also carry out sensitization campaigns which is geared towards encouraging communities to report incidences of child abuse to appropriate authorities as against the culture of silence prevalent in the Nigeria.

Key Words: Impact, COVID-19, Lockdown, Children, Social Work, Nigeria

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I. INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus or COVID-19 has infected more than 1.3 million people globally. Perhaps for the first time in several decades, the world is witnessing a type of disease that does not discriminate based on age, gender or even race. The virus emanated from the Wuhan province of china and has since spread to every part of the world. The disease has been categorized as infectious and contagious by health experts. As a result, the world Health Organization (WHO) and Government alike, have advised their citizens to practice good hygiene by washing their hands with soap and water or even alcohol based hand sanitizer while keeping their nose and mouth covered with a mask (World Health Organisation, 2020).

As the news on COVID-19 continued to spread and more information was learned about the disease, government all over the world led by the World Health Organisation impressed on the populace to practice physical distancing and this advice culminated in mass self-isolation and grinding halt most economic activities, as Nigerians were expected to stay safe at home. But unfortunately developing nations such as Nigeria already face immense pressure with lack of affordable housing for millions of Nigerians, a broken healthcare system with inadequate facilities to cater for the growing population, epileptic power supply among a host of other challenges (WHO, 2020). These challenges have left lower-income households more vulnerable.

Although the Nigerian government has provided cash relief of about 3.6 million naira to poor households during this lockdown, but it is said to be a tiny figure in a country where 95.9 million people live in extreme poverty. Consequently, some citizens especially those who earn daily income have begun to flout the order on the excuse that the government's palliatives did not reach them and they could not cope with the hunger and untold hardship that the lockdown brought on them, as Nigerians were expected to stay safe at home.

Impact of COVID-19 lockdown on children

Aside from children getting the virus as the lockdown law is being broken, they are also more vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic. Children witness families struggling with government lockdowns that prevent their parents from earning a living. Children may lose a parent or an adult caregiver as a result of the virus. For most children, home represents a source of security and safety but for others, the opposite is tragically the case (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2020). Violence by caregivers is the most common form of violence experienced by children during the COVID-19 lockdown. Such violence is more likely to occur while families are confined at home and experiencing intense stress and anxiety. Lockdowns also present opportunities for child abusers to harm children. In most cases, children are rarely in a position to report such egregious acts (Save A Child Mission, 2020). Yet, at a time of increased need, children no longer have the same access to teachers to report incidents at home. According WHO (2020) one in four children under 5 years lives with a mother who suffers from intimate partner violence, nearly 75% of toddlers age 2-4 years regularly suffer physical punishment and or psychological violence at the hands of caregivers and parents. In Nigeria, various types of child abuse experienced by children since the lockdown cuts across physical, mental, emotional and sexual abuse; child labour, child neglect and maltreatment, economic abuse, among others. Before and during the lockdown, several children have been raised in highly sexualized environment or homes, including being exposed to or be at the receiving end of sexual harassment, indecent exposure denied access to education based on culture and religion, acts of intimidation, humiliation, manipulation and threats, forced or conditional separation from families (Gender Based Violence Sub Sector – Nigeria, 2020). Children who are physically abused are often whipped, beaten, kicked or sometimes scalded with boiling water or hot oil, other times they are pushed, flogged with hardwood, inflicted or wounded in their private parts with the use of knives, blades, peppers among others (Working Fingers International Initiative, 2019). Physically abused children are commonly placed among children taken into homes of their guardians as houseboys or housemaids, in some other cases, the parents or guardians are responsible for the abuse. This was the case of a fifteen-year-old Temi who leaves with her mother's eldest sister in Lagos during the lockdown, she just finished mopping the floor when her aunt, walked into the parlor to inspect her work. Temi was lying on the floor when she walked in expressing her disapproval at the quality of the work done, dashed into the kitchen and came back with well boiled water, and pored it on the lower part of Temi's body burning over 90% of her skin off (Umukoro, 2020). Similar to this is a case of an 11-year-old son, whose mother poured hot boiling water on for spoiling her phone. This incident took place during the second week of the lockdown (Umukoro, 2020).

In most part of Nigeria, minors and adolescents who experience child labour or often turned into primary or partial economic providers, doing odious work that puts undue physical strain, pain and injury on their bodies, physical wellbeing in addition to exposure to harsh environmental elements, abusers, kidnappers among others. Many are exposed to street hawking, denied the opportunity to attend school, trafficking of children in armed conflict, exposed to physical fights, dangerous cars on the go while selling on highways and streets (Working Fingers International Initiative, 2019)

International Labour Organisation (2014) reports that Nigeria the worst forms of child labour. These various forms were more acted out during the lockdown. Oyediji (2020) noted that during the lockdown, domestic and physical abuse against children were on the increase. He further states that in most cases, children seem to be the cause of disputes between care givers. This might be in form of conflict in decision and actions on a child's wellbeing. What a mother considers the best interest of the child, father may look at it as aggression or indulgence. This parents which will consequently led to physical abuse on children. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (2020), about 1.5 billion children and adolescents worldwide are out of school due to the closing of teaching institutions to help contain COVID-19. The impact that the school closure may accrue in learning for today's young generation, and the development of human capital, are hard to fathom. To minimize this effect, many schools began to offer distance learning to their pupils. However, this option is only available to some, while the rest of the population who lives in rural environment and who are also low-income earners cannot afford this. Children living in informal settlement, camps with limited infrastructure and no access to internet are particularly impacted. Confinement and movement restrictions could create avenue for hoodlums to occupy, loot or destroy school facilities. In addition, children with disabilities and special needs are especially hard to serve through distance programmes (Guterres, (2020).

Spending more time on virtual platforms can leave children vulnerable to online sexual exploitation and grooming, by predators who exploit the COVID-19 pandemic. More so, lack of face-to-face contact with friends and partners may lead to heightened images, while increased and unstructured time online may expose children to potentially harmful and violent content as well as greater risk of cyber-bullying (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2020).

Most disturbing is the increase of sexual abuse of minors by men. UNICEF (2020) noted that children between 2 to 17 years are the most targeted group for abuse. Nigeria has recorded about 3, 436 criminal cases

covering among other crimes, issues regarding rape, defilement, attempted, wounding with intent among others, as a result of the COVID 19 lockdown. Rosenthal, Ucci, Heys, Hayward, & Lakhanpaul, (2020) noted that from 2019 till date, domestic violence, sexual and gender based violence such as rape, molestation, defilement, female genital mutilation, sexual harassment, or trafficking in persons are reported and published on social media or weekly bases. The perpetrators are often fathers, uncles, brother's cousins, home teachers, domestic worker, and neighbours among others. The lockdown which was targeted to reduce the spread of COVID –19 has now become of violence against children. Ordinarily, children who go to school and other learning centres are now being locked down with an abuser. The most devastating effect of abuse on children is the impact it has on their emotional, psychological, physical and mental health, including exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies for girls, among others (Gerieron, 2020).

Implication for Social Work

COVID -19 has quickly changed the context in which children live. Some preventive and correctional measures, such as home containment, school closures, restriction on movement has exposed many children to their abusers and has also disrupted children's routines and social support (UNICEF, 2020). Stigmas, discrimination, gender inequality, overcrowded settings, poverty, loss of livelihoods, disease control measures with limited protection supports among others are some factors that make children more vulnerable to violence during the COVID -19 lockdown (WHO, 2020).

Social work profession has a long tradition of involvement with the child welfare system, working to support thousands of children and their families who are victims of child abuse and neglect (National Association of Social Workers, 2015). According to National Association of Social Workers (2014), social workers knows that working with a child means working with the entire family and other environmental factors in a culturally competent way. Although the pandemic has altered protective systems for children, including formal services such as social health, education among others, social workers should engage communities to guide the child protection response. Community engagement is critical to preventing, mitigating and responding to abuse, neglect, exploitation, violence against children during the COVID – 19 lockdowns. Social workers should ensure that community members are informed and well placed to identify and respond to risks. Social worker need to collaborate more with community members to strengthen and maintain protective environment. Social workers should also involve all family members in the protection, development and general well- being of the children in their household. Involvement of all the family members, especially when the abusers are members the of the family, reduces the chances of abuse (National Association of Social Workers, 2020). The social worker should strengthen, maintain or establish system of collaboration between the justice and child protection system, identify and build on children's resilience and coping strategies (Amadasun, 2020) noted that social workers should advocate, develop, disseminate messages which should include handling caregiver's stress, stop child abuse media campaign, family tracing and reunification. Finally, social workers should advocate for the development of innovative child- focused legal and policy framework to protect all children (International Federation of Social Workers, 2020).

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