

Domestic Violence and Child Neglect: A Social Welfare Case Management Perspective

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Abstract

Domestic violence remains a significant social problem with far-reaching consequences for women and children, often extending beyond spousal abuse to include child neglect. This paper examines a case of domestic violence managed by the Social Welfare Department, highlighting the implications of marital conflict, family restructuring, and parental neglect on child welfare. The case involves a married woman, Edidiong Jack, who reported repeated domestic abuse by her husband. During the course of social welfare mediation, the husband contracted another marriage, which intensified household conflict and emotional distress. As a result, the first wife relocated with her children for safety. Following separation, concerns of child neglect emerged, including inadequate financial support, irregular school attendance, and emotional deprivation. Social welfare professionals intervened through structured case management involving mediation, child protection assessment, parental responsibility enforcement, and psychosocial support for the affected family members. The intervention prioritized the best interests of the children while addressing the safety and welfare needs of the mother. The paper underscores the critical role of social welfare systems in managing domestic violence cases, preventing child neglect, and safeguarding children's rights. It further emphasizes the need for strengthened social welfare policies, effective enforcement of parental responsibilities, and increased public awareness of the impact of domestic violence on child wellbeing.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Child Neglect, Social Welfare, Case Management, Family Welfare.

1. Introduction

Domestic violence is a persistent social problem in Nigeria, affecting families across different ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. It includes various forms of abuse such as physical, emotional, psychological, and economic violence perpetrated within intimate or marital relationships (Aihie, 2009). Domestic violence undermines family cohesion, violates human rights, and poses serious challenges to social development. Cultural norms, patriarchy, fear of stigma, and economic dependence often discourage victims from reporting abuse, allowing violent behaviors to continue unchecked (Oyekanmi, 2005; Ojo, 2013).

A growing body of Nigerian literature has established a strong link between domestic violence and child neglect. Children raised in violent households are frequently exposed to emotional trauma, instability, and disrupted caregiving, even when they are not directly abused (Olawale & Owoaje, 2015). Domestic violence can impair parental functioning, reduce economic support, and create unsafe living environments, thereby increasing the risk of child neglect. In situations where marital conflict leads to separation or family restructuring, children may experience neglect through inadequate supervision, poor educational support, and emotional deprivation (Adebayo, 2014; Odimegwu, 2017). These interconnected challenges underscore the need for institutional intervention mechanisms capable of addressing both domestic violence and its consequences for child welfare.

Social welfare agencies in Nigeria play a crucial role in responding to domestic violence and protecting children from neglect. Through case management, mediation, counseling, and child protection services, social welfare professionals intervene to safeguard vulnerable women and children and promote family stability where possible (Odimegwu, 2017). These agencies operate within the framework of the Child Rights Act and related social welfare policies, emphasizing the best interests of the child and parental responsibility. Effective social welfare intervention is therefore essential in mitigating the impact of domestic violence and preventing the escalation of child neglect.

The purpose of this study is to examine domestic violence and child neglect from a social welfare case management perspective using a Nigerian case study. The paper seeks to explore how spousal abuse contributes to family disruption and child neglect and to analyze the intervention strategies employed by social welfare professionals in managing such cases. By drawing attention to practice-based experiences, the study aims to contribute to Nigerian social work literature and inform policy and practice on family welfare and child protection.

2. Conceptual Clarification Domestic Violence

Domestic violence refers to a pattern of abusive behaviors used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over

another within an intimate or marital relationship. In the Nigerian context, domestic violence may manifest as physical assault, emotional and psychological abuse, economic deprivation, intimidation, and controlling behaviors (Aihie, 2009; Oyekanmi, 2005). Scholars note that domestic violence in Nigeria is often reinforced by patriarchal norms, cultural acceptance of male dominance, and societal silence surrounding family matters, which collectively hinder timely intervention (Ojo, 2013).

Child Neglect

Child neglect is a form of child maltreatment characterized by a caregiver's failure to provide adequate care, supervision, emotional support, education, or basic necessities required for a child's healthy development (Adebayo, 2014). Nigerian studies indicate that child neglect frequently occurs in households affected by marital conflict, poverty, or family separation, where parental responsibilities are either ignored or poorly enforced (Olawale & Owoaje, 2015). Neglect may be physical, emotional, educational, or economic, and its consequences often include poor academic performance, emotional insecurity, and social maladjustment.

Social Welfare Case Management

Social welfare case management is a professional, systematic process through which social workers assess clients' needs, plan interventions, coordinate services, and monitor outcomes to promote wellbeing (Odimegwu, 2017). In Nigeria, social welfare case management operates within the framework of the Child Rights Act and related social protection policies, emphasizing the best interests of the child, family mediation, and parental responsibility. Case management in domestic violence situations often involves risk assessment, counseling, mediation, referral to relevant agencies, and follow-up to prevent recurrence and protect vulnerable family members.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three complementary theoretical perspectives: Ecological Systems Theory, Family Systems Theory, and the Child Rights-Based Approach. Together, these frameworks provide a holistic understanding of domestic violence, family disruption, and child neglect, while guiding social welfare intervention and case management.

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory, originally proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human behavior and development as products of dynamic interactions between individuals and their multiple environmental systems. These systems range from the microsystem (immediate contexts such as family and school) to the mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, each exerting direct or indirect influence on individual experiences and outcomes. The theory emphasizes that human development cannot be adequately understood in isolation from the social, cultural, economic, and institutional contexts in which individuals are embedded.

From this perspective, domestic violence and child neglect are not solely the result of individual pathology or dysfunctional family relationships but emerge from the interaction of factors operating across multiple ecological levels. At the microsystem level, family power relations and parenting practices may normalize coercion and neglect.

At the exosystem and macrosystem levels, broader structural conditions such as economic hardship, patriarchal cultural norms, weak legal protections, and inadequate social welfare institutions can increase family stress and reduce access to protective resources.

Applied to the Nigerian context, Ecological Systems Theory is particularly relevant for situating domestic violence and child neglect within entrenched socio-cultural and structural realities. Patriarchal ideologies that privilege male authority, women's economic dependency, and limited availability of formal support services may collectively heighten vulnerability to abuse and neglect within households. Empirical studies have applied Bronfenbrenner's framework to demonstrate how these interconnected systems reinforce cycles of violence and constrain effective responses (Adebayo, 2014).

The theoretical strength of Ecological Systems Theory lies in its implications for intervention. Rather than focusing exclusively on individual behavior change, the theory underscores the necessity of multi-level social welfare interventions that simultaneously target family dynamics, community support mechanisms, institutional responsiveness, and policy reform. Consequently, the theory provides a robust conceptual foundation for this study's examination of domestic violence and child neglect, highlighting the importance of integrated and context-sensitive strategies for prevention and social welfare practice.

Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory was developed by Murray Bowen in the 1950s and was later fully presented in 1978. The theory explains that the family functions as a single unit in which the actions and behavior of one member affect all other members. Rather than viewing family problems as the fault of one individual, the theory emphasizes patterns of interaction, shared roles, and emotional connections within the family.

From this perspective, domestic violence is seen as a sign that the family system is not functioning properly. Abuse often emerges when communication breaks down, power is unevenly distributed, and family roles are poorly defined or rigid. These conditions create tension and conflict, which can disturb the emotional stability of the household and weaken the family's ability to care for its members.

In this study, Family Systems Theory helps explain how spousal abuse and changes in family structure, such as separation or the introduction of polygamous relationships, disrupt normal family roles and responsibilities. When these roles are disturbed, parents may struggle to provide consistent care, emotional support, and financial resources for their children. As a result, children may experience neglect due to reduced supervision, lack of attention, or unmet basic needs.

The theory also highlights the importance of family-focused interventions. Social welfare responses should aim to improve family communication, clarify parental responsibilities, and protect vulnerable members, especially children. By addressing problems at the family level rather than focusing only on individuals, Family Systems Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how domestic violence contributes to child neglect and how effective support systems can be developed (Bowen, 1978; Odimegwu, 2017).

Child Rights-Based Approach

The Child Rights-Based Approach is based on the recognition that children are entitled to specific rights that must be protected by families, communities, and the state.

These rights are clearly outlined in international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and in Nigeria's Child Rights Act. The approach emphasizes key principles, including the best interests of the child, non-discrimination, the right to survival and development, and the child's right to protection and participation in matters affecting their well-being.

In this study, the Child Rights-Based Approach serves as a guiding framework for social welfare interventions involving children affected by domestic violence. It requires that the safety, well-being, and development of children take priority in all decisions and actions, regardless of parental conflict or family breakdown. The approach also affirms that parents have a legal and moral duty to provide care, education, and protection for their children. Furthermore, the Child Rights-Based Approach supports the involvement of social welfare institutions in preventing and responding to child neglect. It provides a legal and ethical basis for enforcing child maintenance, offering protective services, and intervening when children are exposed to harm. By focusing on children's rights rather than parental disputes, this approach strengthens efforts to safeguard vulnerable children within the family system.

Relevance of the Framework to the Study

The integration of these three frameworks enables a comprehensive analysis of domestic violence and child neglect. Ecological Systems Theory highlights the broader social and structural influences; Family Systems Theory explains intra-family dynamics and dysfunction, while the Child Rights-Based Approach provides a legal and ethical foundation for social welfare intervention. Together, they support a multidimensional understanding of the case and inform effective social welfare case management strategies.

4. Case Presentation

Client Description and Family Background

The family under study comprises Edidiong A. A. (mother) and her spouse, along with their dependent children. Edidiong is a 39-year-old civil servant residing in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, and is a practicing Christian. The children, whose ages range from 5 to 12 years, live primarily under her care. The spouse's occupation involves small-scale trading. Over several years, the household experienced growing tension characterized by disagreements over financial management, child-rearing, and marital roles. The conflict intensified with the introduction of a second wife, which further disrupted household stability. The family's social support network was limited, and prior engagement with formal social welfare structures was minimal. The family has limited social support and minimal prior engagement with formal social welfare services. The client's background highlights common issues in Nigerian households, where women may experience domestic abuse while balancing employment, caregiving responsibilities, and family stability. Understanding her demographic, occupational, and socio-cultural context is critical for planning effective interventions and ensuring the welfare of her children.

Nature of Domestic Violence

Edidiong reported that she experienced different forms of abuse from her husband, including emotional, psychological, and economic violence. This abuse took the form of constant verbal threats, insults, and public embarrassment, which affected her self-esteem and emotional well-being.

She was also excluded from making decisions about household finances, as her husband tightly controlled money and resources. This financial restriction limited her ability to meet the daily needs of her children, such as food, healthcare, and school-related expenses.

The situation worsened when her husband entered into a second marriage. The introduction of a polygamous relationship increased tension within the household and deepened Edidiong's emotional distress. The shift in family structure led to competition for attention and resources, creating instability and uncertainty for both Edidiong and her children. As conflicts became more frequent, the overall family environment grew more stressful and less supportive, further affecting the well-being of the children.

This experience reflects findings from studies conducted in Nigeria, which show that domestic violence is often shaped by broader social and cultural factors. Patriarchal beliefs that place men in dominant positions within the family, combined with social acceptance of polygamy, can increase power imbalances between spouses. These conditions often contribute to conflict, reduce women's ability to protect their children, and negatively affect child welfare. As noted in previous studies, such family environments may expose children to neglect and emotional harm due to ongoing tension and lack of adequate care (Aihie, 2009; Odimegwu, 2017).

5. Social Welfare Interventions Assessment and Mediation

Following the initial assessment, social welfare officers implemented mediation and counseling sessions with the family. The mediation sessions aimed to reduce tension within the household, encourage constructive dialogue between Edidiong and her husband, and promote non-violent approaches to resolving disagreements (Aihie, 2009). These sessions provided a structured environment in which both parties could express their concerns, understand each other's perspectives, and work toward cooperative problem-solving. Counseling focused on supporting Edidiong by enhancing her coping skills, strengthening her decision-making capacity, and providing guidance on protecting her children's welfare amid the stressful family environment. Social welfare officers also engaged the husband, raising his awareness of how his abusive behaviors affected both his spouse and children. He was educated on his legal and moral responsibilities as a parent under the Child Rights Act, including the obligation to provide care, supervision, and support for his children (Aluede & Idogho, 2012).

Together, these interventions sought to restore family functionality, reinforce parental accountability, and prevent further emotional and developmental harm to the children. By combining conflict resolution, empowerment, and legal education, social welfare professionals aimed to create a safer and more supportive family environment while prioritizing the children's well-being.

Child Protection Measures

As concerns about the children's safety and well-being intensified, social welfare officers implemented a series of child protection measures to mitigate risks and ensure their holistic development. These measures included regular monitoring of school attendance to identify and address gaps in educational engagement, as well as assessment of the children's living conditions to ensure a safe and supportive environment.

Psychosocial support services were provided to help the children cope with emotional distress, anxiety, and the disruptions caused by family conflict and separation. In cases where immediate safety concerns arose, temporary alternative accommodations were facilitated to protect the children from potential harm.

Social welfare officers also collaborated with local authorities to enforce parental responsibilities, ensuring that the father fulfilled his obligations for financial support, care, and supervision, even after the family's separation (Odimegwu, 2017). These interventions were guided by the principle of the best interests of the child, emphasizing that the physical, emotional, and educational needs of the children take priority in all decision-making processes. By integrating continuous monitoring, support services, and legal enforcement, the child protection measures aimed to safeguard the children's well-being and promote their overall development despite the challenges posed by family disruption.

6. Family Separation and Emergence of Child Neglect

Despite the social welfare interventions and mediation efforts, persistent conflict within the family made it difficult to sustain a safe and stable living environment. As a result, Edidiong relocated with her children to a different residence in order to protect them from further exposure to domestic tension. While the separation reduced immediate conflict, it also introduced new challenges that affected the children's care and well-being. Following the separation, signs of child neglect became evident. These included irregular school attendance, limited adult supervision, and noticeable emotional distress among the children. The changes in living conditions, combined with financial strain and emotional stress, reduced Edidiong's capacity to consistently meet the children's educational, emotional, and developmental needs. The children's exposure to uncertainty and disrupted family routines further contributed to their vulnerability.

In response, social welfare officers intensified child protection measures to address the emerging risks. These measures included continued monitoring of the children's living conditions, coordination with educational authorities to support school attendance, and efforts to ensure that the father fulfilled his parental responsibilities, particularly in relation to child maintenance and care. Psychosocial support services were also provided to Edidiong and her children to help them cope with the emotional effects of separation and instability.

This case demonstrates the importance of structured social welfare case management in situations involving family separation and child vulnerability. A coordinated approach that combines assessment, counseling, mediation, and regular follow-up is critical for reducing the risk of neglect and promoting positive outcomes for children. Consistent with findings from previous studies, sustained social welfare involvement plays a key role in safeguarding children and supporting families undergoing significant social and emotional transitions (Olawale & Owoaje, 2015; Odimegwu, 2017).

7. Discussion

Domestic violence is a pervasive social problem with far-reaching consequences for families, particularly children, who often bear indirect yet profound impacts. Children who live in violent households may not be the direct targets of abuse, but they are frequently exposed to emotional stress, disruption of routines, and instability in their immediate environment.

In the present case, the children experienced irregular school attendance, reduced parental supervision, and heightened emotional vulnerability as conflicts between Edidiong and her husband escalated. These experiences align with existing Nigerian research, which shows that children in homes marked by domestic violence often develop psychological trauma, anxiety, and behavioral difficulties (Olawale & Owoaje, 2015; Adebayo, 2014).

The Ecological Systems Theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the ways domestic violence affects children. According to this perspective, children exist within multiple interacting systems, including their family, peer groups, school environment, community, and broader societal structures. Disruption in the family system—through reduced parental care, inconsistent guidance, or emotional neglect can reverberate across these interconnected systems, affecting children's social adjustment, emotional well-being, and academic performance (Adebayo, 2014). In this case, exposure to marital conflict weakened the protective and supportive functions of the family, creating conditions that placed the children at risk for both immediate and long-term developmental challenges.

Social welfare interventions play a critical role in mitigating the adverse effects of domestic violence on children. Counseling services provided the children with emotional support and strategies to cope with trauma, while child protection measures ensured a safer and more stable environment. By addressing both immediate safety concerns and ongoing developmental needs, these interventions contribute to reducing negative outcomes, fostering resilience, and supporting overall child wellbeing. This case demonstrates that timely, context-sensitive interventions can help break the cycle of violence and protect vulnerable family members from prolonged harm.

Beyond the immediate family, domestic violence has broader societal implications. It undermines family cohesion, limits social support networks, and can perpetuate cycles of violence across generations. Cultural and social factors in Nigeria, such as stigma associated with reporting abuse and limited access to social welfare resources, may intensify the impact on children and reduce opportunities for early intervention. Consequently, addressing domestic violence requires a multi-level approach that combines individual support, family counseling, community awareness, and policy initiatives. Strengthening social services and protective legislation, alongside public education, is essential to prevent harm and promote recovery for affected families.

Finally, this case underscores the importance of linking theory to practice. Using Ecological Systems Theory as a guiding framework allows practitioners to understand how domestic violence disrupts children's environments at multiple levels and informs interventions that address both immediate and systemic needs. When social welfare practices are guided by theory, interventions are better positioned to support children's emotional, social, and educational development, ultimately promoting resilience and long-term well-being.

In conclusion, domestic violence exerts profound effects on children, even when they are not the direct victims. Understanding these impacts through theoretical frameworks and implementing timely, targeted interventions can help protect children, strengthen families, and reduce the intergenerational transmission of violence. This case highlights the vital role of social welfare services in safeguarding children, promoting resilience, and fostering healthier family dynamics within the Nigerian context.

8. Summary

Domestic violence has wide-ranging effects on both women and children, creating disruptions in family dynamics and undermining the traditional roles and responsibilities within households. Women who experience abuse often face emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical challenges, which can limit their ability to provide consistent care and supervision for their children. As a result, children in these households may experience neglect, emotional distress, behavioral difficulties, and disruptions in their education and social development.

The present case highlights how these effects manifest in real-life contexts, showing that children may develop anxiety, social withdrawal, or irregular school attendance when exposed to domestic conflict, even indirectly. Importantly, the case also illustrates the critical role of structured social welfare interventions in addressing these challenges. Coordinated, rights-based support, including counseling, child protection measures, and guidance for parents, can mitigate immediate risks, enhance family stability, and support children's emotional and developmental needs.

9. Conclusion

This case highlights the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to prevent and respond to domestic violence, particularly in contexts where cultural, social, and institutional barriers may exacerbate its impact. Strengthening social welfare policies, ensuring the enforcement of child protection laws, and raising public awareness about the consequences of domestic violence are essential steps in safeguarding vulnerable populations.

Effective interventions should not only address immediate safety concerns but also promote long-term resilience among children and accountability among caregivers. By providing timely, context-sensitive support, social welfare systems can help break cycles of violence, enhance family functioning, and foster healthier communities. Ultimately, protecting children from the effects of domestic violence is not only a matter of individual well-being but also a societal responsibility that requires coordinated action across families, communities, and institutions.

10. Recommendations

1. Governments and NGOs should strengthen social welfare services, providing counseling, shelters, and follow-up support to protect children and stabilize families.
2. Child protection agencies, law enforcement, and social workers must enforce laws, respond promptly to cases, and identify at-risk children for timely intervention.
3. Social welfare agencies and community organizations should educate parents on the effects of domestic violence and promote healthy family interactions.
4. Public awareness campaigns led by government, schools, media, and community leaders should reduce stigma and encourage reporting of domestic violence.
5. Multisectoral collaboration among agencies, NGOs, healthcare providers, law enforcement, and schools is needed to coordinate interventions and maximize protection.
6. Academic and research institutions should conduct ongoing studies to inform policies, improve interventions, and evaluate program effectiveness.
7. Child psychologists, school counselors, and social welfare agencies should provide targeted psychological support to children exposed to domestic violence to foster resilience and emotional well-being.

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