

THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN PROMOTING CHILD RIGHTS IN NIGERIA

BELLO IBRAHIM HALILU

Department of Mass Communication, Federal Polytechnic, P.M.B 0231, Bauchi;

ABSTRACT

As leaders of tomorrow, children are supposed to be raised in an atmosphere of peace, happiness, love and understanding. It is in the spirit of this, that the United Nations charter of 1959 provides the inalienable rights of a child to live in societies, in the spirit of peace, freedom, equality and solidarity. Some of these rights include: legal protection before and after birth; protection from all forms of physical harm or mental violence, injury or social abuse; right to proper education and essential services, to mention but a few. In Nigeria, however, a lot of children are denied these rights which in turn have negative consequences on both the child and the socio-political development of the society. The paper identifies factors that hinder smooth implementation of the child rights inter alia poverty, cultural practices, illiteracy of parents/guardians and lack of political will to implement provisions, policies and charters as proclaimed under UN, regional or national declarations. This paper therefore suggests that through agenda setting and social responsibility function, information and enlightenment, the media can advocate and promote these rights. This is by sensitizing parents, policy makers and all stakeholders on the dangers of denying the child rights on the socio-political development of the country.

Key words: *advocacy, charter, right, enlightenment and freedom*

INTRODUCTION

At the world summit for children in 1990, nations of the world including Nigeria, made a pledge to bring to the fore of our national goals, issues concerning the survival, development and protection of the child, hopes were high that the future generation would only read in history books what the past generation had gone through (Ibrahim, 1999). Of specific interest, was the entrenchment of the principles in the "inherent dignity, equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" regarded as the foundation of peace, justice and freedom in the world. This is in recognition of the proclamation and agreement that everyone (children inclusive) is entitled to all rights and freedoms without any discrimination. Similarly based on William Wordsworth assertion that a "child is the father of a man," childhood should be entitled to special care and assistance and that the child should grow up in a family environment in an atmosphere of peace, love, care and understanding (Thompson, 1992). However, that was not the first time such an important summit was convened. Earlier, on 20th July, 1979 in Monrovia, Liberia, countries of Africa under the umbrella of Organization of African Unity (OAU) agreed on the provision for the rights and welfare of the African child. It deals directly with the issues of child survival and development, education, health and health services, child labour, discrimination, sexual exploitation, administration of child justice, etc (Unicef, nd).

Despite all these provisions, children who constitute a great number of our population and who are generally defenseless, helpless and vulnerable in nature, are still not cared for. The rights they deserve are most times not accorded, social amenities are lacking, and education has become a privilege. The recent armed conflicts in North eastern states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa in Nigeria, make children vulnerable to either molestation, rape, maiming and abduction, with the more than 250 girls abducted from their boarding school in Chibok, Borno State allegedly by the dreaded Boko Haram Sect, to their various camps in Sambisa forest which attracted worldwide condemnation and campaign for their release popularly known as "#Bring back our girls". It is on this premise that this paper examines the various provisions of the child rights and how such provisions are applied in Nigeria with a view to ascertaining how the mass media can be effectively used to advocate, protect and promote the child rights in Nigeria.

I. Conceptual clarification

• Child Right

Child according to the United Nations is any human being below the age of eighteen. Child rights are therefore, the human rights of children with particular attention to the rights of special protection and care afforded to the minors, including their rights to association with both parent, human identity as well as the basic needs for food, universal state-paid education, healthcare, freedom from discrimination on the basis of the child's race, gender sexual, national origin, religion or disability. The United Nations declaration on child's rights (1959) proclaimed the child's rights as legal protection before and after birth; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; protection from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or social abuse; right to proper education and essential services. Similarly, the OAU charter on the rights and welfare of the African child (1979) advocates for the freedom of expression, protection from child labour and child abuse, harmful social and cultural practices, physically challenged to enjoy same privileges, provision of health and health services as well as free and compulsory education among others. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, both international advocacy organizations, openly advocate for legislations against corporal punishment, juvenile conviction without parole, military use of children, orphans and abandoned children as well as street children among others (Unicef, nd; UN, 2014).

• Mass Media

Mass media in this context refers to a set of complex organizations with set of work values and principles and gadgetry channels of mass communication complemented by interpersonal channels which mediate news and information across distance to a large heterogeneous, scattered and impersonal audience. Because of its wide coverage and accessibility therefore, the mass media should at all times be used effectively to reach the target audience especially the rural populace in the campaign for advocacy, promotion as well as protection of child rights.

II. Child Rights in Nigeria

The history of child rights dates back to 1765 when Sir William Blackstone recognized three duties expected of every parent to a child: Maintenance, Protection and Education (Blackstone, 1765-1769). Since then, several provisions and charters were agreed upon in which all nations are expected to abide. For example, League of Nations (1924), UN declaration (1989), OAU charter (1979), and several others. Nigeria as a signatory to most of these treaties is expected to abide and domesticate same. Though the country had existing laws that protect children under various constitutional provisions and statutes like penal code, criminal code, children and young persons' law (1958), Nigerian labour Act (1990) and cinematography Act (1990) (FGN, nd), it was not until 2003 that the Child Right Act was passed into law to domesticate the convention on the right of the child after years of intense advocacy from the media as well as other non-governmental organizations.

Although this law was passed at the Federal level, it is only effective if State Assemblies also enact it. To date, only 16 of the country's 36 States have passed the Act. Most of these states are reluctant to pass the law because they argue that some provisions of the law do not conform to their cultural and religious settings. This explains that this landmark legislative achievement has not yet translated into improved legal protection throughout the Federation. Nigeria has been unable to deal with several issues hindering the protection of rights of children such as children living on the streets, children affected by communal conflict, drug abuse, human trafficking and the weaknesses of the juvenile justice system amongst others (unicef, 2014). It is common to see school age children today roaming the street hawking, begging and engaging in some jobs that are immoral, dangerous and most times injurious to their health. These children are therefore vulnerable and willing recruits in any political and ethno-religious armed conflicts. More so, in armed conflict, women and children are often the intended targets of violence, abuse and exploitation; some are even forced to become perpetrators themselves. It is not

surprising therefore that a lot of children were brainwashed in to joining the dreaded Boko Haram armed struggle.

Hawking has become a house hold name, where children are sent out to the street when they ought to be in school or having their leisure. As such they are exposed to dangerous and illicit behaviours such as crimes, stealing and prostitution. Accordingly, it is difficult today, to demarcate between child labour and genuine domestic child support in the home, as part of the contribution to the economic efforts of the parents. Many times, children are overworked beyond what they can endure, under the guise of help. Other street work includes shining shoes, washing and guarding cars, carrying luggage, trading at bus stops and rail stations, etc. Scavenging is another dangerous job children in most rural areas engage in. They spend their days picking up used papers, plastics, rags, bottles, tins, and metal pieces from the street, garbage dumps and refuse bins and selling them to retailers for recycling. This kind of work is unhygienic, dangerous and demeaning because scavengers develop all kinds of diseases like ulcer, scabies, etc. exposure to harsh weather can also cause them pneumonia, influenza and malaria. They could be tempted to eat thrown away food leading to digestive disorder and food poisoning. Most of these people are from poor homes struggling to survive (Megwa, 1998) This is a direct contravention of **Article xv** of the OAU charter which provides that *'every child shall be protected from all forms of economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development'*. (Unicef, nd)

Child labour is prevalent in Nigeria. The children work under hazardous condition especially in industries. They are sometimes exploited in mining operations that would ordinarily be considered too risky for adults in industrialized world. Child miners suffer from respiratory problems such as tuberculosis, bronchitis, and asthma. In these mines, children work with little or no safety equipments and constantly inhale dust and noxious fumes given off by dangerous chemicals. The case of mining field in Zamfara state is still fresh in our minds (Megwa, 1998).

According to **Article xi** of the OAU charter (Unicef, nd), *every child shall have the right to education...* and the fact that knowledge acquisition is a key to the future for individual children and to the ability of whole society to access and participate in global scientific and technological advances in the global economy, good quality education can therefore provide a child with self confidence, critical thinking capacity, values and social skills required of an informed citizen (unicef, 1998). In Nigeria, a lot of children are out of school and for those that are lucky, the schools in most cases are not conducive for learning because they lack the basic amenities like class rooms, chairs, textbooks and unqualified teachers. It is common to see those children learning under the tree shades and subjected to hardship when raining or under scorching sun. Being not educated makes a child a second class citizen and by the time he is of age, expecting to get a good income, he will resort to whatever comes his way and may be a hawker for life. Some these children withdraw and the feeling of second hand citizen is high in them. Their ability and willingness to rise and exercise their thinking faculty is killed (unicef, 1998).

Similarly, **Article xxi** states that *states Parties to the present Charter shall, in accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law, protect the civilian population in armed conflict and shall take all feasible measures to ensure the protection and care of children who are affected by the armed conflicts. Such laws shall also apply to children in situation of internal armed conflict, tension and strife* (Unicef, nd). We are all living witnesses to the recent insurgency in most part of the country where villages are raised down, human beings (children inclusive) slaughtered, girl child raped and or abducted. Government not only failed to protect children in their homes, even in boarding schools, the armed men would freely enter the school, burn their hostels and luggage, some raped, killed or taken to unknown hideout. Examples can be found in Buni Yadi, Gamborou Ngala, Konduga, Bama, Gwoza, and other villages and towns in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States. The most celebrated case is that of Chibok town where more than 250 girls were abducted from a boarding secondary school where they were writing NECO/WAEC. This singular act resulted in worldwide condemnation by the media, civil liberties

organizations; international advocacy groups with a popular campaign for their release tagged “#Bring back our girls”. As a result of this intense advocacy, some countries like, United States, Britain, Australia offered to assist Nigeria in the release of these girls. Narrating their ordeals, some of the abducted girls that escaped from where they were being held (Sambisa forest - situated in the boarder of Nigeria and Cameroon) said some of the girls were seriously ill as a result of the harsh condition of the forest, in addition to the physical as well as psychological suffering they are being subjected to.

Many children in Nigeria are also subjected to rejection, dejection, humiliation as a result of some obnoxious, social and cultural harmful practices, sometimes in the name of religion. **Article xxi** provides *state party to the Charter shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate harmful social and cultural practices affecting the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child particularly those customs and practices prejudicial to the health or life of the child; discriminatory to the child on the grounds of sex or other status* (Unicef, nd). Some of these practices include female genital mutilation, tribal marks and tattoos, child witches belief, male child preference, widowhood, etc. In some cultures in Nigeria for example, some children are rejected on the belief that they were born as witches, and that allowing them to stay in the home brings ‘bad luck’ to the family. The issue of preferring male child is dominant in African cultures, and in Nigeria, it is reflected in all facets of human lives. There is a belief that female children are supposed to be at home assisting in domestic chores as well as engage in hawking as a support to the economic efforts of the family, and the male child if lucky, would go to school. This is evident in the primary school enrollment in the country, where in most states of the federation there is always a disparity between girls and boys.

This violates the provision of the Convention for the Elimination of all Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which states that ‘discrimination against women is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, economic and cultural life of their countries, hampers the growth of the prosperity of the society and the family and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their country and humanity (Unicef, 1998).’ Still talking of education, some parents are of the opinion that it is unnecessary to educate a girl child since she will end up in somebody’s house. Investing in their education therefore is regarded as a wasted effort that will benefit only the family she will be eventually married into (Ibrahim, 2010).

Tribal marks and tattoos are also prevalent in most Nigerian cultures. The resultant effect of this practice may cause contagious diseases and other ailments to the child because the metal used for the act might not have necessarily been sterilized. Another effect of this practice is the fact that it encourages ethnicity, tribalism, as well as religious differences because the child may be discriminated against and when he grows up, may be encouraged to identify only with his kinsmen in whatever he does, instead of seeing the whole country as his “constituency”. Children equally have the right to participate in issues affecting their lives as this will have positive and far reaching effects on their health and socio-economic conditions. “When children participate in decision making, they tend to be more creative, positive and energetic, offering ideas devoid of prejudices and stereotypes. Even though the Federal Government has inaugurated the Children’s Parliament in 2003 to enhance children’s participation, since then, 26 States have inaugurated children’s parliaments, the main challenge is to make these Parliaments truly representative of the broad categories of Nigerian children, including the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.” (unicef, 2014)

III. Mass Media and Child Right Campaign

The media have a great role to play in the advocacy for the advancement of children rights, by sensitizing the general public on the dangers of denying such rights, on the growth and development of the individual child as well as the socio - political development of the society. In order to effectively appreciate the role of the media in this campaign, the study will be subjected to the *agenda setting* function of the media in addition to its traditional functions of information dissemination and enlightenment. It is generally agreed that the media set agenda for the public to follow. This is done by

raising salient issues in the society thereby making people to think along that line. By setting agenda for the public, it means that the mass media have the ability to choose and emphasize certain topics, thereby causing the public to perceive these issues as important. Through information dissemination and agenda setting roles of the media tend to bring out issues to be discussed and in a way they shape our understanding and views of issues, (Asema, 2011) posited that agenda setting refers to the ability of the mass media to influence the level of public awareness of issues as opposed to their knowledge about those issues.

This implies that the media provide information to the members of the public and through this provision of information people learn important issues of the day.

The media constantly present objects and suggesting what individuals in the society should think about, know about and have feelings about. The mass media in Nigeria usually raise salient issues or events taking place so that people will think along that line. In most cases, what we think about, worry about are based on what we have read in the print, watched on television and listened to on radio. (Ibrahim, 2010) also asserted that mass media not only transmit information around the world, they also construct agendas, telling us what is important to attend to, similarly, provides that it is assumed the more the media attention given to a topic, the greater is the importance attributed to it by the news audience. And it is an essential part of advocacy and attempt at influencing public opinion. The mass media therefore are strategically positioned to influence attitude and perception of the parents as well as all the stakeholders by analyzing and highlighting the effects of denying the child rights. This can be done by given prominence and frequency of all issues concerning child right infringement and abuse. For instance the dangers of child labour or girl-child circumcision can be better understood if the mass media give the issue prominence by carrying a special report or documentary. In such a programme, victims of such abuse are interviewed to narrate their ordeal; expert could also be contacted on how the issue can be addressed.

Similarly, (Ibrahim, 2010) observes that based on John and Fuss position that the mass media agenda affects public agenda and the public agenda affects policy agenda, the media need to gather information concerning the child right and problem associated with it so that policy makers and stakeholders will be enlightened on real situation of the problem, so that the people concerned will come up with policies that will tackle the obstacles to child right. This invariably means that for policy makers to come up with effective policies, they need to know the extent or magnitude of the problems and how it affects the societal development. The media can therefore provide such functions.

As earlier enumerated, majority of these violations are caused by poverty, illiteracy as well as social and cultural practices, the media should therefore, package the advocacy campaign in the local dialect of the society mainly, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and Fulani languages. Broadcast media (preferably, Radio) is also the appropriate media through which these kind of campaigns are to be channeled. This is because radio has the widest reach and affordable to the rural populace. Interpersonal communication should also be employed at the grassroots to reach opinion leaders like emirs or kings, village heads, religious leaders, in the sensitization of child right. These people are well respected in the society and their opinions are highly regarded.

In countries like Nigeria where religion is so much respected, the mass media could organize phone – in programmes (audience participation programmes) where religious leaders will be invited to explain religious stand on some of these abuses especially in respect of cultural practices done in the name of religion. The audience will be given opportunity to ask clarification from the clergymen directly on some of these issues. The media should also collaborate with both international and local advocacy groups like UNICEF, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Civil Liberties Organization and other governmental organizations like- the National Orientation Agency; to embark on massive advocacy campaigns not only on the passing of the child right act, but the full implementation of the provisions therein.

Finally, the media should employ any other means possible; to promote the cause of child right as well as monitor progress and report abuses, in line with the commitment of media professionals in Nigeria on 25th march, 1992:

“... we call upon all members of the media and well wishers to use every opportunity to ensure public support for the successful implementation of the UN convention and the OAU charter on the rights and welfare of the child (FGN, nd).”

IV. Conclusion and Recommendation

The paper examined children rights in Nigeria as provided in the UN declaration of child Rights, OAU charter on the rights and welfare of the African child, as well as the Nigerian child rights Act. Even though the country passed the law in 2003, in addition to the constitutional provisions that provide for the protection of child rights, children are still not cared for. Rights to education, health and health services, legal protection against physical and mental abuses, have become privileges. Children face a lot of challenges in accessing the rights. It is common to see children engaging in street activities like hawking, begging, scavenging, when they ought to be in school or enjoying their leisure time. Poverty, illiteracy of parents and lack of political will of governments appeared to be some of the reasons for such abuses. The mass media have a great role to play in the promotion and protection of the fundamental rights of the child. They can collaborate with advocacy groups, religious and community leaders, parents and governments in the sensitization of stakeholders to achieve this task.

The paper therefore makes the following recommendations:

- **Governments at all level should ensure full implementation of the Child Right Act provisions and the states yet to pass the law should do so immediately.**
- **Effective monitoring mechanism should be put in place in order to monitor progress, implementation as well as check abuses.**
- **Massive sensitization and enlightenment campaigns should be embarked upon, to involve the media, advocacy groups, governmental organizations, community and religious leaders, as well as all other stakeholders on the implications and dangers of child right abuses especially with respect to some cultural practices.**
- **Government should also introduce palliative measures in order to strengthen the family, because poverty, as discovered by this paper is the main reason behind such abuses.**
- **Legal institutions should also be strengthened to deal with cases of abuse and more punitive actions to be introduced in the constitution to deal with cases of rape, child abduction as well as trafficking.**
- **Finally, we should realize that MAN, with whom the child shares the environment, is in most cases, as observed by Tunde Thompson, the child’s greatest source of pains and problems. The right of the child has invariably being ignored or blocked arising from delinquency on the part of many adults who forget tomorrow while enjoying today’s pleasures. The media and all stakeholders shall therefore strive to promote the cause of child rights in order to assist in realizing the new global agenda *dreams* of UNICEF:**

“The day will come when nations will be judged not by their military or economic strength nor by the splendor of their capital and public buildings, but by the wellbeing of their peoples: by their levels of health, nutrition and education: by the opportunity to earn a fair reward of their labours; by their ability to participate in the decision that affect their lives; by the respect that is shown for their civil

and political liberties; by the provision that is made for those who are vulnerable and advantaged; and by the protection that is afforded to the growing minds and bodies of their CHILDREN”(emphasis mine) (unicef, 1998)

Bibliography

- Blackstone, W. (1765-1769). *wikipedia*. Retrieved June 19, 2014, from www.wikipedia.
- FGN. (nd). *National report on implementation of UN convention on the rights of the child*. Lagos: Ministry of Health.
- Ibrahim, B. H. (1999, November 16). Child Rights in the Next millennium. *New Nigerian* .
- Ibrahim, H. J. (2010). Role of the media in promoting girl child in Nigeria. *Bayero Journal of communication Studies* , 130-145.
- Megwa, M. (1998, June/July). Child Exploitation. *Tomorrow* , pp. 2-3.
- Thompson, T. (1992, April 17). Children's Rights. *City News* , p. 4.
- unicef. (1998). A global agenda for children beyond year 2000. *A global agenda for children beyond year 2000* (pp. 1-15). Lagos: unicef.
- Unicef. (2014, June 19). Child right and participation. *child right and participation* .
- Unicef. (1998, Lagos). Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* . Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria: Unicef.
- Unicef. (nd, nd). OAU charter on the rights and welfare of the child. *OAU charter on the rights and welfare of the child* . Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria: unicef.
- unicef. (1998). *Progress of Nation*. NY: unicef.