

ENDING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN NIGERIA



Protecting Every Child Through Education, Social Protection, and Community Accountability

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1. Executive Summary

Violence against children in Nigeria is not an isolated phenomenon but a pervasive, systemic challenge affecting children across all regions and social contexts. Evidence from UNICEF underscores that such violence is deeply embedded in everyday life, cutting across socio-economic and cultural boundaries and occurring routinely within homes, schools, and community spaces that should be safe and protective. This normalization of violence not only exposes children to immediate harm but also undermines their long-term development, well-being, and future opportunities. Crucially, violence against children is preventable, and addressing it requires a coordinated, sustained response that tackles root causes, strengthens protection systems, and shifts harmful social norms, with the potential to deliver meaningful and lasting change.

As of March 2026, 329 verified violations were reported across 35 states, with sexual violence accounting for nearly half (46%) of all cases.¹ At the same time, 18.3 million children remain out of school,² significantly increasing their exposure to exploitation, abuse, and harmful coping mechanisms. Findings from a December 2024- December 2025 report show that sexual violence was the most frequently recorded violation, with 1,251 verified incidents affecting 1,344 children, and a clear escalation in the second half of the reporting period. Abduction of children remained widespread and increasingly organised, with 279 incidents involving 453 children, peaking during predictable seasonal risk periods linked to armed banditry and population mobility.³

2. The evidence is Unequivocal

Education is Nigeria’s strongest protective factor against violence. However, protection systems remain weak, under-resourced, and fragmented, while poverty and harmful social norms continue to drive vulnerability.

In conflict-affected regions, this approach must also include the integration of child protection into security operations, ensuring that children encountered in such contexts are treated as victims and transitioned into rehabilitation and reintegration pathways in line with national and international frameworks.

Key Policy Message

“Ending violence against children in Nigeria requires a shift from reactive response to integrated prevention anchored in education, strengthened protection systems, and accountable communities.”

The Scale of the Challenge

Violence against children in Nigeria cuts across geography, gender, and socio-economic status.

Indicator	Evidence
Verified violations (March 2026)	329 cases across 35 states
Most common violation	Sexual violence (~46%)
Out-of-school children	18.3 million
Regional concentration	~70% in Northern Nigeria
Gender disparity	Girls disproportionately affected
Perpetrators	Mostly known to the child (family, neighbours)

Source: Primero, 2025-2026

1. Act to protect March 2026.pdf
2. Primero, 2025 - 2026
3. UNICEF (Act to Protect) Annual Report
4. Primero, 2025 - 2026

2. The Reality for Children: Everyday Risk

For millions of children in Nigeria, violence is not a rare or isolated incident, it is a daily risk shaped by multiple, overlapping vulnerabilities. One of the most significant drivers is education exclusion. A large proportion of affected children are out of school, with girls disproportionately impacted through higher rates of non-enrolment and dropout. Being outside the protective environment of school increases exposure to exploitation, abuse, and long-term marginalization.

At the same time, sexual violence remains alarmingly prevalent, accounting for the largest share of reported violations nationwide. This is compounded by widespread poverty, with an estimate of over 52 % of Nigerians living below the poverty line ⁵. Economic hardship pushes many children into child labour, forces them out of school, and exposes them to unsafe and unregulated environments where risks are significantly heightened.

These challenges are further exacerbated by weak child protection systems. Many cases go unreported due to stigma, fear, and a lack of trust in formal institutions. Even when incidents are reported, access to child-friendly and survivor-centred services remains limited. Together, these factors create a cycle where violence is both normalized and under-addressed, leaving millions of children vulnerable every day.

3. Why This Matters

For children, protection is immediate and personal. It determines their safety, dignity, and future.

Children who are:

Out of school → more exposed to exploitation and abuse

Living in poverty → more vulnerable to neglect and harmful coping strategies

Without support systems → less likely to report violence or receive help

4. What the Evidence Shows

Education and child protection are deeply interconnected, and gaps in one inevitably weaken the other. A substantial proportion of reported cases involve children who are not currently enrolled in formal education. Disaggregation by gender shows a clear disparity: female children have higher proportions of dropout and non-enrolment, while male children are predominantly reported as currently enrolled.

This pattern indicates a strong association between education exclusion and vulnerability, particularly among girls. Female children account for approximately 55–60 per cent of non-enrolment cases, further highlighting the gendered dimension of education-related vulnerability.⁶

When children are out of school, their vulnerability rises sharply. They are more likely to be exposed to trafficking, sexual violence, and child labour, often due to economic pressures or lack of supervision. Without the stability and protection that education can provide, these children face heightened risks that can have lasting consequences on their safety, development, and future opportunities.

“Education is one of the most powerful protective systems available to children”



5. World Bank Poverty and Equity Brief 2025. www.worldbank.org/curate/

6. Primo 2025-2026

The nature of violence against children in Nigeria is both widespread and deeply concerning, as sexual violence dominates with 152 incidents,[AS1] representing nearly half of all reported cases.⁷

However, it is far from the only threat children face with other violations (53), comprising child labour, neglect and abandonment, child trafficking (40), and abduction (32), all of which indicate significant risks tied to exploitation, mobility, and coercion. Killing and maiming (27) and child marriage and harmful practices (21) also remain persistent, while recruitment and use of children by armed groups (3) and detention (1) appear at lower levels but still signal ongoing protection gaps, particularly in conflict-affected or fragile settings.⁸

Conflict-Affected Children and the CAAC Lens

While reported figures on recruitment and use of children, detention, and conflict-related violations appear comparatively low in the dataset, this should be interpreted with caution. Evidence from the United Nations Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) framework indicates that such violations are frequently underreported due to stigma, access constraints, and limitations in verification in complex security environments.⁹

In Nigeria's North East and other fragile contexts, children continue to be affected by armed violence in multiple ways, including recruitment and use by armed groups, abduction, sexual violence, and detention for perceived association with such groups. These risks are often embedded within broader patterns of insecurity and may not always be captured in routine protection data.

Importantly, how children are encountered and handled by security actors has significant implications for both child protection outcomes and long-term national security. Evidence shows that children associated with armed groups are primarily victims of coercion, exploitation, and trauma, and require protection and reintegration of support rather than punitive responses.

Nigeria has taken important steps in this regard through the adoption of the CAAC Handover Protocol, which provides a structured pathway for the transfer of children from military custody to civilian child-protection actors for rehabilitation and reintegration.

This represents a critical bridge between security operations and child protection systems, ensuring compliance with international standards while reducing the risk of re-recruitment and future violence.

Importantly, this violence is not confined to traditionally high-risk or conflict-affected areas. It occurs across all regions of the country, cutting through both urban and rural communities. This widespread pattern underscores that violence against children is a national issue, requiring comprehensive and context-sensitive responses rather than approaches limited to specific geographies.

The sources of risk for children are often closer to home than expected. In many cases, perpetrators are not strangers but individuals within a child's immediate environment with family members, neighbours, or other known community actors. This proximity makes violence harder to detect and report and often deepens the psychological impact on the child.

The profile of alleged perpetrators highlights that the threat to children is largely embedded within their immediate social environment. Strangers (69) and neighbours (64) account for the highest shares, followed closely by family members, including fathers (32), relatives (24), mothers (16), and both parents (14). This pattern highlights a troubling reality where children are at risk not only from external actors but also from those within their homes and communities.¹⁰ Highlighting the urgent need to strengthen protection mechanisms at the household and community levels.

7. Act to protect March 2026.pdf

8. Act to protect March 2026.pdf

9. United Nations, Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/HRC/61/37 (2025), pgs. 8-9 (noting persistent underreporting due to stigma, safety concerns, and limited access).

10. Act to protect March 2026

5. The Policy Gap

Nigeria's current approach remains reactive and fragmented, with limited emphasis on prevention.

Traditional Approach	Required Shift
Focus on response	Prioritize prevention
Education treated separately	Integrate education with protection
Institution-centred	Child-centred
Isolated interventions	Address systemic drivers

A key gap within the current policy approach is the limited integration of security sector engagement and conflict-sensitive child protection measures. Existing frameworks do not sufficiently address how children encountered in security operations are identified, handled, and transitioned into protection and reintegration systems. Without this linkage, responses risk reinforcing cycles of detention, stigmatization, and re-radicalization, particularly in conflict-affected regions.

6. Policy Priorities for Government and Partners

Keeping every child in school must be treated as a first line of defence against violence. This requires elevating the issue of out-of-school children to a national emergency, recognizing the direct link between education exclusion and increased vulnerability. When children remain in school, they are not only learning but also benefiting from a structured, supervised, and protective environment.

To achieve this, there is a need to expand targeted support mechanisms such as cash transfer programmes and school feeding initiatives, which help reduce the economic pressures that push children especially girls out of school. At the same time, flexible and alternative learning pathways should be introduced to accommodate children who are unable to access formal education, ensuring no child is left behind.

Equally important is strengthening safeguarding systems within schools to ensure they remain safe spaces. This includes clear reporting mechanisms, trained personnel, and child protection policies that actively prevent and respond to abuse, reinforcing the role of education as both a right and a critical protection tool.

A. Strengthen Child Protection Systems

Strengthening child protection systems requires moving beyond policy commitments to consistent enforcement of child protection and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) laws nationwide. Clear legal frameworks already exist, but their impact depends on effective implementation, coordination, and accountability across all levels.

Equally critical is ensuring that children have access to safe, accessible, and child-friendly reporting mechanisms. Many cases go unreported because children fear stigma, retaliation, or simply do not know where to seek help. Creating trusted channels within communities, schools, and digital platforms can significantly improve reporting and early intervention.

At the frontline, service providers must be equipped with the right skills and tools. This includes training on safe disclosure practices, effective case management, and delivering survivor-centred care that prioritizes the dignity, safety, and well-being of the child. Together, these measures help build a protection system that children can trust and rely on.

B. Reduce Household Vulnerability

- Scale up social protection systems
- Expand livelihood support for families
- Reduce dependence on child labour as a coping mechanism



D. Integrate Child Protection into Security and Stabilization Frameworks

To break the cycle of violence in conflict-affected areas, child protection must be systematically integrated into national security and stabilization of responses.

This requires:

- Institutionalizing the CAAC Handover Protocol across all security agencies to ensure timely transfer of children from military custody to civilian protection actors
- Embedding child protection standards into military doctrine, training, and Rules of Engagement, including clear guidance on handling children encountered during operations
- Strengthening coordination between security actors, Ministries of Women Affairs, and humanitarian partners to ensure seamless referral and reintegration pathways
- Aligning national efforts with the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Framework, which recognizes children associated with armed groups as victims and prioritizes their release, rehabilitation, and community-based reintegration

These measures are critical not only for protecting children but also for enhancing operational effectiveness, strengthening community trust, and preventing future cycles of violence.

Focus Area	Key Action	Expected Outcome
Child Rights & Social Norms Promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote child rights awareness • Promote gender equality • Introduce consent education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased understanding of children's rights and protection needs • Reduced discrimination and harmful gender norms • Improved awareness of personal boundaries and prevention of abuse
System Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate child protection into school curricula • Embed child protection in parenting programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early education on safety, rights, and reporting mechanisms • Strengthened positive parenting practices and safer home environments
Community Behaviour Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scale community behaviour change campaigns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift in social norms and reduction of tolerance for violence against children

Pillar Outcome for Children



7. Conclusion: A National Imperative

Violence against children in Nigeria is a widespread and systemic challenge that affects millions of children across homes, schools, and communities. Despite its scale and persistence, it is not inevitable, it is preventable. The pathway to ending it is clear and evidence based.

Keeping children in school provides a critical first layer of protection by reducing exposure to harm and strengthening supervision and support systems around them. At the same time, there is a need to strengthen child protection systems and services to ensure timely reporting, effective response, and survivor-centered care.

Addressing underlying drivers such as poverty and vulnerability is equally essential, as economic hardship often increases children's exposure to exploitation and abuse.

Finally, building accountable and engaged communities ensures that protection is not only institutional but also social, with families, leaders, and communities actively playing a role in safeguarding children.

“Every child in school. Every child safe. Every community accountable”



The Child Policy and Information Centre (CPIC)

The CPIC is Nigeria's central evidence-to-policy hub for child protection, linking fragmented data systems with frontline service delivery and high-level decision-making. Beyond data integration, CPIC will provide policy intelligence and advisory support through quarterly briefs, rapid-response analytics, and evidence-based budgeting guidance. CPIC will strengthen accountability and accelerate reform momentum across states.

This is a joint collaboration between UNICEF and Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, Nigeria.

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