

## MASS MEDIA COVERAGE OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides every child a right to their childhood; devoid of exploitation, violence, neglect, extreme poverty, harmful traditional practices, abuse and denial of education. However, prevailing realities in recent times have shown that millions of children around the world including Nigeria are exploited in different ways. While so many children are forced to work in factories; on the streets; and in the sex trade, some are sold as slaves; given out in marriage or even drafted to fight in wars. In line with its information dissemination and agenda setting roles, the mass media, through effective coverage, could contribute immensely in raising awareness, influencing attitude, and promoting debate on the need to promote and protect the rights of the child. This paper is therefore a content analysis of two selected national dailies aimed at ascertaining the extent of their coverage of issues relating to children within a period of three years (2011 – 2013).

On the 15<sup>th</sup> day of July, 2013, Mrs Aminot Otun was arrested by the Lagos State Police Command for roasting the right hand of her seven-year-old step-son, Awwal Otun for adding drops of liquid disinfectant to his bath water, (Vanguard July 16, 2013:6). Again, on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2013, Adeleke Adewale, a commercial bus driver was arrested for allegedly having carnal knowledge of his two daughters between the ages of 10 and 13 for over a period of two years, (Vanguard July 9, 2013:6). These are only a few of the numerous cases of child abuses in Nigeria. Nigerians cannot forget in a hurry how on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2013 the Nigerian senate voted supporting the retention of Section 29(4)(b) of the 1999 constitution, which is open to manipulation arising from its ambiguity. In other parts of the world, children have suffered the ugly consequences of social, political and economic abuses. Yet, universally, children are regarded as precious gifts from God.

The above preface to this study clearly reveals that children are easy targets for exploitation because they are dependent on adults and social institutions for their development, usually unaware of their rights and unable to formally voice their concerns. This explains why various human rights agencies and organizations, child advocacy groups, grassroots groups, educators, global leaders and youth groups are doing meaningful work to promote children's rights.

To concretize global efforts and attention on child development and protection against any form of abuse, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in November 20<sup>th</sup> 1989. The instrument which has three parts with fifty-four (54) articles opens with a preamble that states the aims and objectives which the convention seeks to

accomplish for the child. It states: “Recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. The child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society... in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity.” (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)

In Africa, the Organization of African Unity (now African Union) at its Heads of States Summit in Addis Ababa in July 1990 adopted the African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (CRCW). The charter, which originates from the UN Convention, takes cognizance of the socio-cultural peculiarities of the African child. It notes that the situation of most African children remains critical due to the unique factors of their socio-economic, cultural, traditional and developmental circumstances, natural disasters, armed conflicts, exploitation and hunger and on account of the child’s physical and mental immaturity, he/she needs special safeguards and care, (African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990). Nigeria demonstrated its acceptance of these two international documents by signing and ratifying them in 1991 and 2000 respectively. Furthermore, the Child Rights Bill aimed at principally enacting into law in Nigeria the principles enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the AU Charter on the rights and Welfare of the Child was prepared in the 90s and was eventually passed into Law by the National Assembly in July 2003. It was assented to by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in September 2003; and promulgated as the Child’s Rights Act 2003.

The UNICEF information sheet (2007) reports that the structure of the Child Rights Act 2003 has been informed by the mandate to provide a legislation which incorporates all the rights and responsibilities of children, and which consolidates all laws relating to children into one single legislation, as well as specifies the duties and obligations of government, parents and other authorities, organizations and bodies.

Having put all these legal documents in place, one would expect that the rights of every child under the age of 18 will be respected and protected. Ironically, this is not the case. Basically, no meaningful progress can be expected in the advancement of children’s rights until there is a fundamental change in people’s attitudes.

The mass media have been described as one of the most influential and effective in child advocacy given that they play indispensable roles in shaping public opinion and influencing public policy. Specifically, Goddard and Saunders (2001) cited in Oyero (2010:30) draw attention to the essential role of the media in increasing the society’s awareness of, and responses to child abuse and neglect.

In this regard, the Norwegian government and UNICEF launched the Oslo challenge in 1999, which was aimed at ensuring that the overwhelming power of the media for good in the lives of children is identified, encouraged and supported. Oyero (2010:25) highlights the challenge to media professionals at all levels and in all media to include:

## **Mass Media Coverage of Children's Rights In Nigeria**

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- To raise awareness in the media professions about the rights of children and how they can be protected and promoted by good professional practices or harmed through inappropriate policies or actions;
- To work ethically and professionally according to sound media practices and to develop and promote media codes of ethics in order to avoid sensationalism, stereotyping (including by gender) or undervaluing of children and their rights;
- To resist commercial pressures that lead to children's issues and the rights of children protection from exploitation, including as consumers, being given low priority;
- To work to enhance the relationship between children and the media so that both grow and improve in understanding of the positive and negative power and potential of the relationship.

The underlying issue here is for media professionals to ensure that children's rights are protected and promoted by bringing to the fore issues affecting them. It is against this background that this study examines how the Nigerian mass media have covered children's rights related issues with a focus on The Vanguard and The Punch newspapers.

### **Theoretical framework**

The agenda - setting theory of the media is considered relevant and was used to set the tone for this study. The agenda-setting theory explains the operation of the media that results in prioritization of the issues that arise and engage the attention of the public. By implication, the issues focused upon by the media become the issues that the public accepts as important for attention and discussion, (MaQuail 2005:512)

The idea of agenda setting started with Lippmann's (1922:3) observation that the mass media mediate between the "world outside and the picture in our heads." Cohen (1963:13) reinforced this idea when he notes that, "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read."

Baran and Davis (2009:279) note that Cohen's agenda-setting perspective would have lingered in obscurity had it not been empirically confirmed by research conducted by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. Thus, it was McCombs and Shaw's (1972) investigation which established an empirical link between media agenda and public agenda. They articulated their interpretation of agenda-setting thus: "In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position.... The mass media may well determine the important issues- i.e., the media may set the 'agenda' of the campaign, (McCombs and Shaw, 1972:176).

Key to the agenda-setting theory is the idea that the media influence the level or importance that people attach to what they see, read or hear from the media. In other words, there

is a relationship between media reports and people's ranking of public issues. The mass media shape how audience perceives social reality by the importance they ascribe to certain issues. Okoro and Agbo (2003:31) note that the media can ascribe importance to an issue through;

- The quality/ frequency of reporting
- Prominence given to the report
- The degree of conflict generated in the reports and
- Cumulative media- specific effects over time.

The agenda-setting theory thus provides the basis for examining how the mass media have been able to set agenda for the rights of children by assigning relative importance to them through frequency of reporting, the prominence given to such reports and the amount of conflict generated in them.

### **Research questions**

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

- i. What is the frequency of coverage of children's rights in the Nigerian media?
- ii. What are the dominant forms of coverage of children's rights issues in the Nigerian media?
- iii. What is the degree of prominence given to children's rights issues in the Nigerian media?
- iv. Who are the key actors behind reported children's rights issues in the Nigerian media?
- v. What are the dominant children's rights issues covered in the Nigerian media?

### **Methodology**

Content analysis, which involves studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables, (Kerlinger, 2000) was adopted in this study. Given that the subject of inquiry cuts across diverse socio-cultural, ethnic, political and economic interest, two privately owned national dailies- The Vanguard and The Punch newspapers were purposively selected because of their depth of coverage and their wide circulation.

The study was restricted to a period of three years (2011 – 2013) and all the issues of the two dailies within this period constituted the study population. However, only the issues published in June were studied since June 16 of every year is set aside as the "Day of the African Child." It is expected that the media would feature prominently activities and programmes on children's rights a few days before and after the day. It is against this backdrop that the June 14<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> issues of the two selected newspapers were studied.

Coding sheet was used to obtain data for the study. The content categories include the frequency and form of coverage, prominence, direction and sources of reports. All the news, opinion articles/ features, editorials, cartoons, photo news and special reports on children's rights formed the units of analysis. Data generated were presented in tables and analysed through simple percentage. To ascertain the reliability of the coding process, the researchers engaged two independent coders to code a sub-sample of 14 units and they were found to agree up to 11 times, which gave a reliability coefficient of 0.79. The inter-coder reliability was calculated using Holsti's formula cited in Wimmer and Dominick (2011:172);

## Mass Media Coverage of Children's Rights In Nigeria

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{2M}{N1 + N2}$$

Where:

M = number of coding decisions on which two coders agree.

N1 and N2 = total number of coding decisions by the first and second coders respectively.

### Data presentation and analysis

**Table 1: Number of newspapers and reports on children's rights found within the period of study**

| Newspaper title     | No of issues sampled | No of issues found | No of days children's rights issues were covered | No of children's rights issues covered |
|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--|--|
| <b>The Vanguard</b> | 51                   | 51                 | 22 (56%)   | 54 (67.5%)                             |
| <b>The Punch</b>    | 51                   | 50                 | 17 (44%)   | 26 (32.5%)                             |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>102</b>           | <b>101</b>         | <b>39 (100%)</b>                                 | <b>80(100%)</b>                        |

#### Source: Researchers' 2014 Content Analysis

Table 1 shows the coverage given to children's rights by the two newspapers. A total of 80 reports were covered within the period of study. The Vanguard had more reports, numbering 54 (67.5%) compared to The Punch, which had only 26 (32.5%). This is not unconnected with the fact that Vanguard, in conjunction with other organizations/ agencies, organizes an annual conference for children and all stakeholders to commemorate the "Day of the African Child." Drawing from the data presented in table 1, the remaining tables will be presented in line with the research questions formulated for the study.

➤ **Research Question One:** What is the frequency of coverage of children's rights in the Nigerian media?

**Table 2: Frequency of coverage of children's rights within the period of study**

| Newspaper title     | 1 – 2 times     | 3 – 4 times     | 5 times and above | Total            |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------|
| <b>The Vanguard</b> | 20              | 02              | -                 | <b>22 (56%)</b>  |
| <b>The Punch</b>    | 15              | 02              | -                 | <b>17 (44%)</b>  |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>35 (90%)</b> | <b>04 (10%)</b> | <b>- (0%)</b>     | <b>39 (100%)</b> |

#### Source: Researchers' 2014 Content Analysis

Data in table 2 show the frequency of coverage of children's rights within the period of study. Out of the 101 issues of the two newspapers studied, children's rights reports were found in only 39 (39%). In terms of the frequency of appearance of children's rights reports in the 39 issues, 1 – 2 times had 35 (90%), 3 – 4 times had 4 (10%) while 5 times and above had nothing.

➤ **Research Question Two:** What are the dominant forms of coverage of children's rights issues in the Nigerian media?

**Table 3: Forms of coverage of children’s rights issues**

| Newspaper title     | News               | Editorial         | Opinion articles/ features | Cartoons         | Supplement/ Special reports | Photo news         | Total             |
|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| <b>The Vanguard</b> | 24                 | 01                | 08                         | 02               | 11                          | 08                 | <b>54 (67.5%)</b> |
| <b>The Punch</b>    | 15                 | -                 | 07                         | -                | 01                          | 03                 | <b>26 (32.5%)</b> |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>39 (48.75%)</b> | <b>01 (1.25%)</b> | <b>15 (18.75%)</b>         | <b>02 (2.5%)</b> | <b>12 (15%)</b>             | <b>11 (13.75%)</b> | <b>80 (100%)</b>  |

**Source: Researchers’ 2014 Content Analysis**

Table 3 shows the various forms of coverage given to children’s rights issues reported in the two dailies. The data presented in table 3 reveal that most of the issues, 39 (48.75%) were presented as straight news, 15 (18.75%) were opinion articles/ features, supplements and special reports were 12 (15%) while photo news had 11 (13.75%). Cartoons had only 2 (2.5%) entries while editorial received only 1 (1.25%).

➤ **Research Question Three:** What is the degree of prominence given to children’s rights issues in the Nigerian media?

**Table 4: Prominence given to children’s rights issues covered**

| Newspaper title     | Front page       | Inside page       | Back Page     | Total             |
|---------------------|------------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| <b>The Vanguard</b> | 02               | 52                | -             | <b>54 (67.5%)</b> |
| <b>The Punch</b>    | -                | 26                | -             | <b>26 (32.5%)</b> |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>02 (2.5%)</b> | <b>78 (97.5%)</b> | <b>- (0%)</b> | <b>80(100%)</b>   |

**Source: Researchers’ 2014 Content Analysis**

Table 4 shows the degree of importance placed on children’s rights issues covered by the two dailies. The above data reveal that only 2 (2.5%) of the children’s rights reports covered within the period of the study were found on the front page while 78 (97.5%) appeared in the inside pages. None of the reports appeared on the back page.

➤ **Research Question Four:** Who are the key actors behind reported children’s rights issues in the Nigerian media?

**Table 5: Major sources of children’s rights reports within the period**

| Newspaper title     | Int. org./ agencies | Govt/ govt agencies | NGOs/ CBOs        | Individuals/ Philanthropists | Multinational companies | Total             |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>The Vanguard</b> | 07                  | 11                  | 22                | 13                           | 01                      | <b>54 (67.5%)</b> |
| <b>The Punch</b>    | 06                  | 06                  | 04                | 10                           | -                       | <b>26 (32.5%)</b> |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>13 (16.25%)</b>  | <b>17 (21.25%)</b>  | <b>26 (32.5%)</b> | <b>23 (28.75%)</b>           | <b>01 (1.25%)</b>       | <b>80 (100%)</b>  |

## Mass Media Coverage of Children's Rights In Nigeria

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### Source: Researchers' 2014 Content Analysis

Table 5 shows the various information sources for children's rights reports in the two dailies within the period investigated. Non – Governmental Organisations/ Community Based Organisations had 26 (32.5%), individuals/ philanthropists had 23 (28.75%), and government / government agencies had 17 (25.25%), while international organizations / agencies had 13 (16.25%). Multinational companies recorded only 1 (1.25%).

➤ **Research Question Five:** What are the dominant children's rights issues covered in the Nigerian media?

**Table 6: Dominant children's rights issues covered within the period**

| Newspaper title     | Protection rights  | Survival rights    | Participation rights | Development rights | Total             |
|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| <b>The Vanguard</b> | 24                 | 14                 | 06                   | 10                 | <b>54 (67.5%)</b> |
| <b>The Punch</b>    | 19                 | 03                 | 03                   | 01                 | <b>26 (32.5%)</b> |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>43 (53.75%)</b> | <b>17 (21.25%)</b> | <b>09 (11.25%)</b>   | <b>11 (13.75%)</b> | <b>80(100%)</b>   |

### Source: Researchers' 2014 Content Analysis

Data presented in table 6 reveal that protection rights, which are concerned with abuse and violence against children; harmful traditional practices such as child marriage, slavery, and female genital mutilation received greater attention 43 (53.75%) while survival rights which are concerned with child mortality and mobility was next with 17 (21.25%) entries. This was followed by development rights - access to education and resources – which received 11 (13.75%) entries while participation rights, which involves children's participation in decisions affecting them had 9 (11.25%).

## Discussion

The extent of coverage given to children's rights by The Vanguard and The Punch newspapers shows a serious under reportage. This could be justified by the fact that children's rights issues appeared in only 39 (39%) issues out of the 101 issues of both dailies analysed. Furthermore, the frequency of appearance was also low as 1 – 2 times dominated with 35 (90%) entries. See tables 1 and 2. The low coverage of children's rights issues in this study reinforces earlier research findings by Edeani (1990); Akagbosu and Omoruyi (2004); and Galadima and Enighe (2004), which showed that the mass media in Nigeria often give more coverage to political issues than other pressing issues of national interest, (Nwodo and Ezeoke. 2013:41 – 51).

An evaluation of the dominant forms of coverage given to issues on children's rights revealed that the coverage cut across diverse forms of media contents with straight news dominating (48.75%). The idea of using diverse forms of coverage to report issues on children's rights is quite commendable since it gives the readers varieties, which help to spice up their reading experience.

The level of prominence given to any report is determined by its position in terms of page placement. The study revealed that 97.5% of the reports on children's rights were placed in the inside pages of the dailies. This concentration of children's rights reports in the inside pages is only an indication that the two dailies did not consider issues on children's rights as issues that deserve high focus, which could culminate into public attention and discussion. Usually, placement of reports on the pages of newspapers is influenced by the level of importance a newspaper medium places on the story being reported and since the front page stories help to attract the attention of the readers, editors usually position their most important stories of the day on the front page. Available data have shown that issues on children's rights do not fall into this category, hence they appeared mainly in the inside pages of the two dailies.

On the major sources of information regarding children's rights, it was observed that NGOs/ CBOs were dominant sources of information with 32.5%; followed by individuals/ philanthropists and government/ government agencies, which had 28.75% and 21.25% respectively. This shows that NGOs/ CBOs have been in the forefront in lending voice to child rights related issues and they have performed creditably well in getting their voices into the news. It is however surprising, that multinational companies that should structure the promotion of children's rights as part of their social responsibility to the people are lagging behind. See table 5.

Finally, the analysis of the dominant forms of children's rights issues covered by the two dailies revealed that protection rights were given more attention than other forms of rights. A possible explanation why these two dailies focused more on protection rights is the fact that incidences of sexually abused or raped as well as maltreated children are common occurrences in the Nigerian society.

### **Conclusion/ Recommendations**

This study has empirically shown that issues relating to children's rights are not adequately reported, neither are they given appropriate prominence in the Nigerian media. If indeed children are precious gifts from God who will in turn develop to become leaders of tomorrow, then the media need to wake up to their responsibility of setting agenda for children's rights by giving them adequate and appropriate coverage so that government and public attention would be directed to meeting their needs.

Specifically, media owners, editors and reporters should see children's rights as a development issue and therefore expand the coverage given to all issues in that regard. One way of actualizing this is by effectively using specific pages devoted to children to promote and sensitize government and public awareness of children's rights.

Furthermore, every media organization should endeavor to create a child rights desk just like the foreign or sports desks. This no doubt will help to increase coverage of children's rights issues.

Finally, placing children's rights reports on the front page will increase their news worthiness and raise the issues to the right plane for public discuss. Editors should therefore

## **Mass Media Coverage of Children's Rights In Nigeria**

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devote certain days of the year to issues bothering on the rights of the child aside June 16<sup>th</sup> and let the lead report for such days centre on children's rights.

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