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STAKEHOLDERS' INVOLVEMENT IN PROMOTING CHILD'S RIGHTS AWARENESS IN NIGERIA

KANIYE-EBEKU, Charity Olunma¹

ABSTRACT

Nigeria ratified the United Nations Convention on the Child's Rights in 1991. The implication, therefore, is that Nigeria has committed itself to a code of binding obligation towards her children. Among these obligations are raising awareness and the involvement of stakeholders, including children, in realising children's rights. Thus, to promote and encourage States to act towards the protection and awareness of children's rights, the United Nations declared 1979 as the International Year of the Child (IYC). The IYC event was celebrated globally. It was a huge success as it increased the social and political awareness of the status of children worldwide. After over a decade of ratification, Nigeria domesticated the CRC as required by section 12 of the Nigerian Constitution by enacting the Child's Rights Act (CRA) in 2003. In line with the CRC, the CRA prescribes that children in Nigeria are bearers of rights that can be subsumed under four broad principles: survival, development, participation and protection. The CRA thus guarantees these rights. Guaranteeing children's rights is not sufficient; efforts must be made to ensure that children understand their rights and know how to assert their rights. Again, relevant stakeholders must be aware of child's rights, understand the content and work towards protecting and promoting the rights. In line with this, Article 42 of CRC prescribes that the convention's provisions should be widely known, even to children, so that it becomes clear what rights they have and are entitled to enjoy. This paper explores the role of the relevant stakeholders in realising the child's rights in Nigeria. The article discusses the role of stakeholders in creating awareness of child's rights in Nigeria. The paper further argues that challenges are associated with the awareness of child's rights in Nigeria and proffer solutions to the challenges.

Keywords: Child Protection, International Law, Human Rights, Nigeria.

¹ Lecturer, Faculty of Law, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

Awareness of the existing child protection law is a critical step in protecting and promoting a child-sensitive transformative social protection agenda. It is so sensitive that it will require the concerted efforts of several stakeholders. Nigeria ratified the United Nations Convention on the Child's Rights in 1991. The implication, therefore, is that the country has committed itself to a code of binding obligation towards her children. Among these obligations are raising awareness and the involvement of stakeholders, including children, in realising children's rights.

The Federal Government enacted the Child Rights Act (CRA) in December 2003. This legislation was adopted to implement principles enshrined in International Instruments, including the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the 1990 African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which Nigeria ratified in 1991 and 2000, respectively. Since the Nigerian constitution mandates that the legislative jurisdiction on matters affecting Children belongs exclusively to states, the Federal law was insufficient as a means to extrude protection to all Nigerian children and, therefore, needed to be adopted by the States. Today many States in Nigeria have adopted the CRA, even though some States are yet to adopt the Act.

A common criticism from scholars is the mismatch between policy and legal frameworks and the actual implementation². Again, the society for children and youth of British Columbia, Canada, observed that knowledge of the UN conventions on the Rights of the child and children's rights generally is lacking at all levels in most societies. There is a need for a public awareness campaign to increase awareness of the child's rights. This is because greater public awareness can lead to increase political will, implementation and monitoring, increased advocacy, positive, proactive response to advocacy by adult members of the society, the realisation of children's rights and improved wellbeing.³ Similarly, it was reported that in many parts of Nigerian society, whether children are on holiday or not, they are subjected to various dehumanising conditions, including hawking. According to him, some parents boldly claim that these children hawk to raise money for their school fees as they are unaware that the Child Rights Act (Law) prohibits such⁴. Furthermore, Article 28 provides that children have the right to education and that primary education should be free. However, this is not the case in some parts of the country where parents and children are made to pay, probably because they are unaware that paying school fees by children in government secondary schools is against the law.⁵

Crucially, Article 42 of the Convention Prescribes that the convention's provisions should be widely known by appropriate and active means to the citizen, including the children themselves.⁶ For clarity, this section will examine some of the key stakeholders involved in creating awareness of child protection laws.

2. ROLE OF MASS MEDIA

The mass media has been used extensively to enhance the awareness of the child rights Act (Laws) through public sensitisation and campaigns.⁷ In 1978, UNESCO made a Declaration on the fundamental contribution of the mass media to the promotion of human rights and other aspects of international peace and understanding. Article IV stipulates that

² Jones N, Presler-Marshall E, Banke A, Promoting synergies between child protection and social protection in Nigeria, Research Report and Studies, Nigeria: ODI/UNICEF, 2012.

³ Ibid

⁴ Akor G, Child Right Abuse: Production of Inefficient Leadership. Available at <http://allafrica.com/stories/200910201191.html> accessed 15 January 2018

⁵ Okoye U, Knowledge and awareness of the child's rights act among residents of a university town in Enugu State, Nigeria, (2011) 2 International Research Journals, 1595-1601 at 1595-1596

⁶ CRC Art 42

⁷ Adebayo F, Promoting Children's Rights through the New Media: The Nigerian Experience, (2011) 2 J Communication, 57-65 at 57, 60

media institutions are critical in educating young people towards promoting the spirit of peace, justice, freedom, and mutual respect, as well as facilitating the realisation of the human rights of all people and nations.⁸

Article 17 of the Convention on the rights of the child specifies the role the media should play in the promotion of children's rights and provides that: "State parties recognise the vital function performed by mass media-shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international services, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, state parties shall (a) encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child following the spirit of Article 29; (b) encourage for development of appropriate guidelines for the promotion of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of article 13 and 18. As Article 17 rightly states, access to information should be ensured.

2.1 Mass Media and Participatory Rights

Participatory rights in this context encompass children's freedom to have expressed their views and have to say in matters affecting their own lives, to join associations and assemble peacefully. The children should know that they are entitled to these rights.⁹ Accordingly, Article 12 (1) of CRC stipulates thus: States Parties shall assure the child who is capable of forming his or her views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the pictures of the child given due weight following the age and maturity of the child".

The mass media enhance children's awareness about issues and make their voices heard. One of the projects that enhanced knowledge and participation is the Voice of Youth (VOY), a platform that gives youths a voice to be heard on social issues.¹⁰ VOY is a global child participation project involving 35 countries, including Nigeria. It is committed to harnessing internet technology's educational and community-building potential in protecting and promoting children's rights. Since its commencement in 1995, children and adolescents in various parts of the country can connect dialogue and network with other children globally. Through the VOY project, children can know more, say more and do more through the media. A rural version has been added to this project resulting in Rural Voice of Youth (RVOY), which creates awareness. It supports children and young people in rural areas via SMS, games, video, story-telling, email, and other online communication integrated into local media to promote child rights awareness and participation rights. With online dialogue, the contributions of rural voices are fed into national and international discussions. It also strengthened advocacy efforts with them, and by them, not necessarily for them, as in the past.¹¹ Thus, the use of the new media accentuated the children's voice and image, with more children being seen and heard, unlike the traditional context where children can only be seen and not heard.

Media is a stakeholder in a struggle to create awareness of child protection laws and eliminate all forms of abuses and violations of children's rights through the use of television, radio and print media. Television media coverage has been used in Nigeria to emphasise child's rights. To demonstrate the importance of media coverage of child rights, welfare abuse and other related issues, the United Nations Fund for Population (UNFPA) and Canadian

⁸ UNESCO 1978, Declaration on Fundamental Principles, Concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthen peace and International Understanding to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racialism, Apathies and incitement to war available at <http://Portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php> accesss 15 January 2018

⁹ Adebo F, (n 6)

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *Ibid*

International Development Agency (CIDD) sponsored a drama series on child labour aired on various TV stations on Nigeria.¹²

It is no gainsaying that mass media has been very instrumental in creating awareness of children's rights. It can also exert a powerful influence, for good or for ill. However, there are some challenges they face in discharging their duties effectively. One of the challenges is that they do not have sufficient freedom of information needed for their operation effectively. Furthermore, lack of poor infrastructural facilities is another serious challenge. Thus, the free and independent press is essential to ensure freedom of speech (guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), to Promote democracy, good governance, peace and human rights, combat poverty and crime, inform children about their issues and enable them to participate in public debate, especially on matters concerning them.

3. THE ROLE OF THE NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION (NGO)

NGO is an umbrella term encapsulating a broad array of organisations, varying enormously according to their purpose, philosophy, expertise and scope of activities. World Bank (1992) defines NGOs as "many groups and institutions that are entirely or largely independent of government and that have primarily humanitarian or cooperative rather than commercial objectives. In human rights promotion and protection, Children inclusive, NGOs have performed and continue to perform myriad roles or functions.

One of the most critical functions of the NGOs, which has become very relevant to societies transitioning from authoritarian to democratic rule but is vital for all societies, is human rights education and enlightenment.¹³ Individuals and children in society cannot adequately protect their rights if they do not know them. Importantly, those in positions of authority, especially the army, police, prison officials, and government officials, must understand that there are limits to their power concerning the child's rights and that they cannot abuse them by their position. Judges and lawyers are not left out, so the justice system is firmly grounded in the rule of law.¹⁴ One human rights scholar and activist observed that:

In all regions of the globe, there is a multitude of initiatives on human rights education beyond the school setting, often propelled by non-governmental organizations. Of particular interest is the spread of courses and programmes aimed at difficult situations and specific groups who are the potential or actual victims of human rights violations, such as street children, their protectors and animateurs, such as non-governmental organizations, the mass media and community leaders.¹⁵

NGOs have equally been involved in providing training programmes. Specific programmes and materials have been developed to teach various constituencies: women, workers, children, refugees, peasants, persons living with HIV/AIDs, and persons with disabilities about their rights and how to protect them. This has often involved the need to develop unique methodologies and materials, particularly for working with illiterate populations, for instance, teaching human rights through street theatre, songs, videos, audio, posters and comics.¹⁶

¹² Ekong S.E, Nigeria Policy on Child Labour: An Evaluation of the education Sector Preparedness for Effective Policy Implementation, (Doctoral Thesis, Walden University 2016)

¹³ Wiseberg L.S. The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the project and Enforcement of Human Rights.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵

¹⁶ Wisberg L.S. (n 12)

Given their closeness to the grassroots, they can easily network. They also have the capacity for advocacy and sensitisation as well as data generation. Some of the institutions, groups and Non-Governmental Organizations that play active roles in addressing violence against children and creating awareness regarding the rights of the child in Nigeria include:

- Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF)
- African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) Nigeria Chapter.
- IDIA renaissance.
- Heart Land Child Care Foundation
- Child Life-Line (CLL)
- Children's Rights Advocacy Group of Nigeria (CRAGON)
- Girls' Power Initiative
- The Nigerian Children's Parliament
- Galilee Foundation
- Mectel Consult and Adolescent Development Initiative
- African Women Empowerment Group (AWEG)
- National Council of Child Rights Advocates of Nigeria (NACCRAN)
- National Council of Women Societies
- Faith-Based Organizations.

From the previous sections, it would appear that NOGs might be better able to put participation into practice than the public sector. It was observed that NGOs claim to be innovative, flexible, independent and autonomous, which may enable them to follow non-conventional policies compared to governments and official aid agencies.¹⁷ Most NGOs are already operating at the grassroots level, close to the poor and vulnerable children. It is no gainsaying that this first orientation may enable NGOs to better understand poor, vulnerable children whose rights have been violated with better rapport to sensitize them.¹⁸

However, NGOs are not without notable challenges. One of the significant challenges to their effectiveness is that they face pressure from their donors, who want speedy results irrespective of the nature of the task. This makes it difficult for them to concentrate and get the best out of a difficult task that requires more time.¹⁹

Another challenge is that most NGOs are resource-constrained organizations, dependent on external funding. This illustrates what Craig and Porter (1997) call the problem of "doubt accountability", to the beneficiaries and the source of funds. Balancing these two aspects is challenging as most NGOs funded projects tend to be more 'managed' than 'participatory'. As a result, NGOs may become more accountable to donors than stakeholders.²⁰

4. THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Nigeria's signature of the United Nations Child's Rights Convention puts an obligation on the government to disseminate and display the content of the Act to the citizens. The government must develop awareness strategies, training and capacity building for all involved in implementing convention rights and for all working with and for children.

The government at both Federal and Local levels play a major role in the crusade against child labour by providing a congenial environment, appropriate legislation, healthy

¹⁷ Nelson, N and Wright, S. *Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice*, (London: ITDG Publishing, 1995)

¹⁸ Sadeeg, L. *Assessing the Contribution of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) on Human Development in Bauchi and Gombe States, Nigeria* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2016). 38-39

¹⁹ *Ibid*

²⁰ Sadeeg, L. (n 17)

diplomatic relations and infrastructure. There have been several efforts by the government to create awareness of children's rights. The Nigerian government passed the trafficking in persons (Prohibition) law enforcement and administration Act in 2003, leading to significant progress in the fight against trafficking, particularly in prosecution and raising awareness. For instance, the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity coordinates efforts to combat child labour through its inspectorate department which includes the child labour unit. This includes training and raising awareness. Federal and state governments work through the media, local communities, churches, and mosques to sensitize parents on their responsibilities regarding their children.²¹

The Federal Government, through the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, undertakes awareness and sensitization meetings for directors of child Development at Federal and State levels to review and harmonize efforts to tackle child labour and trafficking and the distribution of informative materials on the Convention on the Rights of the Child which has been simplified and translated into three major Nigerian languages (Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa).²²

The government also needs to incorporate child rights issues in the school curriculum as children need to know their rights to be aware of their rights and demand them when those rights are violated, including the fact that children's right to education is for everyone. Consequently, it was opined that one of the significant constraints why people do not know the Child's Rights Act is the lack of inclusive appreciation of children's rights by the citizens' government agencies. In line with this, government agencies need to fully understand these rights to enable those agencies to differentiate child's rights from child privileges and charity. Again, the government also organises programmes to sensitise parents on their children's rights to respect them and avoid neglecting them. Child's rights information dissemination can better be achieved with enough funds. Thus, the government must allocate adequate funds to sensitise the public about the right of children.

To emphasise the need for adequate funding, ANPPCAN 2010 observed that in many states where the child rights Act has been adopted, the members of the state Child's Rights Implementation Committee lack the mobilization and capacity to advocate and facilitate the contents of the Act effectively. Information dissemination is expensive as money is needed for seminars and enlightenment workshops. Besides, the use of various media for information dissemination is costly. It is, therefore, necessary for the government to allocate adequate funds to achieve the desired result. The reason for the great emphasis on child rights education is that where the government achieves knowledge and awareness of the Act, Nigeria could build a culture of the universality of human rights, and it will also provide an atmosphere that Nigeria needs to promote, protect and enforce child rights. However, although awareness and knowledge of the child's rights Act have increased relatively, more rhetoric is paid to their value than actual implementation.

5. THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

Teachers, given their crucial roles in the lives of children, need to be targeted as key information sources and channels for awareness-raising at school formally and informally. Thus, they need to have a good knowledge of the provisions of the Child Rights Act and the penalties. They also need to be fully aware of the services and programmes that should be provided to help meet child protection goals.²³ Teachers are the first responders to raise awareness of children's rights. They know the attendance issues of children and why and are also primarily among the first adults to know about their vulnerabilities.

²¹ Jones N, Et al, (n 1)

²² Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, Abuja

²³ Jones N, Et al (n 1)

6. RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

Religious and community leaders are very important stakeholders in raising awareness in the community and religious gatherings on children's rights, especially on issues that border on harmful customary and traditional practices. Several community members are unaware of the Child's Rights Act and the services available to ensure children's protection and wellbeing. Evidence suggests that several community residents could not identify a single government programme that addresses any issue relating to the social protection of children.²⁴ Thus, a lack of awareness of child protection issues is a critical challenge to the realization of implementing the laws protecting the child. Crucially, therefore, there is a need to build on existing community capacities and structures of a primary goal of much contemporary programming in child protection. Notably, groups and organizations constitute a major component of local capacity in many settings. Thus, there is a growing recognition of the potential importance of engagement with religious and community leaders in raising awareness of children's rights. This is possible as many religious leaders with more established places of worship use sermons and several existing structures and groups within their worship centres to conduct sensitisation sessions. These include presentations to women's groups, children and youth groups, and elders' forums. Again, community leaders can conduct sensitisation through community meetings.²⁵ However, the barrier to engaging with religious groups and communities may be adequate funds and facilities.

Above all, the role of children in child protection should not be undermined, particularly in seeking to become more aware of how they can be protected from risky and harmful situations. It is equally important for children to access information about services to help them report and recover from any harmful or abusive situation.

7. CONCLUSION

There have been various suggestions as to how to go about achieving the goals of the Child's Rights Act. One of the strategies is to increase public awareness of Children's rights as described in the Convention. According to Article 42 of the Convention, state parties are to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to their citizens. This implies the need to make people aware of CRA through several stakeholders, including the media.

This research shows a need for a public awareness and enlightenment campaign to increase awareness of child's rights. This is because substantial public awareness can lead to Increase political will, implementation and monitoring, increased advocacy, positive and proactive response to advocacy by adult members of the society, the realisation of children's rights and improved wellbeing.

Furthermore, the research shows that the knowledge and awareness of rights will increase by incorporating lessons on children's rights into the curriculum, where classroom teachers will teach and emphasise the provisions. The paper also reveals that infrastructural deficits and technological gaps can hinder public enlightenment of the entire nation through the media. Crucially, another obstacle faced by the media is that they lack sufficient freedom of information needed for their operation effectively. Thus, the free and independent press is essential to ensure freedom of speech (guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), to Promote democracy, good governance, peace and human rights, combat poverty and crime, inform children about their issues and enable them to participate in public debate, especially on matters concerning them.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

²⁴ Jones N Et al (n 1)

²⁵ Eyber, C. Et al, *Intervention*, (2018) 16 *Journal of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Conflict-affected Areas* Official Publication of War Trauma Foundation, 31-37

Based on the findings of the work, the following recommendations were made:

- a) The relevant stakeholders should make an effort to ensure that awareness of the basic provisions of the Child Rights Act is brought to everyone, especially children.
- b) The Ministry of Education in each state should incorporate lessons on Child's rights into the primary and secondary school Curriculum.
- c) Parents should play a very significant role in creating awareness of child rights and also make efforts to educate their children on their rights and constitute the violation of such rights as it will help to curtail the rate of child rights violation.
- d) The government should make and implement policies that will lead to a free and independent press to ensure freedom of speech and to enable them to function effectively.
- e) The children should be allowed to participate in public debate, especially concerning their rights and welfare.
- f) Government and other relevant stakeholders should encourage the children to participate massively in the children's parliament at the Federal, States and Local government levels to enable them to integrate and participate fully in their affairs.
- g) Social Welfare, Federal and State Ministries of Women Affairs should also stick to their responsibilities of public enlightenment on children's rights and what constitutes child rights violation. They should also influence government policies regarding child's rights and educate them on the need to publicise children's rights.
- h) The government should ensure that the provisions of the child rights Act are being implemented and that the offenders are prosecuted and sanctioned accordingly.

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