

Global Efforts to Combat Child Sexual Abuse: An Examination of International Instruments and Their Implications

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received: May 19, 2025

Revised: April 5, 2026

Accepted: April 21, 2026

Keywords

Sexual Abuse;

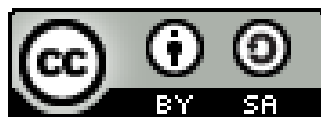
Children's Rights;

Legal Protection;

International Instruments;

Sexual Exploitation

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ABSTRACT

Globally, particularly in Africa, children's rights have long been relegated to the back, and sometimes, they are being portrayed as non-existent. Many reasons have been attributed to this, which include archaic culture and tradition, illiteracy, poverty, and an inadequate legal framework for the protection of children. Lately, however, a number of laws and instruments have been adopted to guarantee children's rights worldwide. This paper examines the various international and regional instruments that are in place to guarantee the rights of children and protect them against sexual abuse or exploitation. Four levels of legal protection are identified: international, regional, and sub-regional. It is posited that although all the layers of protection identified are important, the most relevant for the daily experience of child victims of sexual abuse. This, however, does not derogate the importance of other instruments; rather, they form the foundation upon which national and state laws are based. The conclusion of this paper is that, despite the various laws put in place for the protection of the rights of children, the incidents of child sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and child trafficking for sexual exploitation are increasing at an alarming rate globally. This has been attributed to the poor economic situation and high poverty rate ravaging the country. It is hoped that with improved economic conditions, improved quality education, coupled with concerted efforts by governments and CSOs in enforcing these laws, there would be a drastic reduction in the rate of child abuse and child sexual exploitation being experienced in many countries.

Introduction

Children are the bedrock of any society; they are regarded as the future of every society. Given their age and tender nature, they are often subjected to one form of abuse or the other. In today's world, children suffer hardships occasioned by war, lack of care, parental neglect, abuse by their parents, health care deficiency, hunger and homelessness. Some other children work under harmful conditions and have limited opportunities for basic education, and many more are abused sexually. Millions of children are forced by poverty to live on the streets while millions more work at hazardous jobs or are victims of child trafficking and forced prostitution. Discriminatory attitudes and cultural practices also show that girl children suffer gender-specific abuses, such as female genital mutilation, and are particularly

vulnerable to other forms of abuse, including rape. Child sexual abuse is one of the greatest threats to the realization of children's rights in Nigeria. It is a major impediment to the emotional, physical, and psychological development of a child. The effect of a child's sexual abuse on a child is immeasurable; it hurts them even into adulthood.

The United Nations has taken significant steps to protect the rights and welfare of children, given their vulnerable nature and the prejudices they face. To address these concerns, the UN adopted the Declaration on the Rights of the Child in 1959 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. These landmark documents contain provisions that specifically cater to the interests of children, outlining their rights and welfare. The CRC, in particular, has been instrumental in promoting children's rights globally. Nigeria, for instance, has domesticated the CRC by enacting the Child Rights Act in 2003, which provides a comprehensive framework for protecting children's rights. In addition to the Declaration and the CRC, children's rights have also been recognized in various international and regional human rights instruments. These include the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which provides an African context to children's rights and has been ratified by Nigeria. Overall, these efforts demonstrate a commitment to protecting the rights and welfare of children, both globally and in Nigeria.¹

Due to their age and vulnerability, children often cannot effectively assert their rights as outlined in these instruments, and they face significant challenges in enforcing those rights.² Given the vulnerability of children, it's crucial to implement robust measures to safeguard them against all forms of exploitation and abuse, ensuring a healthy and nurturing environment that enables them to thrive and contribute to society. To this end, various laws have been enacted at different levels to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation.

This article examines key legal instruments relevant to the protection of the rights of children in Nigeria, with a particular focus on those put in place to combat child sexual abuse. It will analyze the existing international and national instruments on the rights of the child to determine whether those instruments adequately guarantee their rights and protect them from sexual exploitation. Should it find those instruments inadequate, the paper will suggest some ways in which the rights of this category of persons can be effectively guaranteed.

Methods

The research method employed in this article is doctrinal legal research with a prescriptive and analytical character. Doctrinal legal research is selected because the study focuses on the analysis of international and regional legal norms governing the protection of children against sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and child trafficking

¹ U. O. Umozurike, 'The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights', *American Journal of International Law*, 77.4 (1983), pp. 902–12, doi:10.2307/2202548.

² Tara M. Collins, 'A Child's Right to Participate: Implications for International Child Protection', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 21.1 (2017), pp. 14–46, doi:10.1080/13642987.2016.1248122.

for sexual exploitation. This research aims to identify, examine, and evaluate the effectiveness of international legal instruments in protecting children's rights globally, particularly in developing countries and the African region.

The approaches applied in this study include the statute approach, the conceptual approach, and the comparative approach. The statute approach is used to examine various international and regional legal instruments, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, as well as other conventions and protocols related to child protection from sexual exploitation. The conceptual approach is employed to analyze the concepts of child protection, child sexual abuse, and child sexual exploitation based on legal doctrines, theories, and principles of international human rights law. Meanwhile, the comparative approach is used to examine child protection regulations at the international, regional, and sub-regional levels to identify similarities, differences, and the effectiveness of their implementation.

The data used in this research are secondary, obtained through library research. Primary legal materials include international conventions, regional charters, protocols, and other international legal instruments related to child protection. Secondary legal materials are derived from books, scholarly journal articles, reports of international organizations, and previous studies relevant to the issue of child sexual abuse. In addition, tertiary legal materials, such as legal dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference sources, are also employed to strengthen the analysis. The data analysis is conducted qualitatively through legal interpretation and normative analysis. All legal materials are systematically analyzed to identify the substance of legal protection, the relationship among legal instruments, and the challenges of their implementation in practice. The findings are then presented descriptively and analytically in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of international instruments in global efforts to combat child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.

Discussion

International Legal Frameworks

Key international instruments addressing child sexual abuse include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography.

1) Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 (herein referred to as UDHR) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on the 1st day of December, 1948. UDHR was the first internationally accepted instrument for the protection of human rights and it contains 30 articles with copious provisions on

the protection of human rights and against all forms of abuse and exploitation. The essential provisions of the UDHR stipulates that every human being has the same rights and is born free and equal in dignity;³ the Declaration abhors discrimination against any person irrespective of age, sex, colour, language, religion and race;⁴ it provides that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.⁵ The Declaration discourages every form of slavery and slave trade by providing that no one shall be held in slavery or servitude.⁶ Additionally, it states that no one shall endure torture or cruel, inhuman, or humiliating treatment.⁷ The UDHR guarantees that everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.⁸ It further stipulates that everyone is equal before the law, and has the right to equal protection under the law.⁹

In addition, the UDHR guarantees that anyone whose fundamental rights are violated by activities that contravene those rights will have the right to an effective remedy from appropriate national tribunals.¹⁰ It discourages subjecting anyone to arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile.¹¹ Furthermore, it states that everyone has an equal right to a fair and public trial before an impartial and independent tribunal in order to have their rights and obligations, as well as any criminal charges against them, determined.¹² It ensures that everyone accused of a crime has access to legal counsel to defend themselves and is entitled to the presumption of innocence unless proven guilty in a public trial.¹³

The UDHR prohibits interference with a person's right to privacy, family, home or correspondence.¹⁴ It upholds the freedom of movement and habitation

³ Sylvester N. Anya, Charles N. Iroh, and Newman U. Richards, 'African Human-Rights-Based Approach to Address All Forms of Abuse of Older Persons in Nigeria', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 29.10 (2025), pp. 1873–93, doi:10.1080/13642987.2025.2531785.

⁴ Theodor Meron, 'The Meaning and Reach of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination', *American Journal of International Law*, 79.2 (1985), pp. 283–318, doi:10.2307/2201704.

⁵ Mathieu Culverhouse, 'Everyone Has the Right to Liberty and Security of Person', *Nursing and Residential Care*, 16.10 (2014), pp. 580–81, doi:10.12968/nrec.2014.16.10.580.

⁶ Anne Gallagher, 'Chapter 14. Using International Human Rights Law To Better Protect Victims Of Trafficking: The Prohibitions On Slavery, Servitude, Forced Labor, And Debt Bondage', in *The Theory and Practice of International Criminal Law* (Brill | Nijhoff, 2008), pp. 397–430, doi:10.1163/ej.9789004166318.i-448.52.

⁷ A.V. Turlayev and N.S. Akhmetova, 'Human Rights to Protection from Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment', *Bulletin of the Karaganda University. "Law Series"*, 30.3(119) (2025), pp. 59–69, doi:10.31489/2025L3/59-69.

⁸ Mustafa Burak Şener, 'A Review of the Meaning and Importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights', *International Journal of Political Studies*, 7.3 (2021), pp. 15–25, doi:10.25272/icps.962292.

⁹ Rian Panji Satria, Hono Sejati, and Irfan Rizky Hutomo, 'Protection of Minority Rights to Equality Before the Law in the Legal System in Indonesia', *Greenation International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 3.3 (2025), pp. 1284–92, doi:10.38035/gijlss.v3i3.620.

¹⁰ Ganna Sobko and others, 'Gaps, Conflicts and Contradictions Regarding Measures to Ensure the Right to a Fair Trial of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms', *Linguistics and Culture Review*, 5.S4 (2021), pp. 1968–84, doi:10.21744/lingcure.v5nS4.1856.

¹¹ Judith Butler, 'Indefinite Detention', *Qui Parle*, 29.1 (2020), pp. 15–24, doi:10.1215/10418385-8241890.

¹² David Harris, 'The Right to a Fair Trial in Criminal Proceedings as a Human Right', *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 16.2 (1967), pp. 352–78, doi:10.1093/iclqaj/16.2.352.

¹³ Pamela R. Ferguson, 'The Presumption of Innocence and Its Role in the Criminal Process', *Criminal Law Forum*, 27.2 (2016), pp. 131–58, doi:10.1007/s10609-016-9281-8.

¹⁴ Audrey Lebre, 'Article 12 – The Rights to Privacy and Family Life', in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Brill | Nijhoff, 2023), pp. 293–313, doi:10.1163/9789004365148_014.

inside a State's boundaries.¹⁵ It also supports right to seek asylum from prosecution in other countries.¹⁶ It advocates that everyone has the right to a nationality which shall not be arbitrarily deprived.¹⁷ It stipulates that everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, and thinking. They also have the right to change their beliefs and to practise their freedom whether they are by themselves or in a group. It further guarantees the right to freedom of opinion and expression.¹⁸ According to the UDHR, no one may be forced to join an organisation, and everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.¹⁹ Everyone is guaranteed the right to a standard of living that is sufficient for their family's health and well-being, including access to food, clothing, housing, healthcare, and essential social services.²⁰ The Declaration also provides that motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and attention, and that every child is entitled to same social protection irrespective of whether they were born in or out of wedlock.²¹ It makes a strong case for everyone's right to education, emphasising that learning should focus on fostering respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights as well as the full development of the individual.²²

The Declaration provides for a comprehensive list of human rights. The only clog is that the Declaration is not a legally binding instrument. It is just a global road map for freedom and equality, which protects the rights of every individual. Although, the provisions of the UDHR do not specifically address the problem of child sexual abuse which is another clog on this interesting instrument, however, the implementation of its provisions in relation to the right to education, social protection, and right to a standard of living, among others, will assist in preventing sexual abuses of children. Also, some of the provisions of the UDHR have become customary international law, and some have even risen to the level of peremptory norms or *jus cogens*.²³

¹⁵ Seyla Benhabib, 'Borders, Boundaries, and Citizenship', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 38.4 (2005), pp. 673–77, doi:10.1017/S1049096505050328.

¹⁶ Joseph Rikhof, 'Prosecuting Asylum Seekers Who Cannot Be Removed', *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 15.1 (2017), pp. 97–113, doi:10.1093/jicj/mqx006.

¹⁷ Hélène Lambert, 'Comparative Perspectives On Arbitrary Deprivation Of Nationality And Refugee Status', *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 64.1 (2015), pp. 1–37, doi:10.1017/S0020589314000475.

¹⁸ J.A. Walkate, 'The Right of Everyone to Change His Religion or Belief – Some Observations', *Netherlands International Law Review*, 30.02 (1983), p. 146, doi:10.1017/S0165070X00012316.

¹⁹ Maina Kiai and Waruguru Kaguongo, 'Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association - Practices and Obstacles', in *Research Handbook on the Politics of Human Rights Law* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), pp. 99–114, doi:10.4337/9781789908831.00012.

²⁰ David Copp, 'The Right to an Adequate Standard of Living: Justice, Autonomy, and the Basic Needs', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 9.1 (1992), pp. 231–61, doi:10.1017/S0265052500003666.

²¹ Beth Goldblatt, 'Gender and Social Assistance in the First Decade of Democracy: A Case Study of South Africa's Child Support Grant', *Politikon*, 32.2 (2005), pp. 239–57, doi:10.1080/02589340500353581.

²² Linda Darling-Hammond, 'The Right to Learn and the Advancement of Teaching: Research, Policy, and Practice for Democratic Education', *Educational Researcher*, 25.6 (1996), pp. 5–17, doi:10.3102/0013189X025006005.

²³ Juan José Ruda Santolaria, 'The Treatment of Peremptory Norms of General International Law (*Jus Cogens*) in the Inter-American Human Rights System', in *Peremptory Norms of General International Law (*Jus Cogens*)* (Brill | Nijhoff, 2021), pp. 319–41, doi:10.1163/9789004464124_013.

2) *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 1966*

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 1966 was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on the 19th of December, 1966 and came into force on the 23rd of March, 1976. The aim of this covenant is to ensure the protection of civil and political rights such as freedom from discrimination, right to equality, right to life, and freedom from torture, among others. This covenant and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) have their foundation built on the rights listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The Universal Declaration and these two covenants form the International Bill of Human Rights.

The ICCPR guarantees the right to legal remedy for violations of rights, regardless of whether the violator acted in an official capacity,²⁴ gender equality,²⁵ life's right,²⁶ right to personal liberty and security,²⁷ rights to freedom of movement, choice of residence, and equal treatment before the law,²⁸ the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion,²⁹ the right to freedom of association, the right of the family to protection by society and state,³⁰ equal protection. The ICCPR is a legally binding treaty, monitored by the Human Rights Committee.³¹

Nigeria ratified the ICCPR on 29th July, 1993, but it is yet to be domesticated as required by section 12 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (as amended). However, a significant number of the provisions of the covenant are in pari materia with some of Nigeria's domestic laws. It should also be mentioned, that, like the UDHR, while the ICCPR doesn't directly address child sexual abuse, it provides relevant protections. Article 23 prohibits marriage without free and full consent, effectively condemning child marriage. Article 24 ensures children's protection from discrimination based on characteristics like race, sex, or birth status. Additionally, it mandates special protection for children from family, society, and the state due to their minor status. In effect, this instrument protects the sexual rights of a child and prevents its abuse.

²⁴ Sarah Joseph, 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Iccpr)', in *Elgar Encyclopedia of Human Rights* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), pp. 178–87, doi:10.4337/9781789903621.int.covenant.civil.

²⁵ Ronald Inglehart, Pippa Norris, and Christian Welzel, 'Gender Equality and Democracy', in *Human Values and Social Change* (Brill, 2003), pp. 91–115, doi:10.1163/9789047404361_007.

²⁶ Torkel Opsahl, 'The Right to Life', in *The European System for The Protection of Human Rights* (Brill | Nijhoff, 1993), pp. 207–23, doi:10.1163/9789004633599_016.

²⁷ S. Trechsel, 'Liberty and Security of Person', in *The European System for The Protection of Human Rights* (Brill | Nijhoff, 1993), pp. 277–344, doi:10.1163/9789004633599_019.

²⁸ Robin Ca White, 'Free Movement, Equal Treatment, and Citizenship of the Union', *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 54.4 (2005), pp. 885–905, doi:10.1093/iclq/lei041.

²⁹ Rafael Domingo, 'Restoring Freedom Of Conscience', *Journal of Law and Religion*, 30.2 (2015), pp. 176–93, doi:10.1017/jlr.2015.5.

³⁰ Mary Daly, 'Changing Family Life in Europe: Significance for State and Society', *European Societies*, 7.3 (2005), pp. 379–98, doi:10.1080/14616690500194001.

³¹ Machiko Kanetake, 'Un Human Rights Treaty Monitoring Bodies Before Domestic Courts', *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 67.1 (2018), pp. 201–32, doi:10.1017/S002058931700046X.

3) *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966*

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) is a multilateral treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on the 16th of December, 1966 and it came into effect on the 3rd of January, 1976. It is also one of the treaties covering some of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. State parties are required by this covenant to gradually realise all of the rights recognised in it and to ensure that these rights will be exercised without regard to one's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political opinion, national origin, or other factors.³² State parties must ensure equal access to and enjoyment of all economic, social, and cultural rights for both men and women.³³ However, these rights might be restricted in ways specified by law to advance the welfare of society as a whole in a democracy.³⁴

States are also enjoined to ensure the right to work, Everyone has the right to just and favourable working conditions, including fair wages, equal remuneration, safe and healthy environments, and equal opportunities.³⁵ The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) recognizes the family as a fundamental unit of society, warranting its protection.³⁶ Marriage requires the voluntary consent of both parties. Mothers deserve special protection before and after childbirth. Children and young people should be safeguarded from economic and social exploitation, including protection from hazardous work that endangers their health and well-being. The law prohibits child labour below a certain age and imposes penalties for violations. Breaches are subject to appropriate sanctions.

Nigeria ratified the treaty in 1993, but it is yet to be domesticated in the country. The only provision in which the protection against sexual abuse may be inferred is article 10. This provision deals with the family, especially mothers and children. It enjoins State parties to provide assistance and protection for children. Even though the provisions of ICESCR do not directly treat the issue of the abuse of children sexually, it may be inferred that the protection referred to in article 10 includes protection from sexual abuse and other vices.

³² Abdulrahim P. Vijapur and K. Savitri, 'The International Covenants on Human Rights: An Overview', *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, 62.2 (2006), pp. 1–37, doi:10.1177/097492840606200201.

³³ Valentine M. Moghadam and Lucie Senftova, 'Measuring Women's Empowerment: Participation and Rights in Civil, Political, Social, Economic, and Cultural Domains', *International Social Science Journal*, 57.184 (2005), pp. 389–412, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2451.2005.00557.x.

³⁴ Allan McChesney, "Promoting the General Welfare in a Democratic Society": Balancing Human Rights and Development*, *Netherlands International Law Review*, 27.03 (1980), p. 283, doi:10.1017/S0165070X00014200.

³⁵ Henny Juliani and Sonhaji, 'Ensuring A Healthy And Safe Working Environment: A Legal Analysis Of Labour Laws In The Protection Of Workers' Rights Inndonesia', *Veredas Do Direito*, 22.5 (2025), p. e223876, doi:10.18623/rvd.v22.n5.3876.

³⁶ Sital Kalantry, Jocelyn E. Getgen, and Steven Arrigg Koh, 'Enhancing Enforcement of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights Using Indicators: A Focus on the Right to Education in the ICESCR', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 32.2 (2010), pp. 253–310, doi:10.1353/hrq.0.0144.

4) *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979*

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 18, 1979, and came into force on September 3, 1981. Nigeria signed the treaty in April 1984 and ratified it on June 13, 1985. CEDAW aims to eliminate discrimination against women and girls, providing a comprehensive framework for protecting women's human rights.

CEDAW requires state parties to eliminate gender-based discrimination and work towards achieving full equality between women and men. It mandates that states condemn all forms of discrimination against women,³⁷ enact laws to prohibit human trafficking, exploitation, and prostitution of women,³⁸ ensure equal rights in the field of education,³⁹ ensure equal employment opportunities for women, including the right to choose their profession, equal pay, job security, and protection from pregnancy-based termination. States must ensure women have equal rights before the law.⁴⁰ Prioritize children's best interests, prohibit child marriage, and eliminate discrimination in marriage and family matters.⁴¹ CEDAW is widely regarded as an international bill of rights for women, serving as a crucial instrument for advocates pushing for gender equality.⁴² However, the minus in this instrument is that Nigeria has not yet domesticated it, and child sexual abuse is not mentioned specifically in the convention. Even though child betrothal is prohibited under Article 16, there is no specific mention of child sexual abuse. Article 16 states that the interest of the child shall be paramount, it is submitted, however, that the concept “interest of the child” therein could extend to the protection of children against child sexual abuse or any other forms of abuse.

5) *The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989*

Adopted in 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is a landmark human rights treaty that outlines the civil, political, economic, social, health, and cultural rights of children. It came into force on September 2, 1990, and has been ratified by 196 countries, including Nigeria, making it a widely accepted

³⁷ Lydia Candelaria González Orta, ‘The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): From Its Radical Preamble to Its Contemporary Intersectional Approach’, *Women’s History Review*, 34.1 (2025), pp. 79–92, doi:10.1080/09612025.2023.2277490.

³⁸ Dorchen A. Leidholdt, ‘Prostitution and Trafficking in Women’, *Journal of Trauma Practice*, 2.3–4 (2004), pp. 167–83, doi:10.1300/J189v02n03_09.

³⁹ Gillian Klein, ‘Equal Rights in the Classroom? The Role of Teacher Education in Ensuring Equality of Educational Opportunities’, *Educational Review*, 46.2 (1994), pp. 167–77, doi:10.1080/0013191940460207.

⁴⁰ Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon, ‘When Do Governments Promote Women’s Rights? A Framework for the Comparative Analysis of Sex Equality Policy’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 8.1 (2010), pp. 207–16, doi:10.1017/S1537592709992787.

⁴¹ Muhammad Jazil Rifqi and others, ‘Child Marriage in Villages: Misuse of Ijbār, Structural Discrimination, and Best Interest of the Child Dismissal’, *AL-IHKAM: Jurnal Hukum & Pranata Sosial*, 20.1 (2025), pp. 168–95, doi:10.19105/al-lhkam.v20i1.15970.

⁴² Neil A. Englehart and Melissa K. Miller, ‘The Cedaw Effect: International Law’s Impact on Women’s Rights’, *Journal of Human Rights*, 13.1 (2014), pp. 22–47, doi:10.1080/14754835.2013.824274.

international framework for protecting children's rights.⁴³ The Convention is guided by the principle that children require special care, protection, and support to ensure their healthy development in a nurturing environment. The Convention comprises 54 articles that safeguard children from abuse and exploitation by parents, states, and society. Key provisions include defining a child as anyone under 18 (unless national laws set a lower age of majority) and outlining various protections to promote children's well-being.⁴⁴ The Convention requires States Parties to respect and ensure that all children's rights are protected without discrimination based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other status;⁴⁵ whether a decision is made by a public or private social welfare organisation, a court of law, administrative authorities, or a legislative body, it is stated that the child's best interests be given top priority.⁴⁶

States Parties must take all necessary legislative, administrative, and other measures to implement the rights outlined in the Convention.⁴⁷ The Convention also recognizes the importance of parents' rights, obligations, and responsibilities in raising their children, in accordance with local customs and the child's evolving capacities.⁴⁸ The Convention requires States Parties to respect every child's inherent right to life, safety, and healthy development.⁴⁹ Every child has the right to a legally registered name, a nationality, and to know and be cared for by their parents.⁵⁰

The Convention protects a child's right to identity, including their name, nationality, and family ties, which governments must respect.⁵¹ A child has the right to maintain relationships with both parents, unless it's contrary to their best interests, and to have regular contact with both parents.⁵² States Parties should facilitate family reunification by granting requests from children or parents to enter or leave a country.⁵³

The Convention requires States Parties to take all necessary measures to prevent and combat child abduction through illegal transfer or non-return of

⁴³ Colette Daiute, 'The Rights of Children, the Rights of Nations: Developmental Theory and the Politics of Children's Rights', *Journal of Social Issues*, 64.4 (2008), pp. 701–23, doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.00585.x.

⁴⁴ E. Kay M. Tisdall, 'Children's Rights And Children's Wellbeing: Equivalent Policy Concepts?', *Journal Of Social Policy*, 44.4 (2015), Pp. 807–23, Doi:10.1017/S0047279415000306.

⁴⁵ Meron, 'The Meaning and Reach of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination'.

⁴⁶ Deby Oktavia Yusrianti, Lies Sulistiani, and Soma Wijaya, 'Implementation of Law Number 12 of 2022 and the Role of State Institutions In Protecting Child Victims of Sexual Violence', *Journal of Public Representative and Society Provision*, 5.1 (2025), pp. 222–37, doi:10.55885/jprsp.v5i1.485.

⁴⁷ Egon Schwelb, 'Civil and Political Rights: The International Measures of Implementation', *American Journal of International Law*, 62.4 (1968), pp. 827–68, doi:10.2307/2197013.

⁴⁸ Erica Burman, 'Local, Global or Globalized?', *Childhood*, 3.1 (1996), pp. 45–66, doi:10.1177/0907568296003001004.

⁴⁹ Daiute, 'The Rights of Children, the Rights of Nations: Developmental Theory and the Politics of Children's Rights'.

⁵⁰ Jacqueline Bhabha, 'Arendt's Children: Do Today's Migrant Children Have a Right to Have Rights?', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 31.2 (2009), pp. 410–51, doi:10.1353/hrq.0.0072.

⁵¹ Daiute, 'The Rights of Children, the Rights of Nations: Developmental Theory and the Politics of Children's Rights'.

⁵² Diana Baumrind, 'Reciprocal Rights and Responsibilities in Parent-Child Relations', *Journal of Social Issues*, 34.2 (1978), pp. 179–96, doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.1978.tb01038.x.

⁵³ Iseult Honohan, 'Reconsidering the Claim to Family Reunification in Migration', *Political Studies*, 57.4 (2009), pp. 768–87, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2008.00761.x.

children across borders.⁵⁴ States Parties should ensure children's freedom of expression and consider their views in accordance with their age and maturity.⁵⁵ Every child has the right to express their views and access information, subject to the law.⁵⁶ Every child has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, provided it doesn't infringe on others' rights. Governments must also respect parents' rights to guide their children in this matter.⁵⁷

Every child has the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly with other children and young people, as long as it doesn't interfere with others' rights.⁵⁸ Every child has the right to privacy, and the law should protect their private, family, and home life.⁵⁹ Children have the right to access reliable information from the media, and governments should protect them from harmful content while promoting accessible and understandable media for young people. Governments should take all necessary measures to protect children from all forms of abuse, neglect, and maltreatment, including physical, psychological, and sexual abuse by parents or caregivers.⁶⁰

For children without a family, governments must ensure they receive proper care that respects their religion, culture, and language.⁶¹ In child adoption, the child's best interests must be the top priority, with consistent protection and standards applied whether adoption occurs domestically or internationally.⁶² Children with disabilities have the right to live a full and decent life with dignity, independence, and community participation. Governments should provide accessible care and assistance to support their needs.⁶³ Every child has the right to the highest attainable standard of health. Governments should provide access to quality healthcare, clean water, nutritious food, and a safe environment.⁶⁴

⁵⁴ Rhona Schuz, 'The Hague Child Abduction Convention and Re-Relocation Disputes', *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 35.1 (2021), doi:10.1093/lawfam/ebaa021.

⁵⁵ Charles C. Helwig, 'Adolescents' and Young Adults' Conceptions of Civil Liberties: Freedom of Speech and Religion', *Child Development*, 66.1 (1995), pp. 152–66, doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.1995.tb00862.x.

⁵⁶ Jenna Gillett-Swan and Jonathon Sargeant, 'Assuring Children's Human Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Education', *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 20.1 (2018), pp. 120–27, doi:10.1080/17549507.2018.1385852.

⁵⁷ Martha Nussbaum, 'The Capabilities Of People With Cognitive Disabilities', *Metaphilosophy*, 40.3–4 (2009), Pp. 331–51, Doi:10.1111/J.1467-9973.2009.01606.X.

⁵⁸ Kiai and Kaguongo, 'Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association - Practices and Obstacles'.

⁵⁹ G. Cohen-Jonathan, 'Respect for Private and Family Life', in *The European System for The Protection of Human Rights* (Brill | Nijhoff, 1993), pp. 405–44, doi:10.1163/9789004633599_022.

⁶⁰ Tiffany Munzer and others, 'Digital Ecosystems, Children, and Adolescents: Technical Report', *Pediatrics*, 157.2 (2026), doi:10.1542/peds.2025-075321.

⁶¹ Penelope Welbourne and John Dixon, 'Child Protection and Welfare: Cultures, Policies, and Practices', *European Journal of Social Work*, 19.6 (2016), pp. 827–40, doi:10.1080/13691457.2015.1084273.

⁶² Elizabeth Bartholet, 'International Adoption: The Human Rights Position', *Global Policy*, 1.1 (2010), pp. 91–100, doi:10.1111/j.1758-5899.2009.00001.x.

⁶³ Barbara E. Gibson and others, 'Disability and Dignity-Enabling Home Environments', *Social Science & Medicine*, 74.2 (2012), pp. 211–19, doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.10.006.

⁶⁴ Paul Hunt, 'The Human Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health: New Opportunities and Challenges', *Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 100.7 (2006), pp. 603–07, doi:10.1016/j.trstmh.2006.03.001.

Every child has the right to a living standard that meets their basic physical, social, and mental needs.⁶⁵ Every child has the right to education, with primary education being free and secondary education being accessible to all. Schools should maintain discipline that respects children's dignity.⁶⁶ Education should aim to develop each child's personality, talents, and abilities to their fullest potential. It should also promote respect for human rights, parents, diverse cultures, and the environment.⁶⁷ Every child has the right to rest, play, and participate in diverse cultural and artistic activities.⁶⁸

Governments should protect children from work that is harmful to their health, safety, or education.⁶⁹ Governments should take all necessary measures to protect children from drug abuse and involvement in the drug trade.⁷⁰ It also advocates that governments should protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, which often destroys the child mentally, physically and psychologically.⁷¹ Governments must take all necessary steps to prevent the abduction, sale, and trafficking of children, recognizing that these heinous crimes are a critical aspect of child abuse and exploitation,⁷² which is the theme of this paper.

The convention prohibits all forms of exploitation that harm children, requiring governments to take preventive measures.⁷³ It protects children against detention by providing that children should be protected from cruel or harmful punishment. Those who break laws should be treated in a way that prioritizes rehabilitation over punishment. It states further that these kids should not be imprisoned with adults, and they should be allowed to stay in touch with their families; they should not be given life sentences or death penalties without the chance to be released.⁷⁴ It supports juvenile justice administration by providing that a child accused or guilty of breaking a law must be treated with dignity and respect. It also supports that the child has the right to help from a lawyer and a fair trial that

⁶⁵ Asbjørn Eide, 'The Right to an Adequate Standard of Living Including the Right to Food', in *Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (Brill | Nijhoff, 2001), pp. 133–48, doi:10.1163/9789047433866_012.

⁶⁶ Audrey Osler, 'Children's Rights, Responsibilities and Understandings of School Discipline', *Research Papers in Education*, 15.1 (2000), pp. 49–67, doi:10.1080/026715200362943.

⁶⁷ Patrick Agyare, 'Contextualizing Human Rights in Multicultural Environments', *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 9.3 (2024), pp. 210–30, doi:10.46303/ressat.2024.56.

⁶⁸ Berit Bae, 'Realizing Children's Right to Participation in Early Childhood Settings: Some Critical Issues in a Norwegian Context', *Early Years*, 30.3 (2010), pp. 205–18, doi:10.1080/09575146.2010.506598.

⁶⁹ Alan D. Woolf, 'Health Hazards for Children at Work', *Journal of Toxicology: Clinical Toxicology*, 40.4 (2002), pp. 477–82, doi:10.1081/Clt-120006750.

⁷⁰ Merrill Singer, 'Drugs and Development: The Global Impact of Drug Use and Trafficking on Social and Economic Development', *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 19.6 (2008), pp. 467–78, doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.2006.12.007.

⁷¹ Sheila Ramaswamy and Shekhar Seshadri, 'Children on the Brink: Risks for Child Protection, Sexual Abuse, and Related Mental Health Problems in the Covid-19 Pandemic', *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 62.9 (2020), p. 404, doi:10.4103/psychiatry.IndianJPsychiatry_1032_20.

⁷² Nanci Yosepin Simbolon and Madyasah Ablisar, 'The Prevention of Child Trafficking Crimes and Its Legal Reform', ed. by D. Chalil and others, *E3S Web of Conferences*, 52 (2018), p. 00033, doi:10.1051/e3sconf/20185200033.

⁷³ Vladimir Filippov, Anastasia Atabekova, and Maria Simonova, 'University Capacity for Children's Education to Prevent Their Abuse and Exploitation', *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 237 (2017), pp. 698–704, doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2017.02.046.

⁷⁴ Robert Johnson and Sandra McGunigall-Smith, 'Life Without Parole, America's Other Death Penalty', *The Prison Journal*, 88.2 (2008), pp. 328–46, doi:10.1177/0032885508319256.

takes account of their age or situation as well as the respect of the child's privacy at all times.⁷⁵

The convention also encourages governments to do everything they can to protect and care for children affected by war.⁷⁶ In advocating for the rehabilitation of child victims, the convention provides that children neglected, abused, exploited, tortured or who are victims of war must receive special assistance to help them recover their health, dignity and self-respect.⁷⁷ The United Nations mandates that State Parties take all necessary legal, administrative, and other actions for the execution of the rights established in the Convention.⁷⁸

The convention has a long list of commendable provisions protective of the child. Notwithstanding, it should be mentioned that Article 34 specifically makes provision prohibiting child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. By this article, State Parties are required to shield minors from all types of sexual abuse and exploitation. The protection afforded by the Convention is, however, not all-encompassing, and as such, may have to be improved upon in the future through an additional supplementary protocol. For instance, the incitement or coercion of children to participate in sexual exploitation and abuse, the exploitation of minors for prostitution and other illegal sexual activities, and the exploitation for sexually explicit materials and performances involving children, are among others, the specific acts that States parties would not to give concerted efforts required to prevent, prohibit, and punish the violators.

6) *Forced Labour Convention 1930 & Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 1999*

The Forced Labour Convention of 1930 provides a foundational definition of forced labour that remains crucial in shaping modern international protocols against human trafficking and smuggling. As a signatory, Nigeria, which ratified the convention on October 17, 1960, is obligated to ban all forms of forced or coerced labour. The Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 1999 aims to eliminate the most severe forms of child labor. According to Article 3, these include: Slavery, trafficking, debt bondage, forced labor, and forced military recruitment of children; child exploitation for prostitution, pornography, or related activities using children for drug production and trafficking; work that harms children's health, safety, or morals due to its nature or conditions. These forms of child labor are considered the most egregious and are targeted for elimination by the convention. Nigeria ratified the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention on October 2, 2002, committing to

⁷⁵ Louise Forde, 'Realising the Right of the Child to Participate in the Criminal Process', *Youth Justice*, 18.3 (2018), pp. 265–84, doi:10.1177/1473225418819086.

⁷⁶ Ilene Cohn, 'The Convention On The Rights Of The Child: What It Means For Children In War', *International Journal Of Refugee Law*, 3.1 (1991), Pp. 100–11, Doi:10.1093/Ijrl/3.1.100.

⁷⁷ Nevena Vuckovic Sahovic and Precious Eriamiatoe, 'Effectiveness of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Realization of the Right to a Remedy for Child Victims of Violence in Africa', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 110 (2020), p. 104307, doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104307.

⁷⁸ Alex G. Oude Elferink, 'Reviewing the Implementation of the Los Convention: The Role of the United Nations General Assembly and the Meeting of States Parties', in *Oceans Management in the 21st Century: Institutional Frameworks and Responses* (Brill | Nijhoff, 2004), pp. 295–312, doi:10.1163/9789047405368_022.

abolish the worst forms of child labor immediately, as outlined in Article 1. However, the convention has not yet been domesticated into Nigerian law, as required by Section 12 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended).

7) *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography 2000*

The Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography was adopted on May 25 is incorrect it was adopted on 25 May 2000, by resolution A/RES/54/263 and entered into force on January 18, 2002. It supplements the Convention on the Rights of the Child, requiring States Parties to take additional measures to protect children from exploitation, sale, prostitution, and pornography.⁷⁹ The Optional Protocol reaffirms the Convention on the Rights of the Child's commitment to protecting children from economic exploitation and hazardous work that could harm their well-being, education, or development. This protection is crucial given the widespread and growing issues of child trafficking, prostitution, pornography, and sex tourism, which disproportionately affect children.

The Optional Protocol addresses the growing concern of child pornography's increasing availability online and through emerging technologies, echoing international efforts like the International Conference to Combat Online Child Pornography.⁸⁰ Notably, the conference concluded that governments and the internet industry must enhance collaboration to combat child abuse, and advocated for global laws criminalizing the production, distribution, and promotion of child pornography.

The Optional Protocol advocates for a multifaceted approach to tackle the complex root causes of child exploitation, including poverty, inequality, lack of education, and harmful practices. To combat the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography, it calls for coordinated public awareness campaigns to reduce consumer demand. Additionally, it emphasizes the need for stronger national law enforcement and enhanced international cooperation among states.

Under the Optional Protocol, States Parties must ensure implementation of its provisions to prevent the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography.⁸¹ It encourages States Parties to make sure that, at the very least, the behaviours are completely protected by their criminal or penal code, whether committed by individuals, groups, or states.

⁷⁹ June Simon, Ann Luetzow, and Jon R. Conte, 'Thirty Years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: Developments in Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 110 (2020), p. 104399, doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104399.

⁸⁰ Bernadette H. Schell and others, 'Cyber Child Pornography: A Review Paper of the Social and Legal Issues and Remedies—and a Proposed Technological Solution', *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 12.1 (2007), pp. 45–63, doi:10.1016/j.avb.2006.03.003.

⁸¹ Trevor Buck, "International Criminalisation and Child Welfare Protection": The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child', *Children & Society*, 22.3 (2008), pp. 167–78, doi:10.1111/j.1099-0860.2008.00148.x.

Nigeria signed the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children on December 8, 2000, and ratified it on September 27, 2010. Certain provisions of the Optional Protocol have been incorporated into domestic law through the Child Rights Act.⁸² Article 10 of the Optional Protocol requires State Parties to take necessary measures to prevent, detect, investigate, and prosecute violations. Despite this, there is no specific provision stating the punishment for the offender.

8) *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000)*

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OPCRC 2000) on the involvement of children in armed conflict was signed by UN member states, building on the widespread support for the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This protocol aims to promote and protect children's rights, preventing the devastating impact of armed conflict on them. It strongly condemns targeting children and attacking protected sites like schools and hospitals during conflicts. The protocol upholds the principle that the best interests of the child should be a top priority in all decisions affecting them. To implement this, it advocates for raising the minimum age for military recruitment and participation in hostilities. The protocol requires states to ensure that armed forces personnel under 18 do not directly participate in hostilities.⁸³ The protocol prohibits the compulsory recruitment of individuals under 18 into armed forces.⁸⁴ For voluntary enlistment of individuals under 18 in national armed forces, the protocol recommends safeguards, including: genuine voluntariness, parental or guardian consent, full awareness of military responsibilities, and age verification before acceptance.⁸⁵

The Protocol prohibits armed groups outside of state armed forces from recruiting or using individuals under 18 in hostilities.⁸⁶ States Parties must enact laws prohibiting and criminalizing the recruitment and use of children, and take practical steps to prevent such actions.⁸⁷ The Protocol encourages States Parties to implement laws and international agreements that better protect children's rights.⁸⁸ States

⁸² David Christopher Giwa, 'A Critical Analysis of the Legal and Institutional Frameworks for the Protection of the Right of the Child in Nigeria', *Ssrn Electronic Journal*, 2023, doi:10.2139/ssrn.4581396.

⁸³ Valeriia Khrystiuk, 'Recruitment Of Children Under The Age Of 15 Into The National Armed Forces Or Their Use For Active Participation In Hostilities: Qualification Issues', *Łódzkie Studia Humanistyczne*, no. 1 (2025), pp. 29–36, doi:10.32782/2956-333X/2025-1-6.

⁸⁴ Rachel Brett, 'Adolescents Volunteering for Armed Forces or Armed Groups', *International Review of the Red Cross*, 85.852 (2003), pp. 857–66, doi:10.1017/S0035336100179961.

⁸⁵ Nehginpao Kipgen, 'The Rohingya Crisis: The Centrality of Identity and Citizenship', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 39.1 (2019), pp. 61–74, doi:10.1080/13602004.2019.1575019.

⁸⁶ Pascal Bongard and Ezequiel Heffes, 'Engaging Armed Non-State Actors on the Prohibition of Recruiting and Using Children in Hostilities: Some Reflections from Geneva Call's Experience', *International Review of the Red Cross*, 101.911 (2019), pp. 603–21, doi:10.1017/S1816383120000065.

⁸⁷ I. Cohn, 'A Call for State Action to Prevent the Recruitment and Use of Children as Soldiers in State Armed Forces and State Allied Armed Groups', *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 6.1 (2014), pp. 182–90, doi:10.1093/jhuman/hut029.

⁸⁸ Collins, 'A Child's Right to Participate: Implications for International Child Protection'.

Parties should take administrative, judicial, and other necessary actions to effectively implement and enforce the Protocol.⁸⁹

Nigeria became a signatory to the Protocol on 8 September, 2000 and ratified it on 25 September, 2012. Some provisions of the Optional Protocol have been domesticated under the Child Rights Act. For example, section 34 of the Child Rights Act prohibits the recruitment of children into the Armed Forces. It provides as follows: No kid may be enlisted in any branch of the Military Forces.⁹⁰ The Act defines the age of majority as 18 years.⁹¹ However, due to the limited nature of the provisions which have been incorporated into Nigerian law, there is a limit to the Protocol's domestic application in Nigeria.

It is submitted that the provisions of the various international agreements discussed above provide the references for the development of national and regional frameworks. However, their effectiveness remains hampered by the fact that most of the provisions have not been domesticated under Section 12 of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution (as amended), while certain provisions are domesticated. Notably, Section 18 of the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties requires signatory states to refrain from actions that would undermine a treaty's purpose, even before ratification or domestication. Accordingly, even though Nigeria is yet to domesticate some of these treaties, however, their provisions would serve to guide the action of the state officials in order not to put the particular country in a situation where its actions would defeat the object of the various conventions signed. Apart from non-domestication, the effectiveness of the various international and regional frameworks is also limited by lack of adequate awareness of their provisions by the public. Most of these international instruments are available online, but they are not readily accessible to the public except to the educated and informed minds. The next part will discuss the regional legal instruments.

Table 1. International Instruments as They Affect the Rights of the Child

Instrument	Adoption Date	Key Provisions	Relevance to Child Sexual Abuse
Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)	December 10, 1948	Right to life, liberty, and security; freedom from torture and slavery; equality before the law	Provides general protections, but doesn't directly address child sexual abuse
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)	December 19, 1966	Right to life, freedom from	Prohibits marriage without consent, ensuring protection for children

⁸⁹ Jonas Tallberg, 'Paths to Compliance: Enforcement, Management, and the European Union', *International Organization*, 56.3 (2002), pp. 609–43, doi:10.1162/002081802760199908.

⁹⁰ Harendra de Silva, Chris Hobbs, and Helga Hanks, 'Conscription of Children in Armed Conflict—a Form of Child Abuse. A Study of 19 Former Child Soldiers', *Child Abuse Review*, 10.2 (2001), pp. 125–34, doi:10.1002/car.669.

⁹¹ Diana E.H. Russell, 'The Incidence and Prevalence of Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Sexual Abuse of Female Children', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 7.2 (1983), pp. 133–46, doi:10.1016/0145-2134(83)90065-0.

Instrument	Adoption Date	Key Provisions	Relevance to Child Sexual Abuse
		torture, and protection of family	
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)	December 16, 1966	Right to work, social security, and family protection	Provides for family protection and assistance, which can include protection from sexual abuse
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)	December 18, 1979	Elimination of discrimination against women; protection of women's rights	Prohibits child marriage and emphasizes the best interests of the child
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)	November 20, 1989	Protection of children's rights; best interests of the child	Specifically prohibits child sexual abuse and exploitation
Forced Labour Convention	June 28, 1930	Prohibition of forced labor	Relevant to child labor and exploitation
Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention	June 17, 1999	Elimination of worst forms of child labor	Includes protection from sexual exploitation and abuse
Optional Protocol to the CRC on Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography	May 25, 2000	Protection from sale, prostitution, and pornography	Directly addresses child sexual exploitation
Optional Protocol to the CRC on Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict	May 25, 2000	Protection from involvement in armed conflict	Prohibits recruitment and use of children in hostilities

Source: compiled by the author based on various international human rights instruments concerning the protection of children

Regional Legal Frameworks

In addition to the international instruments discussed above, Nigeria has signed and ratified several regional instruments protecting children's rights, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the ECOWAS Declaration and Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons. Other relevant African regional legal frameworks include: Maputo Plan of Action 2015-2030 on Gender Based Violence; African Common Position on the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa; and African Union Policy on Prevention and Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse for Peace Support Operations. These instruments are discussed in this part.

1) *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, 1981*

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR 1981), also known as the Banjul Charter, was adopted on June 27, 1981, and came into effect

on October 21, 1986.⁹² The African Charter is a regional human rights framework similar to the European and American Conventions on Human Rights. In Nigeria, the Charter took effect on July 22, 1983. State Parties must recognize and uphold the Charter's rights and freedoms, and enact laws and measures to ensure their effective implementation.⁹³ The Charter affirms the principles of equality before the law and equal protection, while prohibiting arbitrary deprivation of rights.⁹⁴ The Charter ensures all individuals are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection⁹⁵ and prohibits arbitrary deprivation of anyone's rights.⁹⁶

Additionally, it guarantees liberty, protecting against arbitrary arrest and detention, and ensures freedom of conscience, profession, and religious practice. It guarantees the right to liberty, that is, no one may be arbitrarily arrested or detained without recourse to laid down law and procedure.⁹⁷ It also guarantees freedom of conscience, profession and free practice of religion.⁹⁸

The Charter also guarantees the right to free association, which implies that no one may be compelled to join an association.⁹⁹ Equal remuneration for equal effort and the right to labour in fair and suitable conditions are also guaranteed. This is to guard against any form of discrimination in the place of work, as African societies are patrilineal. Right to enjoy physical and mental health and receive medical attention when sick,¹⁰⁰ right to education, participation in the cultural activities of one's community; the State must promote and defend morality and traditional values that the community recognises.¹⁰¹

The State must protect the family's well-being, eliminate discrimination against women, and safeguard children's and women's rights as outlined in international declarations.¹⁰² All individuals are equal, deserving of the same respect and rights, with no room for domination.¹⁰³

⁹² Michelo Hansungule, 'Human Rights The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights', in *The African Union: Legal and Institutional Framework* (Brill | Nijhoff, 2012), pp. 415–53, doi:10.1163/9789004227729_021.

⁹³ Koen Lenaerts, 'Exploring the Limits of the Eu Charter of Fundamental Rights', *European Constitutional Law Review*, 8.3 (2012), pp. 375–403, doi:10.1017/S1574019612000260.

⁹⁴ Albrecht Weber, Karl-Peter Sommermann, and Wolfgang Babeck, 'Building a Fundamental Rights Culture', in *Writing Constitutions* (Springer International Publishing, 2024), pp. 3–22, doi:10.1007/978-3-031-39622-9_1.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Art. 3.

⁹⁶ Katarzyna Dunaj and Joanna Ryszka, 'The Protection of Vulnerable People in the Charter System', in *The European Social Charter: A Commentary* (Brill | Nijhoff, 2022), pp. 319–48, doi:10.1163/9789004434042_014.

⁹⁷ Nehaluddin Ahmad, Ahmad Masum, and Abdul Mohaimin Ayus, 'Freedom of Religion and Apostasy: The Malaysian Experience', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 38.3 (2016), pp. 736–53, doi:10.1353/hrq.2016.0038.

⁹⁸ Martin Scheinin, 'Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion', *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology*, 54.1 (2000), pp. 5–18, doi:10.1080/003933800750041485.

⁹⁹ Lord (Peter) Goldsmith, 'A Charter of Rights, Freedoms and Principles', *Common Market Law Review*, 38.Issue 5 (2001), pp. 1201–16, doi:10.54648/383895.

¹⁰⁰ Jeannette Pols, 'Enforcing Patient Rights or Improving Care? The Interference of Two Modes of Doing Good in Mental Health Care', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 25.4 (2003), pp. 320–47, doi:10.1111/1467-9566.00349.

¹⁰¹ Milton Fisk, 'Community and Morality', *The Review of Politics*, 55.4 (1993), pp. 593–616, doi:10.1017/S0034670500018015.

¹⁰² Eszter Kismödi and others, 'Sexual Rights as Human Rights: A Guide for the Was Declaration of Sexual Rights', *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 29.sup1 (2017), pp. 1–92, doi:10.1080/19317611.2017.1353865.

¹⁰³ Albenaz Azmanova, 'The Right to Politics and Republican Non-Domination', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 42.4–5 (2016), pp. 465–75, doi:10.1177/0191453715623394.

Every person has duties to their family, community, state, and the international community, which must be fulfilled while respecting others' rights, security, morality, and the common good.¹⁰⁴ Individuals are also responsible for treating others with dignity, preserving harmonious relationships, and promoting tolerance and mutual respect.¹⁰⁵ The only position of the child in this Charter is in article 18(3), which provides thus: “in accordance with international declarations and conventions, the State shall guarantee the abolition of all forms of discrimination against women as well as the protection of their rights.” As listed above, the Charter outlines the fundamental rights inherent to every individual as a human being.

2) *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990*

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990 (herein referred to as the Charter) is an instrument made by the States Parties of the AU which came into effect in 1990. The Charter was signed and ratified by Nigeria in the year 2000. The Charter defines a child¹⁰⁶ and states that every child should be allowed to enjoy the rights and freedoms in the Charter without any form of discrimination.¹⁰⁷ The charter emphasizes the importance of hearing and considering the child's opinion in legal and administrative proceedings.¹⁰⁸ It provides that every child has a right to life.¹⁰⁹ The charter mandates that every child has a right to be named and registered at birth.¹¹⁰ The Charter also upholds a child's right to express their views freely, provided they can communicate them effectively.¹¹¹ The charter allows every child to enjoy freedom of association and peaceful assembly in conformity with the law.¹¹² The Charter guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.¹¹³ Every child's right to privacy is protected under the Charter.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁴ Louis Dupré, ‘The Common Good and the Open Society’, *The Review of Politics*, 55.4 (1993), pp. 687–712, doi:10.1017/S0034670500018052.

¹⁰⁵ Salsabila Anita Firdaus and Suwendi Suwendi, ‘Fostering Social Harmony: The Impact of Islamic Character Education in Multicultural Societies’, *Al-Ishlah: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 17.1 (2025), doi:10.35445/alishlah.v17i1.6579.

¹⁰⁶ Muiyiwa Adigun, ‘The Implementation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Nigeria: The Creation of Irresponsible Parents and Dutiful Children?’, *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, 51.3 (2019), pp. 320–49, doi:10.1080/07329113.2019.1675988.

¹⁰⁷ P Nnaemeka-Agu, ‘Discrimination and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights’, *Commonwealth Law Bulletin*, 19.4 (1993), pp. 1670–77, doi:10.1080/03050718.1993.9986316.

¹⁰⁸ Jamal Barafi, ‘The Child’s Right to Be Heard During Administrative And Judicial Proceedings: An Analytical Study of International and Comparative Law’, *Access to Justice in Eastern Europe*, 2026, doi:10.33327/Ajee-18-9.1-a000172.

¹⁰⁹ Julian Savulescu And Guy Kahane, ‘The Moral Obligation To Create Children With The Best Chance Of The Best Life’, *Bioethics*, 23.5 (2009), Pp. 274–90, Doi:10.1111/J.1467-8519.2008.00687.X.

¹¹⁰ Sueann Caulfield, ‘The Right to a Father’s Name: A Historical Perspective on State Efforts to Combat the Stigma of Illegitimate Birth in Brazil’, *Law and History Review*, 30.1 (2012), pp. 1–36, doi:10.1017/S0738248011000587.

¹¹¹ Piet Eeckhout, ‘The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Federal Question’, *Common Market Law Review*, 39.Issue 5 (2002), pp. 945–94, doi:10.54648/5102448.

¹¹² M. Rishmawi, ‘The Revised Arab Charter on Human Rights: A Step Forward?’, *Human Rights Law Review*, 5.2 (2005), pp. 361–76, doi:10.1093/hrlr/ngi021.

¹¹³ Scheinin, ‘Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion’.

¹¹⁴ Anica Čulo Margaletić and Barbara Preložnjak, ‘Children’s Right To Privacy In The Digital Age’, *InterEULawEast: Journal for the International and European Law, Economics and Market Integrations*, 10.2 (2023), pp. 81–100, doi:10.22598/iele.2023.10.2.4.

3) *ECOWAS Declaration and Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons, 2001*

This instrument calls on Member States to pledge to take action against human trafficking, safeguard and assist victims of trafficking, organize awareness campaigns, establish border cooperation for law enforcement officials, and exchange data with the UN and ECOWAS member states. All of the ECOWAS member states' heads of government agreed on a plan of action that included every necessary step that needed to be taken to combat human trafficking. The proclamation of the action plan against human trafficking was approved in December 2001 at the ECOWAS Annual Summit in Dakar, Senegal. These two tools were primarily concerned with responding to human trafficking from a criminal justice perspective.

4) *Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention) 2010*

The Lanzarote Convention (LC 2010) aims to prevent and combat child sexual exploitation and abuse by implementing measures such as screening, child protection training, and monitoring offenders. Its objectives include safeguarding victims' rights and promoting national and international cooperation against these crimes.¹¹⁵ The Convention requires that sexual abuse be made illegal, and this has been construed to imply having intercourse with a minor who is not yet of legal age for sex according to applicable national law rules,¹¹⁶ taking part in sexual activity with a minor while using threats, coercion, or force,¹¹⁷ or child abuse is committed by someone who is acknowledged as having power, influence, or trust over the child, frequently a member of the family; abuse is made of a circumstance in which the child is especially vulnerable, most notably when they are dependent on someone or have a physical or mental illness.

In terms of the convention, child prostitution is defined as using a kid for sexual activities in exchange for money or any other kind of payment or consideration, whether or not the child received the payment, promise, or consideration.¹¹⁸ State parties are obligated to enact laws and measures criminalizing child prostitution, including: recruiting or forcing children into prostitution, exploiting or profiting from child prostitution, and engaging in child prostitution.¹¹⁹ The Convention criminalizes various acts related to child pornography, including its creation, distribution, possession, and intentional access through digital means, as well as

¹¹⁵ Ela Kerka Podgorica and Genada Taho, 'Cooperation at the National and International Level in the Protection of Victims', *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*, 10.3 (2023), p. 45, doi:10.56345/ijrdv10n307.

¹¹⁶ Ben Mathews and Delphine Collin-Vézina, 'Child Sexual Abuse: Toward a Conceptual Model and Definition', *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 20.2 (2019), pp. 131–48, doi:10.1177/1524838017738726.

¹¹⁷ Amy E. Lyndon, Jacquelyn W. White, and Kelly M. Kadlec, 'Manipulation and Force as Sexual Coercion Tactics: Conceptual and Empirical Differences', *Aggressive Behavior*, 33.4 (2007), pp. 291–303, doi:10.1002/ab.20200.

¹¹⁸ Kadriye Bakirci, 'Child Pornography and Prostitution: Is This Crime or Work That Should Be Regulated?', *Journal of Financial Crime*, 14.1 (2007), pp. 5–11, doi:10.1108/13590790710721756.

¹¹⁹ Zsuzsanna Vidra, Noémi Katona, and Viktória Sebhelyi, 'State Policies and Institutional Procedures and Practices Addressing Prostitution and Sex Trafficking of Children in Hungary', *Critical Social Policy*, 38.4 (2018), pp. 645–66, doi:10.1177/0261018317748318.

providing or procuring it for oneself or others.¹²⁰ Any visual representation of a kid participating in actual or simulated sexually explicit behaviour, or any representation of a child's sexual organ used primarily for sexual reasons, is considered pornography.¹²¹ Additionally, it makes it illegal to pay for or exploit a child to participate in pornographic performances, recruit children to participate in such performances, coerce children to participate in such performances, and intentionally attend pornographic performances in which children are involved.¹²² The agreement also makes it illegal to purposefully cause a child to see sexual abuse or other sexual behaviours for sex-related reasons, even if the child is not required to partake. It makes the soliciting of minors for sex purposes much more illegal.¹²³ It is also illegal to aid and abet the commission of any of the offences listed therein.¹²⁴

In line with the nature of the offence, the convention requires that punishments be effective, proportionate, and dissuasive. The penalties provided for in the convention include deprivation of liberty which may result in extradition, monetary fines for crimes or non-crimes, disqualification from receiving public assistance or benefits, placement under judicial supervision, and taking custody of assets, documents and other tools used in the commission of the offenses, money obtained from the offenses, or property with a value commensurate with the proceeds, adopt actions against the offenders, such as removing parental rights or supervising convicted individuals, and confiscate money or proceeds from crime to fund preventative and support programs for victims of any of the offenses defined under the convention.¹²⁵

Table 2. Regional instruments as they affect the rights of the child

Instrument	Adoption Date	Key Provisions	Relevance to Child Sexual Abuse
African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)	June 27, 1981	Equality before the law, protection from arbitrary deprivation of rights, liberty, freedom of conscience, and association.	General human rights framework with provisions applicable to children and women's rights (Art. 18)
African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child	1990	Right to life, name, and registration at birth, freedom of expression, association, and protection of privacy.	Specific protections for children's rights and welfare

¹²⁰ 'Electronic Child Pornography in UAE Law: Crimes And Criminal Liability', *Pakistan Journal of Criminology*, 2024, pp. 457–69, doi:10.62271/pjc.16.1.457.469.

¹²¹ Elisabeth Taylor, 'Pornography as a Public Health Issue: Promoting Violence and Exploitation of Children, Youth, and Adults', *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*, 3.2 (2018), doi:10.23860/dignity.2018.03.02.08.

¹²² Susan H. Bitensky, 'Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse', *International Legal Materials*, 49.6 (2010), pp. 1663–82, doi:10.5305/intelegamate.49.6.1663.

¹²³ Afrooz Kaviani Johnson, 'Grooming and Child Sexual Abuse in Organizational Settings—an Expanded Role for International Human Rights Law', *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 16.1 (2024), pp. 355–73, doi:10.1093/jhuman/huad039.

¹²⁴ Katerina Simonova, 'Attempt And Aiding Or Abetting', in *A Commentary on the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), doi:10.4337/9781788111560.00033.

¹²⁵ Raquel Aldana-Pindell, 'An Emerging Universality of Justiciable Victims' Rights in the Criminal Process to Curtail Impunity for State-Sponsored Crimes', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 26.3 (2004), pp. 605–85, doi:10.1353/hrq.2004.0030.

Instrument	Adoption Date	Key Provisions	Relevance to Child Sexual Abuse
ECOWAS Declaration and Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons	2001	Combating human trafficking through awareness campaigns, border cooperation, and victim assistance.	Addresses human trafficking in West Africa.
Lanzarote Convention (Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse)	2010	Prevention and combating of child sexual exploitation and abuse through screening, training, and monitoring offenders.	Specific focus on preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Source: compiled by the author based on various human rights instruments concerning child protection in Africa

These regional instruments demonstrate Africa's commitment to protecting human rights, particularly for vulnerable populations such as children. By understanding these instruments, individuals and organizations can better advocate for and protect human rights in Africa.

Implementation Challenges

The laws analyzed above aim to protect children from abuse, exploitation, and neglect. However, implementing these regulations faces several challenges. Despite the existence of child protection laws, enforcement remains inadequate. Law enforcement agencies often lack the necessary resources, training, and capacity to effectively respond to cases of child abuse and exploitation. Corruption and impunity further undermine these efforts, allowing perpetrators to escape justice.¹²⁶

Also, many parents and stakeholders are unaware of the provisions of the CRA, hindering its effective implementation. This lack of awareness contributes to widespread violations of children's rights, including child labor, trafficking, and early marriage.¹²⁷ The traditional and religious practices in some regions conflict with the CRA's provisions. Harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and early marriage persist, despite being illegal under the CRA.¹²⁸ This is further complicated by an institutional problem. Government agencies mandated to oversee the implementation of child protection laws are often poorly equipped and understaffed. There is also a lack of political will to enforce these laws, leading to inadequate investigation and prosecution of reported abuses.¹²⁹ Moreover, the limited

¹²⁶ Payam Akhavan, 'Beyond Impunity: Can International Criminal Justice Prevent Future Atrocities?', *American Journal of International Law*, 95.1 (2001), pp. 7–31, doi:10.2307/2642034.

¹²⁷ Julia O'Connell Davidson, 'Moving Children? Child Trafficking, Child Migration, and Child Rights', *Critical Social Policy*, 31.3 (2011), pp. 454–77, doi:10.1177/0261018311405014.

¹²⁸ Rigmor C. Berg and Eva Denison, 'A Tradition in Transition: Factors Perpetuating and Hindering the Continuance of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) Summarized in a Systematic Review', *Health Care for Women International*, 34.10 (2013), pp. 837–59, doi:10.1080/07399332.2012.721417.

¹²⁹ Beverly Chia Chi Liu and Michael S. Vaughn, 'Legal and Policy Issues from the United States and Internationally about Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse', *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 64 (2019), pp. 219–29, doi:10.1016/j.ijlp.2019.03.007.

availability of accurate and comprehensive data on child rights violations hampers the formulation of effective policies and targeted interventions.¹³⁰

Addressing the Challenges

To address the challenges discussed above, the government should provide adequate resources and training to law enforcement agencies to effectively handle child protection cases and establish specialized units within the police force dedicated to child protection. There should be an increase in public awareness. Implement nationwide campaigns to educate parents and communities about children's rights and the provisions of the CRA. By doing this, education regulatory institutions should incorporate child rights education into school curricula. Furthermore, address Socio-cultural and religious barriers by engaging with the community and religious leaders to challenge harmful traditional practices and promote child rights. To achieve this, there should be a conscious effort to develop culturally sensitive interventions that respect traditions while protecting children's rights.

In addition, governments at all levels should strengthen institutional frameworks. One way to get this done is to allocate sufficient funding to agencies responsible for child protection. There should also be enhanced coordination among various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and community organizations. The government may have to establish a centralized database to collect and analyze data on child rights violations. This will enable the agencies concerned to use the data to inform policy decisions and monitor the effectiveness of interventions. By addressing these challenges through concerted efforts by the government, civil society, and communities, Nigeria can better protect children's rights and ensure their well-being.

Conclusion

This paper has examined international laws for combating child sexual abuse, focusing on international and regional instruments. This paper concludes that while children's rights are enshrined in various instruments, their implementation remains elusive in many developing countries. This is attributed to many factors, including financial obstacles, poverty, illiteracy, poor enforcement of these laws and policies due to corruption, lack of accountability, and an inadequate number of enforcement and prosecution personnel.

Acknowledgement

None

¹³⁰ Kimberly A. Svevo-Cianci, Stuart N. Hart, and Claude Robinson, 'Protecting Children from Violence and Maltreatment: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis Assessing the Implementation of U.N. CRC Article 19', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34.1 (2010), pp. 45–56, doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2009.09.010.

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