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**IMPACT OF CHILD LABOUR ON
HAWKING CHILDREN AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK
INTERVENTIONS IN OVIA NORTH EAST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA,
EDO STATE, NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

Child labour remains a critical social issue in Nigeria, with street hawking being a common form of economic exploitation among children. This study examined the effects of child labour on hawking children and assessed the role of social worker interventions in mitigating these risks, focusing on Ovia North East Local Government Area of Edo State. The study employed a descriptive survey design, involving 150 respondents comprising hawking children for questionnaires administration and 10 participants which were parents or guardians for in-depth interview.

The study was guided by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory and Ecological Systems Theory, which collectively emphasize that unmet basic needs and interactions within social and environmental systems significantly influence child development and well-being. Findings indicated that child hawking is on the rise, primarily driven by poverty, with most children residing in polygamous families and under the care of parents engaged in petty trading. Children reported exposure to hazards including physical assault, motor accidents, and social neglect, which adversely affected their academic performance and psychosocial development. Awareness and access to social worker support were minimal, while government policies, though existent, were largely ineffective in addressing child labour.

The study concluded that poverty, inadequate parental support, and low social worker engagement perpetuate child exploitation and hinder child development. Recommendations include implementing targeted poverty alleviation programs, provision of free education, public sensitization on child labour laws, and strengthened social worker interventions. The study underscores the necessity of coordinated efforts between government, social workers, families, and communities to safeguard children's rights, promote their welfare, and ensure holistic development.

Keywords: Child labour, hawking children, social work intervention, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Ecological Systems Theory, Nigeria, child welfare

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as any human being below the age of 18 years unless majority is attained earlier under applicable national laws. In Nigeria, earlier policy frameworks such as the National Child Welfare Policy (1989) defined a child as a person aged 12 years or below; however, the enactment of the Child Rights Act aligns national standards with international conventions by recognizing all persons under 18 years as children (Child Rights Act, 2003).

Children represent the foundation of societal continuity and development; thus, their well-being is a critical indicator of national progress. Any condition that undermines their physical, emotional, or psychological development constitutes a violation of their fundamental rights. While children may engage in age-appropriate domestic or family-based activities that support skill acquisition and socialization, such participation must not interfere with their education, health, or overall development.

Globally, child labour has emerged as a major social concern affecting both developed and developing countries. The International Labour Organization defines child labour as work that deprives children of their childhood, interferes with their schooling, or is harmful to their physical, mental, social, or moral development. Within this broad category, child hawking represents a particularly hazardous form of labour prevalent in many urban and semi-urban areas in Nigeria (Bisi-Onyemaechi, et al., 2022; Adewumi, & Bwowe, 2024).

Child hawking involves children engaging in street trading activities, often for extended hours and under unsafe conditions, to contribute to household income. This practice exposes children to multiple risks, including road accidents, exploitation, abuse, and deprivation of educational opportunities. According to UNICEF, such forms of labour not only compro-

mise children's immediate well-being but also perpetuate cycles of poverty and social inequality (UNICEF & ILO, 2025).

In Nigeria, socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, rapid urbanization, and cultural norms significantly contribute to the persistence of child labour (Balogun & Iduemre, 2019). Many families depend on the income generated by children, thereby normalizing practices such as hawking. Despite various interventions by government agencies and international organizations, the incidence of child hawking remains high, particularly in local government areas where enforcement of child protection laws is weak.

Beyond structural factors, the role of professional social workers is critical in addressing child labour. Social workers are instrumental in identifying at-risk children, providing psychosocial support, advocating for child rights, and facilitating access to education and welfare services (Juliet, 2009). Their interventions complement government policies and programs aimed at eliminating exploitative child labour practices.

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on Ovia North East Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. Specifically, it seeks to identify the remote and immediate causes of child hawking and to evaluate the effectiveness of social work interventions and government measures in curbing the phenomenon, with implications for broader application across Nigeria.

1.1 Statement of the Research Problem

Child labour remains a persistent global and national development challenge, with millions of children engaged in harmful economic activities (ILO & UNICEF, 2025). In Nigeria, poverty, unemployment, and socio-cultural norms continue to drive child participation in income-generating activities such as street hawking, particularly in Edo State. Despite the

Child Rights Act (2003), enforcement remains weak, exposing children to risks including accidents, abuse, and exploitation. Existing government and social work interventions have shown limited effectiveness due to poor coordination and resource constraints. In Ovia North East Local Government Area, there is limited empirical evidence on both the causes of child hawking and the effectiveness of intervention strategies. This study therefore investigates the underlying factors driving child hawking and evaluates the effectiveness of social work and government responses to inform improved policy and practice.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it identifies both structural and immediate causes of child hawking in Ovia North East Local Government Area, providing a context-specific understanding of the phenomenon. It adopts a child-centred approach by gathering primary data from affected children, capturing their lived experiences and the psychosocial impacts of hawking. The study also evaluates the effectiveness of existing social work and government interventions, highlighting gaps in policy implementation, coordination, and service delivery. Furthermore, it contributes evidence-based recommendations to strengthen child protection strategies and supports policymakers, social workers, and stakeholders in developing more effective, coordinated, and sustainable responses to child labour in Nigeria.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of Child Labour and Child Hawking

Child labour constitutes a multidimensional social problem driven by interrelated economic, social, and cultural factors, yet scholarly discourse has tended toward descriptive cataloguing of causes rather than critical interrogation of why these factors persist despite decades of intervention. The International

Labour Organization (2025) defines child labour as work depriving children of childhood, interfering with education, and harming physical, mental, social, or moral development—a definition aligning with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2010). However, this definitional consensus masks significant operational tensions. The distinction between “light, age-appropriate work” and “exploitative labour” remains culturally contested and politically manipulated, with governments in developing contexts frequently invoking the former to justify inaction on the latter (Oyeleke, Eborka, & Okocha, 2019). The determination of what constitutes harmful work depends on age, type, conditions, and educational impact—variables that are themselves subject to local interpretation and weak enforcement, suggesting that definitional clarity has not translated into regulatory efficacy.

The scholarly emphasis on integrating child protection into broader socio-economic development strategies—expanding education access, strengthening social protection, promoting gender equality, addressing structural inequalities (Balogun & Iduemre, 2019; Bisi-Onyemaechi, 2022; Fakunle, 2026)—while analytically sound, suffers from implementation gap blindness. These strategies require state capacity, fiscal resources, and political will that are precisely absent in contexts where child labour is most prevalent. The literature’s tendency to list policy prescriptions without examining why they fail to materialise constitutes a critical weakness, privileging normative aspiration over structural analysis.

Globally, child labour remains concentrated in developing regions, with ILO and UNICEF (2025) estimates indicating millions of children aged 5–17 engaged in hazardous economic activities. The demographic argument—that children constitute a large population share in developing countries, making them vulnerable to exploitation—while factually accurate, risks demographic determinism, implying that

youthfulness itself generates vulnerability rather than the political and economic structures that exploit it. Child trafficking, increasingly linked to labour exploitation, reportedly affects millions annually (Oyeleke, Eborka, & Okocha, 2019), yet the empirical basis for such estimates remains methodologically contested, with significant reliance on modelling rather than direct measurement.

International intervention narratives require critical scrutiny. The Indian, Moroccan, and Senegalese examples cited as success stories—school enrolment drives, income support, child withdrawal programmes (International Labour Organization, 2010; International Labour Organization & UNICEF, 2025)—are typically reported without longitudinal follow-up or attention to re-engagement rates. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (World Economic Forum/ILO, 2023) reinforces normative commitments, yet the gap between regional instrument ratification and domestic implementation remains vast, with weak institutional frameworks and limited enforcement constituting the real determinants of child labour persistence. The literature's invocation of these instruments without examining implementation failure patterns produces a false optimism that legal formalism equals practical protection.

In Nigeria, child labour manifests across domestic servitude, street begging, commercial sexual exploitation, and street hawking, with the latter among the most visible and pervasive forms (Adewumi & Bwowe, 2024). Children in hawking operate in unsafe, unregulated urban environments, exposed to road accidents, harassment, exploitation, and abuse. The causal analysis, however, requires deeper critical engagement. Poverty is ubiquitously identified as the primary driver, with families relying on children's income for basic needs (Balogun, 2022; Adewumi & Bwowe, 2024; Fakunle, 2026). Yet this framing, while accurate, risks naturalising poverty as an immutable constraint rather than a politically produced

condition. The correlation between household poverty and child labour participation is robust, but the policy implication—that poverty reduction eliminates child labour—assumes linear causation that empirical evidence does not consistently support. Economic growth in Nigeria has not automatically reduced child labour; rather, the structure of growth—informal, low-wage, exclusionary—reproduces the conditions that necessitate child income contribution.

Socio-cultural practices constitute a second causal domain, with children's economic participation frequently rationalised as socialisation and adulthood preparation (Adewumi & Bwowe, 2024; Oyeleke, Eborka, & Okocha, 2019). This cultural functionalism, while descriptively valid, requires critical interrogation: whose interests does this framing serve? Parents deploying children for income frequently invoke socialisation discourse to deflect scrutiny, while the literature's uncritical reproduction of this justification risks complicity with exploitation. Gender norms further shape labour allocation, with girls disproportionately channelled into hawking and domestic work—a pattern the literature notes but rarely theorises beyond descriptive observation. The absence of intersectional analysis linking gender, class, and rural-urban migration dynamics limits explanatory depth.

Additional factors—including inadequate education access, weak Child Rights Act enforcement, family instability, and rural-urban migration—are consistently cited (Bisi-Onyemaechi, 2022; Larai, Mahmoud, & Mukhtar, 2022). Yet the analytical tendency to list causes additively rather than examining their interaction produces fragmented understanding. Child labour both reflects and reinforces poverty cycles, undermining human capital development through limited educational attainment and long-term physical and psychological harm (ILO & UNICEF, 2025). This recursive relationship, while acknowledged, is insufficiently operationalised in intervention design, which typically addresses symptoms rather than sys-

tem dynamics.

The social work intervention literature occupies a particularly problematic position, oscillating between aspirational prescription and thin empirical description. Social workers are assigned roles in identifying vulnerable children, providing psychosocial support, facilitating education access, and advocating for child rights (Keagher, 2006; Juliet, 2009)—functions requiring resources, training, and institutional backing that are systematically absent in Nigerian practice contexts. The literature's silence on this implementation gap constitutes a significant critical failure.

The primary-secondary-tertiary prevention framework (ILO, 2006; Juliet, 2009) structures social work roles across proactive, remedial, and rehabilitative levels. Primary prevention encompasses awareness campaigns, community sensitisation, economic empowerment through micro-enterprise, and capacity building for teachers and community leaders. These interventions, while theoretically sound, assume social worker presence and community trust that are unevenly distributed. Mass media deployment—radio, television, community drama—assumes audience access and message penetration that empirical evaluation rarely confirms.

Secondary prevention focuses on identifying at-risk or engaged children, rescue operations, temporary shelter, case management, and multidisciplinary coordination with law enforcement, healthcare, and education providers. The emphasis on psychosocial counselling and child-friendly legal procedures assumes service infrastructure density that urban-rural disparities fundamentally undermine. Tertiary prevention—rehabilitation, reintegration, vocational training, ongoing support, family assessment, and follow-up—requires sustained engagement that institutional resource constraints render episodic at best.

The guiding principles for social work practice—best interest of the child, non-discrimination, protection

and safety, privacy and confidentiality, child participation, dignity and empowerment, family-based care, collaboration and professional competence (Juliet, 2009; ILO, 2006)—represent normative ideals rather than empirical descriptions of practice reality. Their invocation in the literature without critical examination of how they are compromised by resource scarcity, corruption, training deficits, and community resistance produces a misleadingly optimistic portrait of social work capacity. The preference for family- and community-based care over institutionalisation, for example, assumes safe home environments that are precisely absent in many child labour cases; reintegration under such conditions risks re-trafficking and re-exploitation that the literature acknowledges but does not systematically address.

The critical gap across this literature is the absence of theoretically grounded, empirically rigorous evaluation of social work intervention effectiveness in specific Nigerian contexts. Studies enumerate what social workers should do without examining what they actually do, or with what results. The Ovia North East Local Government Area focus of the present study addresses this gap by examining causal factors and evaluating social worker and government responses in a bounded setting. Such context-specific evidence is essential, but its generation requires methodological designs—longitudinal tracking, control comparisons, outcome measurement—that the current literature largely avoids. Without this evaluative turn, social work's role in child labour prevention will remain aspirational rather than demonstrated, and policy will continue to assume intervention efficacy without evidentiary foundation.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three complementary theoretical perspectives: the Marxian Political Economy Theory, the Rights-Based Approach, and Crisis Intervention Theory (Ugiagbe, 2018). Together, these

frameworks provide a comprehensive explanation of the structural causes of child hawking, the normative obligations of the state, and the practical role of social work intervention.

The Marxian Political Economy Theory, associated with Karl Marx (1867), provides the structural foundation for understanding child labour as a product of capitalist inequality. It argues that society is divided into the bourgeoisie, who control economic resources, and the proletariat, who sell their labour under conditions of exploitation. In the Nigerian context, this framework explains how poverty, unemployment, and unequal resource distribution compel households to depend on children's economic contributions for survival. Child hawking, therefore, is not merely a cultural practice but a manifestation of systemic deprivation. The weakening of traditional economic systems through colonial history and integration into global capitalism has further deepened household vulnerability, reinforcing the structural conditions that sustain child labour.

The Rights-Based Approach shifts the focus from structural explanation to legal and moral responsibility. Grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it conceptualises child hawking as a violation of children's rights to education, protection, development, and dignity (Ugiagbe, 2018). This approach positions children as rights-holders and the state as the primary duty-bearer responsible for ensuring their protection. It is guided by principles of participation, non-discrimination, accountability, and empowerment. In Nigeria, gaps in enforcement of the Child Rights Act and unequal access to social services demonstrate a failure to fully realise these obligations, thereby sustaining child labour. This framework is particularly useful for evaluating government policies and institutional responses.

Crisis Intervention Theory provides the micro-level practice framework for understanding immediate

social work responses. It explains how children and families experiencing economic and psychosocial stress require timely, structured intervention to restore stability (Ugiagbe, 2018). Social workers apply this approach through assessment, counselling, case management, and referral services aimed at reducing immediate harm and strengthening coping capacity. It is especially relevant in addressing the urgent needs of children engaged in hawking who are exposed to physical danger, exploitation, and emotional distress.

In synthesis, the Marxian Political Economy Theory explains the structural causes of child hawking, the Rights-Based Approach defines the ethical and legal framework for protection, and Crisis Intervention Theory guides immediate professional response. Collectively, these theories provide an integrated lens for analysing causes, evaluating interventions, and informing policy and practice within the study context.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive and exploratory survey research design to investigate the effect of child labour on hawking children and the role of social work interventions in Ovia North East Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. The study was grounded in relevant theoretical perspectives, including the Marxian Political Economy Theory by Karl Marx and the Ecological Systems Theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. While the Marxian perspective explains child labour as a consequence of structural inequality and economic exploitation, the ecological systems perspective situates the child within interacting social environments (family, community, and institutions), thereby providing a holistic understanding of child hawking and the need for social work intervention.

The study population comprised children aged 5–18 years engaged in street hawking, alongside their parents or guardians, irrespective of socio-cultural back-

ground. This classification aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defines a child as any individual below 18 years.

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. Oluku and Okada communities were purposively selected due to the high prevalence of child labour and hawking activities. Each community was divided into clusters, from which streets were randomly selected. A total of 150 hawking children were selected using accidental sampling for questionnaire administration. In addition, 10 parents or guardians were selected through snowball sampling for in-depth interviews, resulting in a total sample size of 160 respondents.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires and in-depth interview guides, both of which were content-validated to ensure consistency with the study objectives. Primary data were obtained directly from respondents, while secondary data were sourced from journals, textbooks, internet materials, and government publications. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages for clarity. Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic content analysis, enabling the identification of recurring themes and patterns related to child labour, hawking, and social work interventions.

3.2 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

This section presents the socio-demographic profile of respondents involved in child hawking in Ovia North East Local Government Area, focusing on gender, age, religion, and educational attainment. The gender distribution shows that females (59.7%) are more involved in hawking than males (40.3%), suggesting a gendered dimension to child economic participation shaped by household roles and socio-cultural expectations. In terms of age, nearly half of the respondents fall within the 10–14 years category (49%), followed by those aged 15–18 years (35.7%), while 15.3% are

aged 5–7 years. This indicates that early adolescence is the peak period for engagement in hawking, raising concerns about disruption of schooling and developmental progression. Religiously, most respondents are Christians (56.7%), followed by Muslims (36.3%) and traditional worshippers (7%), reflecting the general population structure of the area rather than a causal influence on hawking.

Educational attainment further shows that 43.7% have primary education, 37.7% secondary education, 5.3% beyond secondary level, and 14% no formal education, indicating varying but generally disrupted educational trajectories due to involvement in hawking.

Parental marital status and ethnic background also reveal important patterns. A significant proportion of respondents come from single-parent (29.7%), deceased-parent (25%), and separated/divorced homes (24%), while only 21.3% are from intact marriages, highlighting the role of household instability and economic vulnerability rather than marital status alone. Ethnically, respondents are diverse, with Igbo (18.3%), Bini (16%), Yoruba (12%), Esan (9.3%), Calabar (8.3%), and Etsako (7.3%) being most represented, while Hausa, Agbor, and Igala groups each account for 5.3%. Overall, the findings indicate that child hawking is a cross-cutting phenomenon driven primarily by economic hardship, cutting across gender, religion, family structure, and ethnicity.

3.3 Immediate and Remote Causes of Child Hawking and Labour

This section examines the immediate (proximal) and remote (structural) factors influencing children's involvement in hawking activities in the study area. Findings show that a large majority of respondents (68.3%) do not enjoy hawking, while 23.7% reported enjoyment and 8% indicated occasional enjoyment. This indicates that participation is largely involuntary and survival-driven rather than based on personal choice. In addition, 66% of respondents perceived

that child hawking is increasing in prevalence, compared to 23.7% who disagreed and 10.3% who were uncertain, suggesting a rising socio-economic challenge within the community.

In terms of immediate causes, poverty emerged as the most dominant factor (54%), followed by financial gains (22.7%), peer influence (15.7%), and personal interest (7.7%). Household context further reinforces this pattern, as 43.7% of respondents live with parents, 27.3% with guardians, 20.3% with foster parents, and 8.7% with friends, indicating that child hawking occurs even within biological family settings. A majority (67.7%) confirmed that parental economic hardship contributed directly to their involvement in hawking. This is consistent with the occupational profile of caregivers, where petty trading (39%) and informal artisanal work (35%) dominate, reflecting unstable and low-income livelihoods. Family structure also plays a role, with 59.3% of respondents from polygamous homes, which may increase dependency burdens and economic pressure.

Qualitative findings further deepen this analysis by highlighting remote structural causes such as unemployment, business failure, lack of government support, and weak social welfare systems. Respondents consistently linked child hawking to household survival strategies in contexts of economic instability. Overall, the findings demonstrate that child hawking is shaped by an interaction of immediate economic deprivation and broader structural inequalities, with poverty serving as the central but not exclusive driver of the phenomenon.

3.4 Social Worker Intervention and Government Measures to Control Child Hawking and Labour

This section evaluates the extent of social worker intervention and the effectiveness of government measures in addressing child hawking in the study area. Findings indicate extremely limited engagement with social workers, as 83% of respondents reported

no prior contact, 13.7% had some contact, and 3.3% could not recall. This suggests that social work services are largely inaccessible or absent for children engaged in hawking. In addition, 63% of respondents were unaware of the roles of social workers, while only 4.3% demonstrated any clear awareness. A further 68.3% reported that no community sensitization or awareness campaigns had been conducted, indicating weak outreach and poor visibility of social work practice.

Similarly, 70.3% of respondents had never benefited from any form of social worker intervention, with only 1.7% reporting actual support. Qualitative responses reinforce this gap, showing that many participants either confuse social workers with law enforcement or question their relevance to addressing economic hardship. This reflects a broader disconnect between professional services and community expectations, as well as low institutional trust.

Regarding government measures, awareness of child protection laws was mixed: 34% were aware, 32% were unaware, and 34% uncertain. However, 50.7% of respondents considered these laws ineffective, while only 16.3% viewed them as effective, indicating weak enforcement and implementation gaps. Furthermore, 95.3% reported no direct benefit from government interventions, aside from minimal mentions of scholarships (1.7%) and incentives (1%). Respondents recommended improving parental economic conditions (52%) and providing free education (35.3%) as key solutions.

Overall, the findings show that both social worker interventions and government measures are largely ineffective in addressing child hawking in the study area, largely due to poor implementation, limited awareness, and weak institutional reach.

4.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Summary

This study investigated the effects of child labour on hawking children and the role of social worker interventions in Ovia North East Local Government Area, Edo State, Nigeria. Unlike previous research, this study focused on children's own experiences, aiming to examine the prevalence of hawking, associated dangers, parental economic influences, academic impacts, and the effectiveness of social worker and government interventions.

Respondents included hawking children and their parents or guardians. Most children were aged 10–14 years, with females (59.7%) predominating. Christianity was the major religion (56.7%), and the Igbo ethnic group was most represented (18.3%). The majority of children attended primary school, while some had never attended school. Most parents were petty traders, often from polygamous families.

Key findings revealed that child hawking is increasing and largely motivated by poverty. Children experience dangers such as assault and traffic accidents, struggle academically, and perceive hawking as harmful and abusive. Awareness of social workers and government laws protecting children was low, and interventions were largely absent or ineffective. Effective reduction of child hawking requires improving parental economic status, providing free education, and enhancing social worker engagement.

4.2 Conclusion

The study confirms that child hawking negatively affects children's social, educational, and psychological wellbeing, with poverty and inadequate parental support as major drivers. Government measures and social worker interventions are essential for protecting children, improving their productivity, and mitigating the dangers of child labour. Consistent, structured, and

well-funded interventions can enhance child safety, knowledge, and future potential. Addressing poverty and promoting education remain critical strategies for reducing child hawking.

4.3 Recommendations

- **Economic Empowerment:** Government should provide affordable loans, subsidized trading centers, and ensure adequate salaries to improve parents' economic capacity.
- **Education:** Free education should be implemented to remove financial barriers and encourage school attendance. Laws should prevent parents from forcing children into labour.
- **Awareness and Sensitization:** Government and NGOs should educate the public on the dangers of child labour and the role of social workers in child protection.
- **Strengthening Social Worker Interventions:** Social workers should receive adequate funding and resources, align with international standards, and collaborate with government and NGOs to address child labour effectively

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