

Improving Access to Community-Based Social Support Services for Vulnerable Women and Children in Imo State, Nigeria: A Review of Current Evidence and Policy Implications

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
Article history: Published: August 2026 Keywords: Community Development Social Welfare Women Children Vulnerable Populations Social Work Nigeria Community-Based Services	Community-based social support services play an important role in improving the lives of vulnerable women and children, especially in developing countries where poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, child neglect, and social exclusion remain common. In Nigeria, many women and children continue to face serious challenges in accessing essential social welfare services despite government policies and the presence of non-governmental organizations and community-based groups. This review examines the existing literature on access to community-based social support services for vulnerable women and children, with attention to Imo State, Nigeria. The paper discusses the major barriers that prevent people from benefiting from available services, including inadequate funding, shortage of trained social workers, poor public awareness, transportation difficulties, cultural beliefs, social stigma, and weak collaboration among service providers. It also reviews the role of professional social workers, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, and local communities in promoting social welfare and protecting vulnerable populations. Evidence from previous studies shows that strengthening community participation, increasing investment in social welfare programmes, expanding outreach services, improving professional social work practice, and encouraging stronger partnerships among stakeholders can significantly improve access to social support services. The review concludes that sustainable improvements require coordinated efforts from government institutions, communities, civil society organizations, and development partners. It recommends increased funding for social welfare programmes, continuous capacity building for social workers, improved policy implementation, public awareness campaigns, and evidence-based interventions that respond to the changing needs of vulnerable women and children in Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Women and children are among the most vulnerable groups in many developing countries due to poverty, gender inequality, violence, poor access to healthcare, limited educational opportunities, and weak social protection systems. In Nigeria, these challenges continue to affect the well-being of millions of individuals and families, especially those living in economically disadvantaged communities. Vulnerable women and children often require social support services that address not only immediate needs but also the underlying social and economic factors contributing to their difficulties (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2023).

Community-based social support services provide an important approach for improving the welfare of vulnerable populations. These services are designed to provide assistance within local contexts through counselling, child protection programmes, healthcare referrals, livelihood support, psychosocial care, educational assistance, and family strengthening initiatives. By bringing services closer to individuals and families, community-based approaches improve accessibility, encourage participation, and promote sustainable solutions to social problems (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024).

Nigeria has developed several policies and programmes aimed at protecting vulnerable populations, including the Child Rights Act, National Social Protection Policy, and gender protection frameworks. However, many women and children continue to experience difficulties accessing available services because of poverty, limited awareness, inadequate funding, shortage of professional social workers, transportation challenges, and weak coordination among service providers (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022).

For instance, Imo State, located in southeastern Nigeria, faces many of these challenges. Although the state has active government institutions, non-governmental organizations, faith-based groups, and community associations involved in social welfare activities, access to support services remains uneven. Rural communities and low-income households are often more affected due to limited resources, inadequate outreach programmes, and social barriers that discourage individuals from seeking assistance.

Also, professional social workers play a critical role in improving access to community-based support services. They provide counselling, advocate for vulnerable groups, coordinate referrals, support child protection efforts, promote community participation, and connect individuals with available resources (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2024). However, limited recognition of social work practice, insufficient workforce capacity, and inadequate funding continue to affect effective service delivery in many Nigerian communities.

Previous studies have identified that improving access to social support services requires stronger collaboration between government agencies, social workers, civil society organizations, community leaders, and development partners. Community participation, public awareness, improved funding, and evidence-based interventions are essential for developing sustainable social welfare systems that respond effectively to the needs of vulnerable populations (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2024). This review examines the factors affecting access to community-based social support services for vulnerable women and children in Imo State, Nigeria. It discusses the nature of vulnerability, existing social support systems, barriers to service utilization, the role of social workers, and strategies for improving social welfare delivery. Strengthening community-based support systems is essential for promoting social inclusion, protecting human rights, and improving the quality of life of vulnerable individuals and families.

2. Concept of Community-Based Social Support Services

Community-based social support services refer to programmes and interventions designed to improve the welfare of individuals, families, and vulnerable groups within their local communities. These services aim to provide assistance in environments where people live, rather than relying only on institutional facilities. The approach focuses on improving accessibility, strengthening family relationships, promoting community participation, and addressing social problems at an early stage (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). However, community-based social support includes a wide range of services such as counselling, child protection, healthcare referrals, psychosocial support, educational assistance, livelihood programmes, legal support, and empowerment initiatives. These services are very important for vulnerable women and children who may face barriers accessing formal institutions because of poverty, stigma, disability, social exclusion, or geographical location (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2023).

The main principle behind community-based social support is that individuals and families should receive assistance while maintaining their connection with their communities. This approach recognizes that families, neighbours, traditional institutions, faith-based organizations, and local associations can contribute significantly to protecting vulnerable populations and promoting social well-being.

In social work practice, community-based services are guided by principles of social justice, human rights, empowerment, and inclusion. Social workers collaborate with community members and other service providers to identify needs, coordinate interventions, and support individuals in overcoming social and economic challenges (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2024). For vulnerable women, community-based services may include support for survivors of gender-based violence, economic empowerment programmes, reproductive health education, counselling, and legal assistance. For children, these services focus on child protection, education support, nutrition, healthcare access, and prevention of abuse, neglect, and exploitation (UNICEF, 2023). In Nigeria, community-based social support services are delivered through government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based organizations, community development groups, and traditional institutions. These stakeholders complement each other by providing assistance to individuals and families who may not be reached through conventional social welfare systems. However, despite their importance, community-based services in Nigeria face several challenges, including inadequate funding, shortage of trained social workers, poor coordination among organizations, limited public awareness, and unequal access between urban and rural communities. Addressing these challenges is necessary to ensure that vulnerable women and children benefit from available social support programmes.

Furthermore, community-based social support services provide an effective approach for reducing vulnerability and promoting inclusive development. Strengthening these services in Imo State and other parts of Nigeria requires greater investment, stronger partnerships, improved professional social work practice, and increased community participation.

3. Understanding Vulnerability Among Women and Children

Vulnerability refers to the condition in which individuals or groups face increased risks of harm, poverty, discrimination, exploitation, or inability to access essential services. In social work and community development, vulnerability is understood as a result of the interaction between personal circumstances and wider social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors. Women and children are considered vulnerable populations because they are often affected by unequal access to resources, limited decision-making power, and dependence on family and community support systems (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2024).

In Nigeria, vulnerability among women and children is linked to poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, family instability, violence, limited healthcare access, and inadequate social protection systems. The Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index reported that a large proportion of Nigerians experience multiple forms of deprivation, including poor living conditions, limited education, and inadequate healthcare access (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). These challenges place additional pressure on women and children, particularly those living in low-income households.

Poverty is one of the major causes of vulnerability among women and children. Families experiencing economic hardship may struggle to provide adequate nutrition, education, healthcare, and safe living environments. Women, especially those who are widowed, single parents, or unemployed, may face greater difficulties because of limited income opportunities and unequal access to productive resources (UN Women, 2024). Children from poor households are also more likely to experience school dropout, child labour, malnutrition, and inadequate healthcare.

Also, gender-based violence is another important factor affecting women's vulnerability. Domestic violence, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and economic control can negatively affect women's physical and psychological well-being. Many survivors do not seek help because of fear of stigma, cultural expectations, financial dependence, or lack of awareness about available support services (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024).

Children face vulnerability through abuse, neglect, exploitation, trafficking, child labour, and inadequate parental care. Factors such as poverty, family breakdown, parental illness, and community insecurity may increase children's exposure to risks. Effective child protection requires community-based interventions that identify vulnerable children early and provide appropriate support while strengthening families and caregivers (UNICEF, 2023).

Family instability also contributes significantly to vulnerability. Families affected by unemployment, conflict, separation, or domestic violence may have reduced capacity to provide emotional, financial, and social support. Women and children in such households often require counselling, protection services, and economic assistance to improve their living conditions.

Social exclusion and stigma further increase vulnerability by preventing individuals from seeking available support. Some women and children experiencing violence, disability, mental health challenges, or extreme poverty may avoid social services because they fear discrimination or community judgment. This highlights the importance of awareness campaigns and inclusive social welfare systems. For instance, in Imo State, disadvantaged women and children are affected by many of these challenges. Rising living costs, unemployment, limited social welfare resources, and unequal access to services have increased the demand for community-based support programmes. Rural communities may experience additional difficulties due to transportation barriers, limited professional social workers, and reduced awareness of available interventions.

Therefore, understanding vulnerability is important because it helps policymakers, social workers, and community organizations design interventions that address both immediate needs and underlying causes. Effective community-based social support should therefore focus not only on providing assistance but also on empowerment, prevention, protection, and strengthening the ability of individuals and families to overcome challenges.

4. Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides a foundation for understanding the factors that influence vulnerability and access to social support services. It helps explain how individuals, families, communities, and institutions interact to shape social outcomes. This review is guided by three major theories relevant to community-based social support services: Ecological Systems Theory, Systems Theory, and the Strengths Perspective.

4.1 Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), explains that human development is influenced by different levels of the environment in which individuals live. The theory suggests that people cannot be understood separately from their families, communities, culture, and broader social structures.

The theory identifies different environmental levels, including the family environment, schools, communities, government institutions, cultural values, and economic systems. These factors interact to influence people's opportunities, challenges, and overall well-being. This theory is relevant to vulnerable women and children because social problems are often caused by multiple factors rather than individual circumstances alone. For example, a child experiencing neglect may also be affected by poverty, parental unemployment, family conflict, and limited access to social services. Similarly, a woman experiencing domestic violence may face additional challenges such as economic dependence, social stigma, and inadequate support systems.

Ecological Systems Theory supports community-based interventions because it emphasizes addressing problems at different levels. Social workers can support individuals through counselling while also working with families, communities, and institutions to create safer and more supportive environments.

4.2 Systems Theory

Systems Theory views society as a network of connected parts where changes in one area can affect other areas. In social work practice, the theory emphasizes that individuals are influenced by their relationships with families, organizations, communities, and social institutions (Payne, 2021).

This theory is important for understanding community-based social support because effective service delivery requires cooperation among different stakeholders. Government agencies, social workers, healthcare providers, schools, NGOs, religious organizations, and community leaders must work together to provide comprehensive support.

For example, a child experiencing abuse may require medical care, psychological support, legal protection, and educational assistance. If these services operate separately without proper coordination, the child's needs may not be fully addressed. Systems Theory therefore highlights the importance of referral networks, collaboration, and integrated service delivery.

4.3 Strengths Perspective

The Strengths Perspective focuses on the abilities, resources, and potential of individuals, families, and communities rather than concentrating only on their problems. The theory argues that vulnerable populations possess strengths that can be developed to improve their circumstances (Saleebey, 2013).

In community-based social work, this approach encourages empowerment and participation. Instead of viewing vulnerable women and children as helpless recipients of assistance, social workers help them identify personal skills, family support systems, and community resources that can contribute to positive change.

For women, a strengths-based approach may involve supporting entrepreneurship, vocational training, education, and leadership opportunities. For children, it may involve strengthening family relationships, supporting education, and creating safe environments for development.

4.4 Application of the Theories to Community-Based Social Support in Imo State

The three theories provide a useful framework for understanding and improving access to social support services in Imo State. Ecological Systems Theory highlights the importance of addressing social problems within the wider environment. Systems Theory emphasizes cooperation among different service providers, while the Strengths Perspective promotes empowerment and community participation.

Together, these theories demonstrate that improving the welfare of vulnerable women and children requires more than providing short-term assistance. Sustainable solutions require strong families, supportive communities, effective institutions, professional social work practice, and policies that promote inclusion and social justice.

5. Community-Based Social Support Services in Nigeria

Community-based social support services have become an important component of social welfare delivery in Nigeria. These services aim to provide assistance to individuals and families within their local communities by addressing social, economic, psychological, and health-related challenges. They are very important for vulnerable women and children who may face difficulties accessing formal institutions because of poverty, distance, stigma, or lack of information (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2023). In Nigeria, social support services are provided through a combination of government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based organizations, community-based organizations (CBOs), and traditional institutions. These stakeholders provide different forms of assistance, including child protection, counselling, healthcare referrals, educational support, livelihood programmes, and empowerment initiatives.

5.1 Government-Based Social Support Programmes

The Nigerian government provides social welfare services through ministries and agencies responsible for women affairs, humanitarian services, health, education, and social development. These institutions develop policies and programmes aimed at reducing poverty, protecting children, supporting women, and improving access to essential services.

Important government initiatives include social protection programmes, poverty reduction interventions, child protection frameworks, and gender-based violence response mechanisms. The Child Rights Act and Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act provide legal protection for children and survivors of violence, although implementation varies across states (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2023).

At the state and local government levels, social welfare departments are responsible for identifying vulnerable individuals, providing counselling, supporting families, and coordinating referrals to relevant services. However, limited funding, inadequate staffing, and weak infrastructure continue to affect effective service delivery.

5.2 Role of Non-Governmental Organizations

Non-governmental organizations play a significant role in supporting vulnerable populations in Nigeria. Many NGOs provide services that complement government efforts, especially in communities where public resources are limited.

Their activities include child protection programmes, women's empowerment, healthcare support, education assistance, livelihood training, emergency relief, and advocacy. Organizations working in partnership with communities often have better access to vulnerable households because they understand local needs and social conditions.

International organizations such as UNICEF and other development partners have supported programmes focused on child welfare, gender equality, social protection, and community resilience (UNICEF, 2023). Local NGOs also contribute by providing direct assistance and promoting awareness about available support services.

5.3 Faith-Based and Community Organizations

Faith-based organizations and community groups remain important providers of informal social support in Nigeria. Churches, mosques, women's associations, youth groups, and traditional institutions often provide assistance to families experiencing hardship. These organizations contribute through food support, scholarships, healthcare assistance, counselling, community mobilization, and emergency support. Their close relationship with community members allows them to identify vulnerable individuals who may not seek help from formal institutions.

Traditional leaders also influence community attitudes toward issues such as child protection, domestic violence, education, and women's participation in development activities. Their involvement can improve acceptance and sustainability of social welfare interventions.

5.4 Types of Community-Based Support Services

Community-based social support services for vulnerable women and children include:

- Child protection services: These focus on preventing child abuse, neglect, exploitation, trafficking, and harmful practices while ensuring children's safety and development.
- Counselling and psychosocial support: These services help individuals cope with trauma, family conflict, violence, and emotional challenges.
- Women empowerment programmes: These include vocational training, entrepreneurship support, financial literacy, and skills development to improve women's independence.
- Educational support: Programmes may provide school materials, scholarships, learning support, and interventions to reduce school dropout.
- Healthcare support: Community outreach programmes assist vulnerable families with healthcare information, referrals, maternal care, nutrition support, and access to primary healthcare services.
- Livelihood assistance: These interventions provide opportunities for income generation through skills training, small business support, and agricultural activities.

5.5 Community-Based Social Support in Imo State

In Imo State, social welfare services are provided through government agencies, NGOs, religious organizations, and community development groups. These services support vulnerable women and children through counselling, child protection activities, skills acquisition programmes, educational support, and humanitarian assistance.

Community associations and faith-based organizations play an important role because they often have strong connections with local households. They provide immediate assistance during emergencies and support families facing economic hardship.

However, access to these services remains unequal. Rural communities often experience greater challenges because of limited awareness, transportation difficulties, inadequate professional personnel, and insufficient programme coverage. Strengthening community outreach and improving collaboration among service providers are therefore important for increasing access.

5.6 Challenges Facing Community-Based Services in Nigeria

Despite their contributions, community-based social support services face several challenges. These include inadequate funding, limited coordination among stakeholders, shortage of trained social workers, weak monitoring systems, and inconsistent policy implementation.

Many programmes depend heavily on external funding, making their sustainability uncertain. In addition, some communities lack awareness of available services or may avoid seeking support because of cultural beliefs and stigma.

Hence, addressing these challenges requires stronger government commitment, increased investment in social welfare systems, improved professional social work capacity, and greater community participation.

Furthermore, community-based social support services provide an important pathway for improving the welfare of vulnerable women and children in Nigeria. Government agencies, NGOs, faith-based organizations, and community groups all contribute to supporting disadvantaged populations. However, improving access requires addressing existing gaps in funding, coordination, awareness, and professional capacity. Strengthening these systems will promote more inclusive and sustainable social development, especially in states such as Imo where many vulnerable households require additional support.

6. Barriers to Accessing Community-Based Social Support Services

Although community-based social support services are essential for improving the lives of vulnerable women and children, many individuals in Nigeria continue to experience difficulties accessing available programmes. The existence of social welfare services does not always guarantee that vulnerable populations can benefit from them. Access depends on factors such as affordability, awareness, availability of trained professionals, cultural acceptance, and the effectiveness of service delivery systems.

6.1 Poverty and Financial Limitations

Poverty is one of the major barriers affecting access to social support services in Nigeria. Many vulnerable families struggle to afford basic needs such as food, healthcare, education, and transportation. As a result, accessing social welfare programmes may become difficult, especially when individuals must travel long distances or lose income to attend appointments (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Women in low-income households are mostly affected because many depend on unstable informal employment. Financial dependence may also prevent some women from leaving abusive situations or seeking professional assistance. Children from poor families may experience reduced access to education, healthcare, and protection services.

6.2 Limited Awareness of Available Services

Many vulnerable individuals are unable to access support because they are not aware that such services exist. Information about government programmes, NGO interventions, counselling services, and protection mechanisms often does not reach rural communities or disadvantaged households.

Low awareness may result from limited public education, poor communication systems, and inadequate community outreach. Without proper information, individuals may not know where to seek assistance or how to access available programmes.

Improving awareness through community meetings, media campaigns, schools, religious institutions, and local leaders can encourage more people to utilize social support services.

6.3 Inadequate Funding and Resources

Insufficient funding remains a major challenge affecting social welfare delivery in Nigeria. Many social welfare agencies and community organizations operate with limited resources, reducing their ability to provide regular outreach services, employ sufficient staff, and support vulnerable families effectively.

Financial limitations also affect monitoring, transportation, training, and programme expansion. Some NGO programmes depend heavily on donor funding, which may affect their sustainability when external support reduces.

Increased government investment and stronger partnerships with development organizations are necessary to create sustainable social support systems.

6.4 Shortage of Professional Social Workers

Social workers are central to effective community-based support services; however, Nigeria faces a shortage of trained professionals, especially at the community level. Limited numbers of social workers mean that many vulnerable individuals do not receive adequate assessment, counselling, follow-up, or case management support (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2024).

In rural areas, the shortage is more serious due to limited employment opportunities, poor working conditions, and inadequate professional support. Strengthening social work education, recruitment, and continuous training is important for improving service delivery.

6.5 Cultural Beliefs and Social Stigma

Cultural attitudes and stigma can prevent vulnerable individuals from seeking help. In some communities, issues such as domestic violence, child abuse, poverty, and mental health challenges are considered private family matters.

Women experiencing violence may avoid reporting abuse because of fear of shame, family rejection, or economic consequences. Similarly, children and families affected by disability, illness, or social difficulties may experience discrimination.

Community education and involvement of traditional and religious leaders are important strategies for reducing stigma and encouraging acceptance of social support services.

6.6 Poor Coordination Among Service Providers

Community-based social support involves multiple organizations, including government agencies, NGOs, healthcare providers, schools, and community groups. However, poor coordination among these stakeholders can reduce the effectiveness of interventions. Weak referral systems may result in delays, duplication of services, and gaps in support. For example, a survivor of domestic violence may require healthcare, counselling, legal assistance, and financial support, but without proper coordination, these services may not be provided together.

Improving collaboration and establishing clear referral networks can strengthen service delivery.

6.7 Transportation and Geographic Barriers

Geographical location affects access to social support services, especially in rural communities. Many villages experience poor road networks, limited transportation options, and long distances from government offices or service centres.

Transportation costs may discourage poor households from seeking assistance. Women caring for children, elderly relatives, or persons with disabilities may face additional difficulties travelling to access services.

Expanding mobile outreach programmes and bringing services closer to communities can help reduce these barriers.

6.8 Weak Policy Implementation

Nigeria has developed several policies and laws aimed at protecting vulnerable groups, but implementation remains inconsistent. Challenges such as inadequate funding, limited monitoring, political changes, and weak institutional capacity often reduce the effectiveness of these policies (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2023).

Strong implementation requires commitment from government institutions, adequate resources, accountability mechanisms, and cooperation among stakeholders.

6.9 Digital and Information Barriers

Technology is increasingly used to improve social service delivery through online registration, digital information platforms, and electronic referral systems. However, many vulnerable populations lack access to smartphones, internet services, electricity, or digital skills.

Women in rural communities and low-income households are particularly affected by digital exclusion. Therefore, digital solutions should complement rather than replace traditional community-based approaches.

6.10 Implications for Imo State

In Imo State, these barriers affect the ability of vulnerable women and children to benefit from available social support services. Although government agencies, NGOs, and community organizations provide assistance, many households continue to face challenges related to poverty, limited awareness, transportation difficulties, and insufficient professional support.

Improving access requires strategies that consider local realities, including stronger community outreach, increased funding, improved coordination among organizations, and greater involvement of trained social workers.

Furthermore, access to community-based social support services is affected by multiple interconnected barriers. Poverty, inadequate funding, limited awareness, shortage of social workers, stigma, weak coordination, and geographic challenges continue to restrict service utilization among vulnerable women and children. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts involving government institutions, social workers, NGOs, community leaders, and local residents.

7. Role of Professional Social Workers in Improving Access to Community-Based Social Support Services

Professional social workers play a central role in improving access to social support services for vulnerable women and children. They serve as a link between individuals, families, communities, government agencies, and other service providers. Through their professional knowledge and ethical practice, social workers help identify social problems, provide support, advocate for vulnerable groups, and connect individuals with available resources (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2024).

In Nigeria, where many vulnerable populations face poverty, violence, social exclusion, and limited access to formal support systems, social workers contribute significantly to strengthening community-based interventions. Their role extends beyond providing direct assistance to addressing the wider social conditions that contribute to vulnerability.

7.1 Identification and Assessment of Vulnerable Individuals

One of the major responsibilities of social workers is identifying individuals and families who require support. Through community visits, interviews, and assessments, social workers evaluate social, economic, emotional, and environmental factors affecting people's well-being.

Early identification allows timely intervention before problems become more severe. For example, social workers can identify children at risk of abuse, neglect, or school dropout and connect them with appropriate protection and educational services.

In rural communities, where some vulnerable individuals may not actively seek help due to stigma or lack of awareness, social workers provide outreach services to locate and support those in need.

7.2 Counselling and Psychosocial Support

Many vulnerable women and children experience emotional distress due to poverty, domestic violence, abuse, family separation, or social exclusion. Social workers provide counselling and psychosocial support to help individuals cope with difficult experiences and improve their emotional well-being.

For women affected by domestic violence, social workers provide emotional support, safety planning, referrals, and information about available legal and protection services. For children, they provide trauma support, guidance, and interventions that promote healthy development. Psychosocial support is of utmost importance in communities where access to professional mental health services remains limited.

7.3 Case Management and Referral Services

Case management is a major function of social workers. It involves assessing needs, developing support plans, connecting individuals with appropriate services, and monitoring progress.

Many vulnerable individuals require assistance from different sectors. For example, a child experiencing abuse may need healthcare, legal protection, counselling, and educational support. Social workers coordinate these services to ensure that individuals receive comprehensive assistance.

Effective case management reduces service gaps and improves cooperation among healthcare providers, schools, government agencies, NGOs, and community organizations.

7.4 Advocacy and Protection of Rights

Social workers advocate for the rights and dignity of vulnerable populations. They work to ensure that women and children have access to protection, healthcare, education, justice, and social services.

Advocacy may involve educating communities about human rights, supporting survivors of violence, influencing policies, and promoting stronger protection systems. Social workers also help vulnerable individuals understand their rights and access available legal and social resources.

In Nigeria, advocacy is very important because cultural practices, poverty, and social inequality can prevent vulnerable groups from fully exercising their rights.

7.5 Community Mobilization and Awareness Creation

Social workers promote community participation by engaging local leaders, families, youth groups, women's associations, and community organizations. They organize awareness programmes on issues such as child protection, gender-based violence, healthcare access, and available social services.

Community mobilization helps reduce stigma and encourages communities to participate in solving social problems. In Imo State, collaboration with traditional and religious leaders can improve acceptance of social welfare programmes and increase service utilization.

7.6 Empowerment of Women and Families

Modern social work emphasizes empowerment rather than dependency. Social workers support vulnerable women and families by helping them develop skills, access livelihood opportunities, and strengthen their ability to manage challenges.

Women empowerment programmes may include vocational training, entrepreneurship support, financial literacy, and access to community resources. These interventions improve economic independence and reduce vulnerability.

For families, social workers provide parenting education, conflict resolution, and guidance that strengthens family relationships and improves child welfare.

7.7 Child Protection Services

Child protection remains one of the most important areas of social work practice. Social workers help prevent child abuse, neglect, exploitation, and trafficking by identifying risks and supporting affected children.

They work with families, schools, healthcare providers, and child protection agencies to ensure that children's rights are respected. Where necessary, social workers facilitate alternative care arrangements while prioritizing the safety and best interests of the child.

7.8 Collaboration with Other Stakeholders

Social workers cannot address social problems alone. Effective community-based support requires collaboration with government agencies, healthcare workers, educators, legal professionals, NGOs, and community leaders.

Through multidisciplinary teamwork, social workers help create coordinated responses to complex issues such as domestic violence, child abuse, disability, and poverty.

Strong collaboration also improves referral systems and ensures that vulnerable individuals receive continuous support.

7.9 Challenges Affecting Social Work Practice in Nigeria

Despite their importance, social workers in Nigeria face several challenges. These include inadequate staffing, limited funding, poor working conditions, insufficient recognition of the profession, and limited opportunities for specialized training.

In some communities, the role of professional social workers is not fully understood, reducing demand for their services. Strengthening social work education, professional regulation, and public awareness is necessary to improve the effectiveness of community-based interventions.

In summary, professional social workers are essential in improving access to community-based social support services for vulnerable women and children. Their roles in assessment, counselling, case management, advocacy, empowerment, and community mobilization contribute significantly to improving social welfare outcomes.

Strengthening social work practice in Imo State requires increased investment in professional training, improved working conditions, greater recognition of social work as a profession, and stronger collaboration between social workers and other stakeholders.

8. Government Policies and Legal Framework Supporting Vulnerable Women and Children in Nigeria

Government policies and legal frameworks provide the foundation for protecting vulnerable women and children and ensuring their access to social support services. In Nigeria, several laws and policies have been developed to address issues such as child protection, gender-based violence, poverty reduction, social inclusion, and access to essential services. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks depends largely on proper implementation, funding, and coordination among relevant institutions.

8.1 Child Rights Act (2003)

The Child Rights Act (CRA) is one of Nigeria's most important legal instruments for protecting children. The Act recognizes children's rights to survival, development, protection, education, healthcare, and freedom from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and harmful practices. The law provides a framework for preventing child labour, child trafficking, early marriage, and other forms of exploitation. It also emphasizes the responsibility of families, communities, and government institutions in ensuring the welfare and protection of children.

Although the Child Rights Act provides strong legal protection, its implementation remains uneven across Nigeria because adoption and enforcement depend on individual state governments. Some states have made progress in domestication and implementation, while others continue to face challenges related to resources, awareness, and institutional capacity (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2023).

8.2 Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP Act)

The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act of 2015 provides legal protection against various forms of violence, including domestic violence, sexual abuse, harmful traditional practices, and psychological abuse. The Act represents an important step toward protecting women and children from gender-based violence.

The law also provides mechanisms for supporting survivors through legal protection, compensation, and access to assistance. However, many victims still face barriers when reporting violence, including stigma, cultural pressure, fear of retaliation, and limited awareness of their legal rights.

Effective implementation of the VAPP Act requires stronger community awareness, improved access to legal services, and better coordination between social workers, law enforcement agencies, healthcare providers, and community organizations.

8.3 National Social Protection Policy

Nigeria's National Social Protection Policy provides a framework for reducing poverty and improving the welfare of vulnerable populations. The policy focuses on social assistance, access to healthcare, education support, livelihood opportunities, and protection of disadvantaged groups.

Social protection programmes are particularly important for vulnerable women and children because they help reduce the effects of poverty and improve household resilience. Initiatives such as cash transfers, skills development, and livelihood support programmes aim to assist poor and vulnerable households (Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Reduction, 2024).

However, challenges such as limited funding, weak targeting mechanisms, inadequate monitoring, and low coverage continue to affect the impact of social protection programmes in Nigeria.

8.4 National Gender Policy

The National Gender Policy promotes gender equality and aims to address discrimination against women and girls. It focuses on improving women's access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, political participation, and protection from violence.

The policy recognizes that gender inequality contributes significantly to women's vulnerability. By promoting women's empowerment and equal participation, the policy supports efforts to improve the social and economic position of women within families and communities (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2023).

However, cultural norms, economic barriers, and limited enforcement continue to affect progress toward gender equality in many Nigerian communities.

8.5 National Policy on Child Protection

Nigeria has developed child protection policies aimed at preventing abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children. These policies promote collaboration among government agencies, social workers, communities, schools, and civil society organizations. Child protection systems rely on early identification of vulnerable children, referral mechanisms, family support, and community awareness. Strengthening these systems is essential for preventing harm and ensuring that children receive appropriate support when challenges occur.

8.6 Role of State and Local Governments

State and local governments play an important role in implementing social welfare policies. They are responsible for establishing social welfare departments, supporting community programmes, coordinating local interventions, and ensuring that national policies reach vulnerable populations.

In Imo State, government agencies responsible for women affairs, social welfare, and community development provide services such as counselling, child protection, skills training, and support programmes for vulnerable households.

However, local-level implementation is often affected by limited financial resources, inadequate staffing, weak infrastructure, and insufficient monitoring systems.

8.7 Implementation Challenges

Despite the existence of several policies and laws, significant gaps remain between policy development and practical implementation. Common challenges include: inadequate funding for social welfare programmes; shortage of professional social workers; poor coordination among government agencies; limited public awareness of existing laws and services; weak monitoring and accountability systems; and cultural practices that conflict with protection principles. These challenges reduce the ability of policies to effectively improve the lives of vulnerable women and children.

8.8 Importance of Stronger Policy Implementation in Imo State

Improving social welfare outcomes in Imo State requires stronger implementation of existing policies rather than the creation of new policies alone. Government institutions, social workers, NGOs, traditional leaders, and community organizations must work together to translate legal protections into practical services.

Greater investment in social welfare departments, improved training for social workers, public awareness campaigns, and stronger community participation can improve access to services and ensure that vulnerable women and children receive adequate protection and support. Summarily, Nigeria has developed important legal and policy frameworks to protect vulnerable women and children. The Child Rights Act, Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, National Social Protection Policy, and National Gender Policy provide a foundation for improving social welfare and promoting human rights.

However, effective implementation remains the major challenge. Strengthening funding, institutional capacity, public awareness, and collaboration among stakeholders is necessary to ensure that these policies produce meaningful improvements in the lives of vulnerable populations, including those in Imo State.

9. Strategies for Improving Access to Community-Based Social Support Services

Improving access to community-based social support services requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the social, economic, institutional, and cultural barriers affecting vulnerable women and children. While Nigeria has existing policies and programmes, stronger strategies are needed to ensure that services reach those who need them most, particularly individuals living in rural and disadvantaged communities.

9.1 Increasing Government Investment in Social Welfare Services

Adequate funding is essential for effective social support service delivery. Government investment should focus on strengthening social welfare departments, improving infrastructure, supporting community outreach programmes, and increasing the availability of professional social workers.

Sustainable funding will enable social welfare agencies to provide regular services, conduct community assessments, maintain referral systems, and support vulnerable families through targeted interventions. Greater budget allocation to social protection programmes can also reduce dependence on short-term donor-funded projects.

9.2 Expanding Community Awareness Programmes

Many vulnerable individuals fail to access available services because they lack information about where and how to obtain support. Public awareness campaigns should therefore become a major component of social welfare programmes.

Awareness activities can be conducted through community meetings, radio programmes, schools, religious institutions, social media platforms, and collaboration with traditional leaders. These campaigns should educate communities about child protection, gender-based violence, available welfare services, and the rights of vulnerable populations.

In Imo State, engaging community leaders and local organizations can improve trust and encourage more individuals to seek assistance.

9.3 Strengthening Professional Social Work Practice

Improving the capacity of social workers is critical for effective community-based interventions. This requires investment in social work education, professional training, recruitment, and continuous development.

Social workers should receive training in areas such as child protection, trauma counselling, gender-based violence response, mental health support, case management, and community development. Increasing the number of trained social workers, especially in rural areas, will improve access to professional assistance.

Recognition and improved working conditions for social workers are also necessary to strengthen the profession in Nigeria.

9.4 Improving Coordination Among Stakeholders

Effective social support requires collaboration among government agencies, NGOs, healthcare providers, schools, law enforcement agencies, religious organizations, and community groups.

Establishing stronger referral systems and regular coordination meetings can reduce duplication of services and ensure that vulnerable individuals receive comprehensive support. A coordinated approach also improves information sharing, accountability, and programme monitoring.

In Imo State, stronger partnerships among government institutions, community organizations, and development partners can improve the coverage and effectiveness of social welfare programmes.

9.5 Promoting Community Participation

Community participation is essential for sustainable social development. Local communities should be actively involved in identifying challenges, designing interventions, and monitoring programmes.

Community members often understand local problems better than external organizations and can provide valuable knowledge about cultural practices, vulnerable households, and available resources. Participation also increases ownership and acceptance of social support programmes. Women's groups, youth associations, traditional leaders, and faith-based organizations should be included in planning and implementing community interventions.

9.6 Strengthening Support for Women's Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is an important strategy for reducing women's vulnerability. Many women remain dependent on others because of limited access to employment, skills training, financial resources, and business opportunities.

Social support programmes should include vocational training, entrepreneurship development, access to credit, agricultural support, and financial literacy programmes. Improving women's economic independence can reduce exposure to poverty, domestic violence, and social exclusion.

9.7 Improving Child Protection Systems

Strengthening child protection requires early identification of vulnerable children, effective reporting mechanisms, family support services, and community monitoring systems.

Schools, healthcare facilities, social workers, and community leaders should collaborate to identify children at risk of abuse, neglect, trafficking, or school dropout. Families should also receive parenting education and support to create safer environments for children.

9.8 Using Technology to Improve Service Delivery

Technology can support better access to social welfare services through digital information platforms, electronic referral systems, mobile applications, and online awareness campaigns.

However, digital solutions should be designed with vulnerable populations in mind. Many rural households may have limited access to internet services and digital devices, so technology should complement traditional community-based approaches rather than replace them.

9.9 Addressing Social Stigma and Cultural Barriers

Reducing stigma is important for improving service utilization. Community education should challenge harmful beliefs that discourage women and children from seeking support.

Religious leaders, traditional rulers, teachers, and community influencers can play important roles in promoting positive attitudes toward counselling, child protection services, and support for survivors of violence.

Creating safe and confidential services will also encourage more vulnerable individuals to seek assistance.

9.10 Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation

Effective monitoring and evaluation systems are necessary to determine whether social support programmes are achieving their goals. Data collection should focus on service coverage, beneficiary needs, programme outcomes, and areas requiring improvement. Evidence-based monitoring allows government agencies and organizations to make better decisions and allocate resources more effectively. Therefore, improving access to community-based social support services requires coordinated action from government institutions, social workers, NGOs, communities, and development partners. Major priorities include increased funding, improved awareness, stronger social work practice, better stakeholder collaboration, community participation, women's empowerment, child protection, and effective monitoring systems.

For Imo State, adopting these strategies can strengthen existing social welfare systems and improve the quality of life of vulnerable women, children, and families.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

10.1 Conclusion

Community-based social support services play an important role in improving the welfare of vulnerable women and children in Imo State, Nigeria. These services provide essential support through counselling, child protection, healthcare referrals, empowerment programmes, and family strengthening initiatives. By operating within local communities, they have the potential to reach individuals who may experience difficulties accessing formal social welfare institutions.

However, many vulnerable populations continue to face barriers that limit their ability to benefit from available services. Poverty, inadequate funding, limited public awareness, shortage of professional social workers, transportation difficulties, cultural stigma, weak coordination among service providers, and inconsistent policy implementation remain major challenges affecting access to social support programmes.

Professional social workers are critical in addressing these challenges. Their roles in assessment, counselling, advocacy, case management, community mobilization, and policy implementation contribute significantly to improving the effectiveness of social welfare interventions. Strengthening professional social work practice is therefore necessary for developing responsive and sustainable support systems.

Although Nigeria has established important policies and legal frameworks to protect women and children, including the Child Rights Act, Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, and social protection policies, effective implementation remains a major concern. Improving outcomes requires stronger collaboration among government agencies, non-governmental organizations, community leaders, social workers, and beneficiaries.

In Imo State, improving access to community-based social support services requires a community-focused approach that recognizes local challenges and promotes participation. Investment in social welfare systems, increased awareness, professional capacity development, and stronger coordination among stakeholders will contribute to better protection and improved quality of life for vulnerable women, children, and families.

10.2 Recommendations

Based on the issues identified in this review, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Increase Government Funding for Social Welfare Services:** The government should increase financial support for social welfare programmes at state and local government levels. Adequate funding will improve service availability, expand community outreach, support professional staffing, and strengthen monitoring systems.
- **Strengthen Professional Social Work Practice:** Government and relevant institutions should invest in social work education, professional training, recruitment, and continuous development. Increasing the number of qualified social workers will improve access to counselling, case management, and protection services.
- **Expand Community Awareness Campaigns:** Public education programmes should be strengthened to ensure that vulnerable individuals understand available social support services and their rights. Awareness activities should involve community leaders, schools, religious institutions, and local organizations.

- **Improve Collaboration Among Stakeholders:** Government agencies, NGOs, healthcare providers, schools, and community organizations should develop stronger partnerships and referral systems. Coordinated service delivery will reduce gaps and ensure that vulnerable individuals receive comprehensive support.
- **Promote Women's Economic Empowerment:** Social support programmes should include skills training, entrepreneurship opportunities, access to financial resources, and livelihood assistance. Economic empowerment will reduce women's dependence and improve household stability.
- **Strengthen Child Protection Mechanisms:** Child protection systems should be improved through better reporting channels, community monitoring, family support programmes, and stronger enforcement of child protection laws. Early intervention can prevent abuse, neglect, and exploitation.
- **Reduce Social Stigma Through Community Engagement:** Community education should address harmful beliefs that prevent vulnerable women and children from seeking assistance. Traditional and religious leaders should be actively involved in promoting acceptance and support.
- **Improve Data Collection and Programme Evaluation:** Government agencies and organizations should strengthen data collection systems to identify vulnerable populations, monitor programme effectiveness, and guide evidence-based decision-making.
- **Promote Inclusive and Accessible Services:** Social support programmes should consider the needs of rural populations, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. Mobile outreach services and community-based delivery approaches can improve accessibility.
- **Encourage Research on Social Welfare Needs in Imo State:** Further research should examine specific challenges affecting vulnerable populations in different communities within Imo State. Evidence from local studies can support better policies and more effective interventions.

Furthermore, improving access to community-based social support services for vulnerable women and children requires a shift from short-term assistance toward sustainable, community-driven solutions. Strengthening professional social work practice, improving government commitment, increasing community participation, and promoting collaboration among stakeholders are essential steps toward building an inclusive social welfare system.

By addressing existing barriers and investing in effective support mechanisms, Imo State can improve the protection, empowerment, and overall well-being of vulnerable women, children, and families.

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