

# Under-18 domestic helpers in south-eastern Nigeria and abusive concerns: Implications for child protection and social work

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**Abstract:** The employment of under-18 domestic helpers is common in Nigeria. Our study provides evidence of abuse of these domestic helpers, and identifies policy and practice gaps that have allowed it. A phenomenological and descriptive research design was used. Data was elicited from 13 respondents. The results show that there were no social protective services available for abused under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria. There were reports of psychological, emotional, and physical abuses, causing them to experience suboptimal development into adulthood. Absence of qualified social workers in local authorities, with the mandate to pursue child protection has contributed to the thriving of abuse of under-18 domestic helpers. The study recommends efforts by stakeholders to develop strategies and identify adequate funds for effective child protection services. Social work advocacy for community education and raising the awareness of the dangers of abuse of under-18 domestic helpers is crucial.

**Keywords:** abuse; child protection service; maid; Nigeria; social work; Under-18 domestic helpers

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## Introduction

An under-18 domestic helper can be referred to as a child or a person below the age of 18 that is engaged by a household to help in taking care of the family chores such as washing of dishes and clothes, house cleaning, cooking, running errands, in exchange for social protection (Kabir, 2022). The majority of working parents usually engage the services of under-18 domestic helpers to aid them in household chores while they concentrate on other economic and social activities. However, there have been cases of abuse of these under-18 domestic helpers in Nigeria, despite provisions of legislation like the Child Rights Act of 2003 (UNICEF, 2021). According to Kabir (2022) hundreds of underage children who work as domestic helpers in different parts of Nigeria are faced with hardship. Some of them are trafficked, molested, tortured, and subjected to different kinds of inhumane treatment.

Worldwide, economic hardship exacts a toll on millions of families, and in some places, it comes at the price of a child's safety. It is documented that one in every 10 children is subjected to child labour worldwide, with roughly 160 million children subjected to child labour at the beginning of 2020 (UNICEF, 2021). Africa has the largest number of child labourers, at about 72.1 million, and 31.5 million of them are in hazardous work (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). Sub-Saharan Africa is the region where child labour is most prevalent (Esteban & Max, 2016), just as Nigeria records about 15 million children in child labour, sourced from its huge child population that comprises about 40% of the total population (Ameh, 2021). Children working in Nigeria are engaged in such activities as quarrying granite, artisanal mining, commercial sexual exploitation, street hawking and deployment in armed conflict (US Department of Labor, 2020). However, of interest to our research are those who are recruited for domestic labour and are at risk of facing abuse.

There is evidence of extreme harm to under-18 domestic helpers, including cases of fatalities (Kabir, 2022; Usman, 2020). Sexual molestation and threats to the safety of under-18 domestic helpers have been the subject of media investigations in Nigeria, with questions about the awareness and enforcement of the Child Rights Act (Unini, 2020). The effects of these abuses on the domestic helpers' psychosocial, economic, and overall developmental wellbeing cannot be overstated. A study found that children who were not used as domestic helpers performed better academically than children who were used as domestic helpers (Ekeng & Esubana, 2021). And another study showed that under-18 domestic helpers were identified to have poor health conditions as a result of excessive stress and hard labour (Arinze, 2006). They have also been victims of harmful cultural practices (Mbadiwe & Oscar, 2021).

A broad spectrum of issues informs the employment of the services of under-18 domestic helpers, such as families with spouses that are well engaged in economic

activities and those who feel their children will be dispassionately trained in the hands of another family (Adesina, 2015). Some families send their children into domestic help because of poverty, with the belief that the foster family will remunerate them or help train their children in school or a viable trade (Kiss et al., 2022). Unfortunately, some of the children are taken against their will to serve as domestic helpers (Usman, 2020).

Despite a good number of laws and interventions to protect children and under-18 domestic helpers from abuse in Nigeria, the rate of molestation and dehumanizing treatment against under-18 domestic helpers remains alarming (Anazonwu, 2019). Some of the laws and interventions to protect children from abuse in Nigeria are as follows: Nigeria's trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and administration Act, 2003, as amended in 2015, stipulates: it is a crime to use minors as domestic helpers. Section 23 (1) (a) states: "Any person who employs, requires, recruits, transports, harbours, receives or hires out a child under the age of 12 years as a domestic worker, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment for a minimum term of 6 months and not exceeding 7 years (Unigwe, 2021). Also, Chapter IV (Sections 33–46) of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) provides for the fundamental rights of every person including children. The rights include the right to life and the right to dignity of the human person (1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Again, the Child's Right Act (2003) is the law that guarantees the rights of all children in Nigeria. It also provides for a child to be given the protection and care necessary for his or her wellbeing. So far, 24 out of 36 states in Nigeria have adopted the CRA as a state law (National Human Rights Commission, 2022). The UNICEF partners with Nigerian government to strengthen legislative and institutional frameworks to protect children vulnerable and exposed to violence, abuse and exploitation (UNICEF, 2016).

It is based on the foregoing that social work, as a social justice and social care profession, is involved in child protection. A child protection social worker's primary responsibility is to protect children in situations of neglect, abuse, or maltreatment (Indeed Editorial Team, 2021). Furthermore, child protection is an important area of social work practice in Nigeria. It deals with various ways of keeping all children safe and ensuring that they are protected against any form of abuse, neglect, violence, and harm (Nnamma-Okechukwu et al., 2017).

Scholars have carried out studies generally to investigate child abuse in Nigeria (Akpan & Oluwabamide, 2017; Mbakogu, 2017; Ojiakor & Adeline, 2020; Wilson-Oyelaran, 1989), but none has designed a study tailored specifically to interrogate the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers in Nigeria, implication for child protection and the role of social workers in abating, ameliorating and eradicating the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers. Hence, this study was designed to fill that gap. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the causes for the need for under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria?
2. What are the abusive realities faced by under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria?
3. What is the assessment of the availability of social protection services for under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria?

The findings of the study will be of immense importance to policymakers with respect to child protection and policies. It will as well enable social workers to pay attention to the scale of abuse faced by Under-18 domestic helpers and can guide the profession toward retooling practice approaches for this set of clients.

## **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical underpinning of this study will be anchored on ecological system theory. The theory was propounded by Urie Bronfenbrenner in (1974). The ecological system theory views development as a complex of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from the immediate settings of family and school to broad cultural values, laws, and customs. Furthermore, the basic tenet of the theory is that human behavioral patterns and development in general are largely influenced by their socio-economic and cultural environment (Guy-Evans, 2020). A child's disposition and development are largely determined by the child's immediate environment, such as the family, or the external environment, such as school and places of worship. The Nigerian environment is one that does not place emphasis on child protection services. This influences the prevalence of child abuse witness the Nigerian context.

The ecological system theory supports the position that environmental factors were responsible for the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers in Nsukka LGA, Enugu State, Nigeria. The weak laws and unenforced child protection laws that are prevalent in the study environment make under-18 domestic helpers susceptible to abuse and maltreatment. The primary responsibility of the government is the protection of lives and properties. However, the government has failed the children, most especially the under aged domestic helpers. The prevailing environment of lack of child protection laws makes children from this side of the world vulnerable to abuse and maltreatment compared to children in developed nations such as the United Kingdom or the United States of America, where child protection laws are effective and implementable when the occasion arises. The porous and weak child protection laws and enforcement in the Nigerian environment make it hard and difficult to keep under-18 domestic helpers safe from abuse (Ajibo et al., 2015).

## **Method**

### **Study Design**

The study adopted descriptive and phenomenological research design. Descriptive research design is a comprehensive summarization, in everyday terms, of specific events experienced by individuals or groups of individuals (Lambert & Lambert, 2013). Furthermore, it is a type of research design that aims to obtain information to systematically describe a phenomenon, situation, or population (Voxco, 2021). Employing descriptive research design, the researcher was able to describe in details the practice and narrative of abuse of under-18 domestic helpers in Nigeria. On the other hand, phenomenological research design is concerned with the study of lived experience from the perspective of the individual (Lester, 1999). This research design was utilized to display the lived experience of under-18 domestic helpers and other members of the society who have witnessed the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers.

### **Study participants**

For this study, 13 respondents selected using a purposive method. The respondents comprise four current under-18 domestic helpers, six key informants, and three social workers. The current under-18 domestic helpers were selected for the study so that they could share their lived experience as domestic helpers. The second category of respondents was selected for the study because they served as key informants. These are people who have witnessed the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers and are willing and able to share their experience. The third category of respondents were social workers who were able to demonstrate the role of social workers in ameliorating and eradicating the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers.

### **Study area**

The participants for this study were drawn from the Nsukka Local Government urban area of Enugu State, Nigeria. The University of Nigeria is located in the urban area of Nsukka. The sample for this study was drawn from this area because the area is notable for having considerable numbers of working-class parents who engage the services of under-18 domestic helpers. Nsukka Urban has a population of 254,422, whereas the total population of the Nsukka Local Government Area was put at 417,700. Close to half (148,636) of the total population of Nsukka were below 19 years (City Population, 2016). There are no official statistics/number of under-18 domestic helpers in Nsukka LGA and Nigeria at large; however, observation

indicates that three out of five working-class parents engage the services of under-18 domestic helpers to aid them in household chores.

### **Sampling procedure**

A non-probability sampling method was employed for this study. Among the various non-probability sampling methods, purposive and availability sampling were deployed for selecting the study respondents. The study adopted a purposive sampling procedure because a unique target population was needed for the study. This target population comprised: current under-18 domestic helpers; key informants who have witnessed the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers; and social workers. The study employed availability sampling to ensure that only available and willing under-18 domestic helpers, key informants, and social workers would be recruited for the purpose of this study.

### **Data collection and Analyses**

A Structured In-depth Interview Guide was the instrument for data collection. The instrument was utilized because it enables the researchers to elicit answers from the respondents from a pre-designed structured research question. A research assistant was appointed who was graduate of the department of social work, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The research assistant served as the note taker during the interview while the researchers served as the interviewer. The interview session lasted between 40 to 60 minutes to circumvent burnout and fatigue associated with longer durations. The data collected was analyzed using Nvivo 12 software. Thematic analysis was employed to categorize the data into themes for easy comprehension.

### **Ethical consideration**

Informed consent was obtained from the under-18 domestic helpers, guidance of under-18 domestic helpers and the key informants before the interviews commenced. The participants were made to understand that participation in the study was voluntary and they were at liberty to exit the study at any time when they felt comfortable. Covid-19 preventive protocols such as social distancing and wearing of nose mask were observed during the interviews. Furthermore, ethical approval to conduct this study was granted by the Strategic Contacts Ethics and Publications (STRA- CEP) of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka Campus, Enugu State.

## Results

### Demographic characteristics of respondents

This section presented the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents of the study.

Table 1  
Socio-demographics of participants

Respondent	Gender	Age	Level of Education	Occupation
Domestic helper 1	Female	16	Senior secondary 1	Student
Domestic helper 2	Male	17	Senior secondary 2	Student
Domestic helper 3	Female	14	Junior secondary 1	Student
Domestic helper 4	Male	16	Primary 6	School dropout
Key informant 1	Male	30	Bachelor of Science	Unemployed
Key informant 2	Female	42	Masters of Science	Trader
Key informant 3	Male	35	Bachelor of Science	Civil servant
Key informant 4	Female	24	National Diploma	Student
Key informant 5	Female	36	Bachelor of education	Civil servant
Key informant 6	Female	45	Bachelor of Science	Farmer
Social worker 1	Female	40	Masters of Science	Child Social Worker
Social worker 2	Female	34	Masters of Science	Social work Educator
Social worker 3	Male	29	Bachelor of Science	Welfare officer

Source: Field study (2022)

Table 1 shows that four respondents in the study were under-18 domestic helpers, six were key informants, and three were social workers. Out of the 13 respondents for the study eight were female and five were male. The mean ages of the under-18 domestic helpers were 15.5 years, the mean ages of the key informants were 35.3 years, and the mean ages of the social workers were 34.3 years. It can be observed that 4 out of the 6 key informants had Bachelor of Science degree; one had Masters of Science degree; and one had National Diploma Certification degree. Similarly, out of the 4 under-18 domestic helpers, 2 were in senior secondary I; one was in senior secondary II, while the other was a primary school dropout. Furthermore, out of the 3 social workers, 2 had Masters of Science degrees and one had a Bachelor of Science degree. Of the participants, 4 were students, 2 were civil servants, one each were unemployed, a trader, a farmer or a school dropout, and 3 were social workers, respectively a child social worker, a social work educator, and a welfare officer.

## **Factors in the need for under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria**

This section explored and examined the causes for the need for under-18 domestic helpers in south-eastern Nigeria. Most of the key informants agree that the categories of children engaged as domestic helpers in Nigeria are children from poor parents and less privileged, orphans and vulnerable children. Poor parents give out their children to serve as domestic helpers to well-to-do relatives or strangers in exchange for education and the provision of basic needs. Samples of quotes to illustrate the above findings are as follows:

Children from poor parents; parents that have many children and they don't have enough money to take care of them. Most times they give out their children to stay with family relations or total strangers as domestic helpers with the promise that their child or children will be taken care of. Some are orphans which mean that they don't have any parents to take care of them; the extended families usually allocate the children to themselves as domestic helpers (KI 2, Trader).

So many Nigerian parents from my knowledge give birth to multiple children that they cannot take off, out of ignorance and illiteracy. They cannot provide for their kids' basic necessity of life such as good food and education. So, because they cannot take care of up to 6 children or more, they end up sending them out to serve as domestic helpers with the promise that the new care giver will provide food, shelter and education for the children. I grew up in the village, my uncle had 11 children, he sent out 9 to be domestic helpers because he could not provide for them. None of them went to school and they could not afford three square meals (KI 3, Civil Servant).

## **Abusive realities faced by under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria**

Both the under-18 domestic helpers and key informants agree on the common ways in which under-18 domestic helpers are abused in South Eastern Nigeria. The study revealed that under-18 domestic helpers are abused physically, sexually, emotionally, and socially. Physically, they are abused by excessive beating and torture; sometimes they die from the injuries sustained from excessive beating. Sexually, these under aged domestic helpers are taken advantage of by their masters; they are raped and molested in most cases as a result of their vulnerability. Emotionally, they experience verbal abuse and are falsely accused of wrongdoing; their emotional development is numbed, dampened, and truncated. Socially, the under-18 domestic helpers are abused on all fronts. They are denied good education. Even when they are allowed to go to school, they do not go on time. They are enrolled in a less educationally



equipped school. The under-18 domestic helpers were starved and denied food. They cook the food, but they are not allowed to eat the food, even when they are allowed to eat, they are given left over or spoiled food. The study also revealed that the under-18 domestic helpers are not allowed to associate with their peers; they are always restricted to excessive labour at their master's home. Quotes below contain the exact views of the under-18 domestic helpers:

I am limited and abuse socially, environmentally, physically, and educationally. Socially, I am banned from associating with friends. Educationally, I was not enrolled in a good school like other children. I don't have text books and enough writing materials. I go to school late because I have to do so many house chores. My madam will tell me to wait, prepare and take her own kids to school before I will go to school. Physical abuse is the one that pain me most; sometimes I am accused, flogged and beaten for something I did not do. I have also been sexually abused (Under-18 domestic helpers 1, 16 years).

I am being maltreated and beaten by my master, even when I did not do anything wrong. She slaps me and many times deny me food. In most cases it is either spoiled food or leftover food that I am allowed to eat. I do not eat when I am supposed to eat. I was not enrolled in a good school like that of my Madam's kids. I usually go to school late on a daily bases because I have to do all the house chores before I will be allowed to go to school (Under-18 domestic helpers 2, 17 years).

The under-18 domestic helpers shared their lived experience with regards to education. It was revealed that in some cases, households that engage the services of under-18 domestic helpers deny them the opportunity to go to school and be educated. The following is an illustrative quote:

They abuse me in many ways. The one that pain me the most is school. I am supposed to be in senior secondary school, but I dropped out in primary six because my master says there is no money to train me in school. His children are going to school but put in the shop to be selling market. My master also talks to me as if I am an animal, he abuses me verbally. If there is any way government can help us that will be nice. (Under-18 domestic helpers 4, 16 years).

Key informants in the study revealed that under-18 domestic helpers are sexually abused, tortured, and denied education. The inhumane treatments were buttressed in the following quotes:

The most rampant ones are sexual abuse. They are enslaved, overlabored, deprived of education and tortured most times. There is a lot of inhumane treatment against them. There Madam are always inhumane to them (Key informant 1, Unemployed).

Sexual abuse, I have seen a case whereby a Madam orders her under aged domestic helper, every night to suck her breast and vagina. If she doesn't, her Madam will start beating her. This happened for months before the under-18 domestic helper cried out (Key informant 3, Civil Servant)

It was also revealed that the incessant emotional abuse of under-18 domestic helpers has led some of them into suicide ideation and actual suicide. It was further revealed that the under-18 domestic helpers are denied basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. They are subjected to hard labour and torture. The following are some of the illustrative quotes:

Under-18 domestic helpers are abused emotionally, sexually, psychologically and physically. Physically, they are beaten excessively. Sexually, masters who are pedophiles do take advantage of them:

When I was younger, I use to have a friend who was a domestic helper. She was usually abused. After sometimes I stopped seeing her. When I asked after her, I was told she committed suicide by drinking snipper (insecticide) because of the starvation and emotional abuse she gets from her madam (Key informant 4, Student).

Some under-18 domestic helpers were deprived of their human right like vital needs, good feeding, shelter, clothes and rest. Some of the domestic helpers were subjected to too much labour. As early as 3am they will begin to do house work. The domestic helper will be the last person to go to school among the children of the master. Some will not be allowed to eat food despite that they are the once that prepared the food. They will not receive good quality and quantity of the food. When the under-18 domestic helpers are denied food, it exposes them to so much ill health. Beating and excessive flogging in excess are also major abuse under-18 domestic helpers face (Key informant 2, Trader).

The study also investigated channels available to under-18 domestic helpers to report when abuse. The result of the study revealed that under-18 domestic helpers do not have anyone to report to when abused. Some factors were identified to be limiting the capability of under-18 domestic helpers to report the abusive situations they are going through. The factors include: lack of access to technologies such as phones and social media handles; a culture of silence; an inferiority complex; a lack of knowledge of their rights; a lack of phone numbers of relevant authorities; and restricted movement. Some of the illustrative quotes are as follows:

No, under-18 domestic helpers do not have who to report to when abused because we do not have means of communication. Means of communication here means that we do not have the phone number of relevant agencies to call when abused (Under-18 domestic helper 3, 14 years).

They do not have access to technology such as phone, so they can't reach out to any one when abuse, even if they want to. There is culture of silence (KI 4, student). Under-18 domestic helpers have many problems: their inferiority complex cannot allow them to open up when abused, because they are not literates. They don't even know their rights, so is it when you know that you are not supposed to be abused that you can report an abuse. They don't have anybody to report to. Even if they have someone to report to, they lack that confidence. They are always deprived of education (KI 1, Unemployed).

This study revealed that abuse of under-18 domestic helpers negatively affects their overall wellbeing. The educational, social, and psychological wellbeing of these children is retarded in most cases. Both the under-18 domestic helpers and key informant stipulate that most of the under-18 domestic helpers end up with mediocre educational backgrounds. Many of them end up as school dropouts, thus: 'I could not attend my secondary education because I am a domestic helper.' My master said that there is no money to train me in school. He put me in his shop so that I can help him in trading' (Domestic helper 4, school dropout). The ones who further their education are not able to gain admission into universities to study professional courses because of their poor academic backgrounds. Socially and psychologically, the under-18 domestic helpers are traumatized because of the hardships they go through. These make them feel inferior and, in the process, acquire low self-esteem. The following are illustrative quotes on the effects of abuse on under-18 domestic helpers:

Abuse goes a long way in affecting under-18 domestic helpers, psychologically, physically and otherwise. Psychologically: abuse makes under-18 domestic helpers to feel inferior that they are below every other person, they don't have right. It affects their reasoning; they walk dejected and rejected. Even academically, they don't do well. When they are in class they are thinking about the messages, the labour they will pass through when they get home, even punishment. You see that the child is not socially balanced to learn. The child cannot even associate with others because he lacks that confidence. The under-18 domestic helper sees himself as a never do well because the master can never applaud him (Key informant 6, farmer).

Educationally, abuse makes many of us not to complete our education. Concerning social life, my madam prevents me from associating with my peers. Mentally, abuse can lead under-18 domestic helpers into mental health issue. I have seen a case whereby abuse leads a fellow domestic helper into mental challenges and emotional trauma (Domestic helper 3, 14 years).

## **Availability of social protection services for under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria**

The study also investigated the social protection services available to abused under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria. Findings of the study revealed that there are no social protection services available to abused under-18 domestic helpers in south-eastern Nigeria. These under-18 domestic helpers are abused physically, psychologically, and emotionally on a daily basis, but there is nobody – neither the government, nor non-governmental organizations, to intervene and protect their rights, thus ‘I have not heard about any social protection services that protect abused under-aged domestic helper’ (KI 2, Trader). Further illustrative quotes are as follows:

Nigeria has a sociological problem that tends not to care for the general public let alone somebody who is a domestic helper. I can imagine if Nigeria does not have right for the Masses, what happens to somebody who is a domestic helper. This under-18 domestic helpers we are talking about could be an indigent person, the down trodden, ‘the have not’, and the orphans: this are the children that are always used as domestic helpers. In conclusion, there is no social protection for under-18 domestic helpers (KI 5, Civil Servants).

One of the under-18 domestic helpers indicated that the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Person (NAPTIP) is involved in the protection of under-18 domestic helpers from abuse; however, the respondents, in contradiction, indicated that the agency was not effective in protecting under-18 domestic helpers from abuse in Nsukka LGA. The respondent further stated that NAPTIP was not present or operational in Nsukka LGA. The following contains an illustrative quote:

I was taught about National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Person in school. They work against child slavery, for example under-18 domestic helpers. They are not effective and available in Nsukka LGA (Under-18 domestic helpers 1, 16 years).

The result of the study shows that the study participants stipulated ways abuse of under-18 domestic helpers can be decisively ameliorated and eradicated in the South-eastern Nigeria. The participants were of the view that those who engage in abuse of under-18 domestic helpers should be arrested and adequately punished to serve as deterrents, thus: ‘Those who engage in the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers should be arrested and sanctioned’ (Under-18 domestic helpers 1, 16 years). ‘Punishment should be given to those who abuse us’ (Under-18 domestic helpers 4, 16 years). The result of the study shows that public enlightenment campaign, community education, and re-orientation of households and masters on the dangers of abuse of under-18 domestic helpers will go a long way to prevent the abuse of

under-18 domestic helpers, thus: ‘community education of the households to stop the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers’ (Domestic Helper 2, 17 years). Religious organizations were identified as having an important educational role in preventing abuse of under-18 domestic helpers:

The church leadership can help to educate parents on the dangers associated with giving out their children as domestic helpers. For the poor parents that give out their children as domestic helpers; they should be educated on the importance of giving birth to children according to their financial capacity (KI 2, Trader).

The study also indicated that special government agency should be created to with the sole purpose of monitoring, identifying and ensuring the persecution of those involved in the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers, thus: ‘There should be government monitoring team who make sure that under-18 domestic helpers are protected from abuse’ (KI 5, Civil servant).

An agency should be created specifically to record the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers and handle it appropriately. This will encourage people to have courage to report the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers. The agency will be responsible for follow-up and proper investigations. For orphans used as domestic helpers, maternal mortality is a major causal factor. Government can prevent maternal mortality by providing sophisticated and efficient health facility (KI 4, Student).

The result of the study also shows the assessment of the involvement of Nigerian social workers in the protection of under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria. The resounding and recurrent views and positions were that there was little or no knowledge about social work practitioners’ involvement in the protection of under-18 domestic helpers, thus: ‘I have heard about social workers, but I have not seen them protecting under-18 domestic helpers from abuse.’ I don’t know what they are trained to do (KI 2, Trader). It was revealed that social workers’ involvement in the protection of under-18 domestic helpers was very low. Emphasis shows that a particular participant gave a failed mark (10 out of 100 percent) in the assessment of the involvement of social workers in the protection of under-18 domestic helpers. The following is an illustrative quote:

The percentage of the usefulness of social workers in tackling the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers is 10 out of 100. It is very low. I have not seen social worker rescuing the abused under-18 domestic helpers from their abusive masters. Social workers should improve because it is their responsibility. They have not been doing well in tackling this issue, 10 out of 100 is a failed mark (KI 1, Unemployed).

Findings from the study revealed vital roles social workers can play to put an end to the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria. There should be social welfare agencies in all the LGAs manned by social workers to monitor, report, and prosecute those who engage in abuse of under-18 domestic helpers in any form. Social Workers should engage in public information campaigns and

community outreach to educate the communities on the contents of child right act and the dangers of abuse under-18 domestic helpers. They should also take custody of under-18 domestic helpers who are sexually abused. Social Workers should influence policies and advocate for basic education for all under-18 domestic helpers. The following contains some illustrative quotes from social workers in South-eastern Nigeria:

We should have agencies manned by social workers. Social Workers should educate the public to always report cases of abuse of under-18 domestic helpers. Social Workers should also take custody of abused under-18 domestic helpers, that is what we did when I was working with Women's Aid Collective (WACOL). In cases of child sexual abuse, we remove the child from the abusive home. I have had the course to remove a child from a home because the child was sexually abused by her master (Child Social Worker).

A lot of people are not aware of Child Right Act. Social workers should sensitize the community on the content of child right act and the need to observe them. Through community outreaches community members should be sensitized on what abuse really means. Social Workers should also advocate for the rights of the abused under-18 domestic helpers. Child welfare services should be institutionalized across the local government. Social workers should influence policies that will mandate masters to enroll their under-18 domestic helpers in school (Social Work Educator).

## **Discussion**

This study was designed to investigate the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria and its implications for child protection and social work practice. The study discovered that children from poor parents, less privileged children, orphans, and vulnerable children were used as domestic helpers. A study by Tade(2019) affirms that vulnerable children, such as orphans and children of poor parents, are usually utilized as domestic helpers in South-west Nigeria. Furthermore, in most cases, poor parents give birth to large number of children more than they can take care of. These parents have no option other than to give their children to strangers and relatives as domestic helpers in exchange for the child's shelter, food, clothing and education. However, these expectations are not usually met because the under-18 domestic helpers from the findings of this study are neglected and subject to extreme abuse.

Under-18 domestic helpers are abused physically, sexually, emotionally, and socially. Physically, the under-18 domestic helpers are tortured. The study uncovered instances where an electric iron was used to inflict pain on them by their masters; they are beaten and flogged severely; in some cases, red pepper is ground

and inserted into their private organs as a deterrent for a perceived wrongdoing. Sexually, these under-18 domestic helpers are raped by their masters. A study by Al-Mahroos, (2007) in Arab Peninsula provides evidence of physical and sexual abuse, which in some cases led to a significant number of deaths among under-18 domestic helpers and other categories of vulnerable children. Similarly, Kabir, (2022) asserted that Nigerian children used as domestic helpers face abuse. Furthermore, emotionally, they are verbally abused, neglected, and made to feel that they are not good for anything but hard labour and enslavement. The social development of these under-18 domestic helpers is usually truncated, they are not enrolled in school, and even when they are, they are enrolled in school, the schools are of poor quality, and they are distracted from focusing on study by excessive house chores.

The under-18 domestic helpers do not have channels to report when they are abused. There is a culture of silence surrounding the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers. The abuses of under-18 domestic helpers in south-eastern Nigeria are underreported, or at worst, not reported at all. The under-18 domestic helpers do not have anyone to report to when abused. Usually, their masters do not allow them access to communication gadgets like phones, so they suffer in silence, they can't call or contact anyone for help. This finding is in line with the basic tenet of the Ecological systems theory. The Nigerian policy and implementation environment does not pay adequate attention to child protection. This is the major reason why under-18 domestic helpers who are abused do not have proper or any channel to file their report when abused.

Abuse negatively affects the overall wellbeing of under-18 domestic helpers. Their educational developments are impaired in most cases. They usually have problems of rejection, low self-esteem and inferiority complex as a result of the maltreatment they go through. The foregoing corresponds with the assertion of Grebenik (2021) abuse of under-18 domestic helpers impair their development, bond and create negative behavior in them. Further, the high-level abuse in some cases leads to death or severe health impairment among the under-18 domestic helpers.

There were no social protection services available to abused under-18 domestic helpers. According to UNICEF (2016) children, most especially under-18 domestic helpers in Nigeria who are abused, fewer than five out of a 100 received no form of social support services. Similarly, Jones et al.(2012) carried out an assessment on the Child Right Act which was enacted in 2003 and adopted by 24 out of 36 states in Nigeria to protect the rights of children. The assessment found the implementation of the act to be poor, weak, and incapable of protecting children's rights. Furthermore, social protection services for children are not functional in most part of Nigeria, especially the south-east. Under-18 domestic helpers go through severe abuses, and there are no social protection services to rescue them, either from governmental or non-governmental agencies. It was discovered that the National Agency for Trafficking in Persons, which is responsible for preventing all forms of trafficking and abuse of children, is not functional and, at worst, lacks

presence in the south-eastern Nigeria. Furthermore, the Ecological System Theory explains that the lack of social protection services for abused under-18 domestic helpers is an environmental issue. The policy and implementation environment regarding child protection services is abysmally weak and ineffective in Nigeria and Nsukka LGA in particular. A comparative analysis shows that nations like US or UK that prioritise child protection services have fewer cases of abuse of under-18 domestic helpers or other children in general (Badoe, 2017; Cassar, 2020; Yahaya et al., 2012).

There are a number of ways to ameliorate and eradicate the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers, which include severe punishment for perpetrators of abuse and a public enlightenment campaign to put an end to under-18 domestic helpers' abuse. Religious leaders should be actively involved in educating the congregation on the ways and importance of respecting the dignity and worth of the under-18 domestic helpers. Monitoring teams should be instituted specifically to investigate the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers among households. The foregoing corresponds with the solutions stipulated by Al-Mahroos(2007) on ways to curb and eradicate child abuse. The author recommends increased awareness on the prevalence and dangers of the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers and the identification of child protection authorities to monitor and prosecute perpetrators of abuse of under-18 domestic helpers. Similarly, Olaiya (2020) in an assessment of the maltreatment of child domestic helpers called for increased reporting of cases of abuse as a way to stem the tide of abuse of under-18 domestic helpers.

The study revealed that social workers were not actively involved in the fight against abuse of under-18 domestic helpers in South Eastern Nigeria. This was due partly to a shortage of social work professionalism in Nigeria, and partly to lack of fund for necessary social work engagement. The knowledge and awareness of social work practitioners were also very low among the study participants. Furthermore, the study identified pertinent roles social workers can play to ameliorate and eradicate the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers in South Eastern Nigeria. Some of the roles include advocacy, education, policy and programme design and leadership roles. Social workers should advocate for the rights and dignity of under-18 domestic helpers. Social workers should also engage in community education geared towards educating community members on the dangers and impact of the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers on the overall development and wellbeing of children. Social workers should also design policies and programmes that will be responsible for identifying and prosecution of perpetrators of the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers. Social workers should play a leadership role in the staffing of all the social welfare agencies in the south-eastern Nigeria. The essence of this is to ensure that the welfare of children is not left in the hands of untrained professionals.

Some challenges were encountered during the course of the study. The major constraint was that the sought-after access to under-18 domestic helpers for interviews was denied by their masters in most of the cases. The researcher would



have interviewed a greater number of under-18 domestic helpers so that they could share their experience, but was limited to only four participants from that category. The effort to interview those who were formally under-18 domestic helpers was futile and abortive because of the seemingly unspoken stigma attached to being a domestic helper in the context of abuse. Despite the challenges, the researchers got robust information from the few respondents who were willing to participate in the study.

Conclusively, the study provided evidence of deep-rooted prevalence of the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria. Under-18 domestic helpers are abused physically, psychologically, socially, and emotionally. There was also evidence of culture of silence around the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers, as both the abused and significant others do not have established channels for reporting incidences of abuse. Overall wellbeing and development of under-18 domestic helpers are extremely impaired by abuse. The most serious problem is that there are no social protection services available to abused under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria. The study recommends social work interdisciplinary approach to curb and eradicate the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers in South-eastern Nigeria. Social workers should encourage increased reporting of cases of abuse of under-18 domestic helpers. They should engage in community education to enlighten the public on the dangers and repercussion of the abuse of under-18 domestic helpers. Social workers, in collaboration with child protection unit of social welfare agencies, should monitor, identify, and prosecute perpetrators of abuse of under-18 domestic helpers.

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