

# Social Analysis of Child Labor in Nasarawa State, Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Child labor remains a widespread issue in many societies, including Nigeria, where, despite an apparent level of awareness, numerous children must still endure this harsh reality. This study aims to assess and understand the social conditions, experiences, educational status, and challenges child laborers encounter, particularly in Lafia, Nasarawa State. It also explores the relationship between parents' economic status and the labor demands placed on children. Purposive sampling was used to select 50 child laborers for the interviews. The results show that 46% of the children interviewed constantly worry about their lives being at risk, while 30% express similar concerns occasionally. The study identifies crucial factors that perpetuate child labor, such as the economic and social circumstances of the parents, highlighting issues like household poverty, parental illiteracy, and inadequate social protection. The findings reveal that most children do not receive proper care, support, or education. The results emphasize the urgent need for comprehensive policy interventions focused on poverty alleviation, improving access to education, and protecting children. The study advocates the involvement of government agencies in creating a robust structural framework that safeguards the rights of child laborers in society and protects them from abuse. Results from the research, asserts that social and cultural factors significantly contribute to the prevalence of child labor in Lafia, Nasarawa state.

**Keywords:** Child labor, child trafficking, child rights, social welfare, education, social protection, health and safety.

## INTRODUCTION

Child labor has been a prevalent issue in most countries for decades now, with problems associated with poverty, gender inequality, and education (Ibrahim et al., 2019). The International Labor Organization (ILO) reported that over 160 million children between ages 5-14 are involved in child labor in 2024, of whom 79 million are in hazardous work. Child labor is defined as any work that robs children below the age of 18 of their childhood, potential, education, and dignity through excessively long and heavy work that harms their physical and mental development (ILO, 2024a). In developing countries, such as Nigeria, child labor is a result of the poor economy of the country, forcing millions of children to child labor as their major source of income. This has had adverse effects on the children physically, psychologically, socially, intellectually, and morally (Agbo, 2017).

In Nigeria, it has been reported that child labor has been in existence all throughout history and has gradually been accepted as part of the culture in some parts of the country. Child labor has extended from minimal activities like child caring, house chores, street trading, gardening, and handicrafts to prostitution and trafficking. The child labor rate increased daily due to the prevalence of poverty, corruption, and ignorance, exposing the children to several dangers (Azunwo & Sopuruchi, 2018). Edmonds, in their review, concluded that the primary cause and consequence of child labor is the poor economic development of the country (Edmonds, 2016). Kemp stated that over 49.4% of Nigeria's population are children between ages 0-17, as shown in Figure 1:1a (Kemp, 2024). The ILO reported that over 50.5% of this population is involved in economic activity, 39.2% in child labor, and 22.9% in hazardous work. ILO further reported that a higher percentage of these children are used for own-use good production like house-chores, fetching water, and

firewood collection, a lower percentage of these children are paid for their jobs, while others serve as unpaid trainees in stores (ILO, 2024b). Figure 1.1c shows that North-Eastern and South-Eastern states have high reports of children in child labor. North-central also reported a high number of children in child labor.

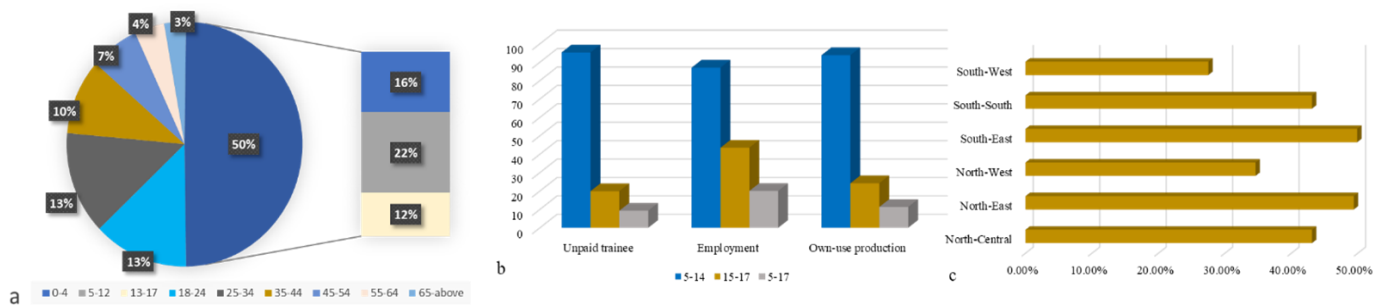


Figure 1.1: a. Age distribution in Nigeria (Kemp, 2024); b. Percentage distribution of child laborers based on age and type of work; c. Child labor distribution in Nigeria geopolitical zones (ILO, 2024b).

Several research has been carried out to understand the rate of child labor in Nigeria. Research carried out by Audu et al. showed that out of 316 girls who were successfully interviewed in Maiduguri, 77.7% reported cases of sexual assault, of which 38.6% were by a customer. They also reported that these girls worked for a mean of  $8.5 \pm 3.8$  hours/day (Audu et al., 2009). More recent research by Abdu et al. showed that males are more involved in child labor as females' movements are restricted. They also reported that the rate of polygamy is high which leads the children to end up as laborers. An interesting finding in this research was the relationship between child laborers on the farm to the availability of large farmland in Katsina that encouraged small-scale farming (Abdu et al., 2020). Ofuoku et al reported in their research that about 43.33% of children interviewed combined schooling with farming operations starting from field preparation to harvesting, product harvesting and processing (Ofuoku et al., 2014). Famodu et al research assessed the relationship between child labor and mental health status among in-school adolescents in Agege local government, Lagos, Nigeria. Their findings showed that of the 23.8% of respondents who experienced child labor, about 55% of them were apprenticeship and 10% were street traders. Their result also showed that 16.8% had negative mental health, particularly in peer and conduct issues, with others reporting having problems with their peers, emotional problems, and conduct problems, highlighting the need for interventions to address both child labor and mental health challenges in this population (Famodu et al., 2018). Folami et al interview showed that many of the child laborers were abandoned by their parents, relatives and guardians at an early age to fend for themselves. They also stated that from the responses they received, they discovered that there was not enough public awareness of the child protection policy that was passed into law by the government (Folami et al., 2018a). Anurioha's research on human trafficking exploitation in Nigeria revealed that approximately 80.5% of participants' education remained unaffected by their child labor experiences, in contrast to findings from earlier studies (Anurioha, 2024). These papers have provided valuable information about child labor in Nigeria. However, to the best of our knowledge, no papers report the rate of child labor in North-Eastern Nigeria.

The aim of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the process of child labor in Nasarawa State, Nigeria. This will guide policymakers to strengthen or update labor laws to better protect children, regulate child labor environments, and set stricter enforcement measures. Policies that support alternative schooling options, regulate school attendance, and allocate resources to cover educational costs for families in need should also be enforced. This can also raise awareness of the need for policies to strengthen social welfare through vocational training for families and financial support provisions to reduce dependence on child labor for income.

## Objectives

1. To understand child labor and its causes in Nasarawa State

2. To investigate children's access to education
3. To identify challenges faced by children involved in child labor (health and mental)
4. To determine the presence of external support

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Area

The study area is conducted in Lafia, the largest city and capital of Nasarawa State, Nigeria, with over 509,300 people as of 2022. The area covers approximately 2,827 square kilometers within 8.5060°N and 8.5227°E. This research was carried out in Lafia due to its high population and reports on child labor. The study focused on specific areas, including Roundabout, Akunza, Mararaba, and Modern Market, which are known for their high economic activities and where child laborers are mostly found. These areas have similar characteristics, such as household structures, economic activities, and markets.

### Population and Sample Size

The data used in this study is primary data collected from the field using a qualitative method. A purposive sampling method was employed to select hawking children in this area as reported by Folami et al (Folami et al., 2018b). Sampling was restricted to:

1. Children who possess relevant knowledge and who can provide valuable data.
2. Children between ages 6 – 14 years who are hawking goods.
3. Children who are old enough to give adequate consent.

Fifty children and some adults working around these children were interviewed using a Key Informative Interview (KII). Responses were collected based on verbal responses and observation of nonverbal reactions of the participants. Observation of the working environment was also recorded. Interview questions were explained and interpreted in the Hausa language for some participants to get their best responses. Sensitive personal information revealed by the participants was kept confidential to protect them.

### Data Analysis

Data was collected in July 2024 using qualitative methods. The data obtained from this study are described using analytical methods, including tables and percentages. Thematic analysis was employed to report the qualitative information derived from the research.

### Limitations of Study

It was challenging to engage with the children, as some were fearful of answering questions, and many, being minors, struggled to provide adequate responses. To capture their attention, the interviewer often had to buy products from the children. Additionally, some chose to remain quiet when asked certain questions due to fear or anxiety, which sometimes resulted in misleading answers. A significant amount of information had to be gathered through observation, and the researchers made efforts to avoid interpretations that could misrepresent the findings. Another obstacle encountered was the language barrier; most of the children spoke Hausa, so the data collected in Hausa had to be translated into English before analysis. Most of the children involved in child labor came from impoverished backgrounds.

## RESULTS

Table 3.1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The majority of the children interviewed were between the ages of 13 and 16. Most of them were engaged in hawking food items such as groundnuts (peanuts), soybean cake, peppered meat, and charcoal for cooking. Only 6% worked as mechanics' assistants, while 18% were responsible for carrying customers' loads to their vehicles. The average workday was 7 hours,

which is comparable to findings by Audu et al. (2009), who reported a mean of 8.5 hours (Audu et al., 2009). Fifty-four percent of the participants were females, while 46% were males.

Table 3.1: Socioeconomic characteristics of the participants

Age of Participants	
0-4 years	0
5-8 years	26%
9-12 years	30%
13-16 years	44%
Sex	
Female	54%
Male	46%
Work Hours per day	
1-4 hours	20%
5-8 hours	50%
9-12 hours	30%
Type of labor	
Food hawking	76%
Mechanics	6%
Carrying loads	18%

**Objective 1: Understanding Child labor and its causes in Nasarawa State**

Basic information about the children's knowledge of child labor was gathered from them. They quickly listed various forms of labor they had observed over the years. Many of the children were involved in hawking a range of items, including food and firewood, while others carried out more physically demanding tasks such as carrying heavy loads for market customers or working as mechanics' assistants. Most of the children reported that the primary form of abuse they experienced was being forced to hawk late into the night or until all their goods were sold. Some, like Participant 6, explained that they were sent back to the streets if they didn't reach a set financial target. Others, like Participant 3, described suffering from physical and verbal abuse, such as beatings, starvation, and the use of abusive language by their parents. Participant 1 reported hawking items that are physically strenuous to manage.

**Question:** What are the forms of child labor/abuse observed?

**Answers:** Participant 1: Hawking of different things that are very heavy.

Participant 2: I keep staying out late, trying to make income.

Participant 3: I experience physical violence, such as beating, starving, and mental abuse, such as abusive words.

Participant 4: My guardian curses me when I do not finish selling my goods.

Participant 5: I work as a mechanic in the workshop. I help to repair vehicles.

Participant 6: I am sent back to the street until I sell the goods or gain a certain amount of money.

Participant 7: I lack mental support and emotional support.

Participant 8: I carry the loads of those who visit the market to buy items they cannot lift. I lift them to the buyers' vehicles, and they pay me.

The participants explained that the primary reasons they were involved in hawking goods included a lack of money for their daily needs, such as food, school supplies, or clothing. Some mentioned that their parents, being illiterate and without formal education, do not believe their children should attend school. Others stated that in their community, it is customary for children to hawk goods, and they feel they are participating in their cultural norms by doing so. A few participants also noted that, since there are no laws preventing them from hawking, they believe it is acceptable to engage in it as a means of supporting their families and making ends meet.

**Question:** What are the reasons for the child's involvement in this labor?

**Answer:** Participant 1: "I hawk because I want to contribute to the income of the house. My mother is our breadwinner, and she is trying her best, but I really want to help her, and this is the best way I can think of. She supports me."

Participant 2: "I hawk because my mother asked me to. Almost all my siblings hawk, too, so at age 7, I started going with them to hawk, and now I can go out on my own."

Participant 3: "I started hawking because my father wouldn't give me money for my uniforms and school stuff, so I will hawk after school and use the money to pay for them. But now I do it just to have savings and buy things for myself."

Participant 4: "My parents are dead, so this is my survival option."

Participant 5: "My mother forced me to start hawking at age 5. I will go about selling soybean cake, and she will collect the money from me; she says it's not a big deal; all her friends' children hawks, too."

When asked about their family structure, most of the children revealed that they came from large polygamous households with many siblings. With limited attention from their parents, they often had to fend for themselves by hawking. One child shared, "There are so many of us at home, and if I don't make money to help my mum, we might not have anything to eat." Some others lived in large households with unrelated adults who did not care for the children in their midst, leaving the children to hawk in order to provide for themselves. Several participants reported that their parents were directly involved in the business, with the children hawking goods and reporting back to them. Others mentioned that they chose to hawk without seeking permission from their parents or guardians, simply to meet their own needs and ensure they had food.

## **Objectives 2: Education of children involved in child labor**

The participants were asked about the condition of their education. Figure 3.1 below presents the children's responses. Fifty-eight percent of the participants reported that their school conditions were good, 32% stated that their school was in poor condition, and 14% indicated that they did not attend school. Those who do attend school generally go to the nearby government school. Upon observing the schools attended by most participants, it was found that they were poorly equipped with essential facilities. The schools had few teachers, and the classrooms lacked desks, chairs, and writing materials, forcing some students to sit on the floor during class. Additionally, most of the participants could not speak English, the country's official language, so the questions had to be translated into Hausa for them to understand and respond.

Many of the children who said they attended school admitted they only went when they felt like it or after finishing their hawking for the day. Some reported that they hawked both before and after school. Among the 14% who do not attend school, some explained that they stopped going because they could no longer afford basic school necessities such as uniforms and books, and their parents instructed them to contribute to the family's income instead. Others said they only go to school to socialize with friends.

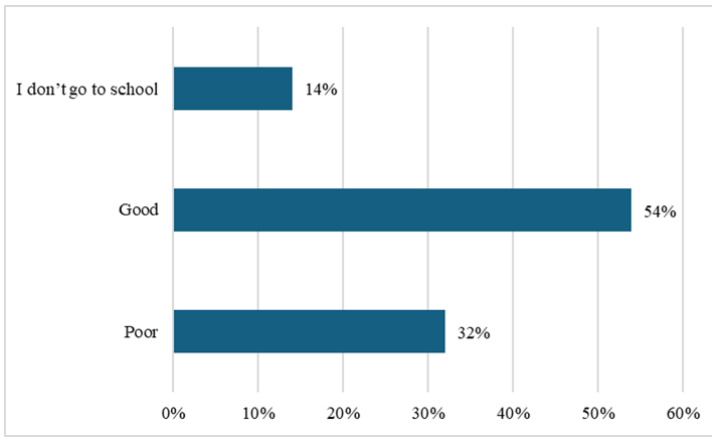


Figure 3.1: Data showing participants' assessment of their school

### Culture influence on child labor

From observations, the cultural practice of polygamy and having many children is a significant factor contributing to child labor. In interviews with parents, many expressed the belief that they should continue having as many children as possible, even if they cannot afford to care for them. This situation often forces children to fend for themselves. This cultural norm is not surprising, as Nigeria is known to have a high fertility rate. According to Macrotrend (2024), the current fertility rate in Nigeria is 5.009 births per woman as of 2024.

### Objective 3: Challenges in child labor

As shown in Figure 2.1, 46% of the children interviewed reported that they constantly worry about their lives being at risk, while 30% sometimes feel this way. Only 24% indicated that they feel safe most of the time. Many of the children expressed feelings particularly scared when working late at night. According to Table 3, 36% of the children feared being kidnapped, 22% were afraid of being hit by a car or getting into an accident, and 16% were concerned about not receiving adequate healthcare if they became ill. Additionally, 8% were afraid of being raped, 2% were worried about the physical strain of carrying heavy loads, 2% feared that their education might be jeopardized as they were eager to continue schooling, and another 2% were scared of encountering strangers while working. Only 12% of the participants felt that their lives were not at risk in any way.

Figure 1 shows that 78% of participants reported that they sometimes fall sick, 8% said they are always sick, 10% often fall ill, and 4% had never been sick. Among those who fall sick, only 46% visit the hospital; the rest rely on self-medication or herbal remedies. Most of the children who reported not feeling that their lives were at risk were older, between the ages of 14 and 16, while the younger children more frequently expressed fear for their safety during child labor.

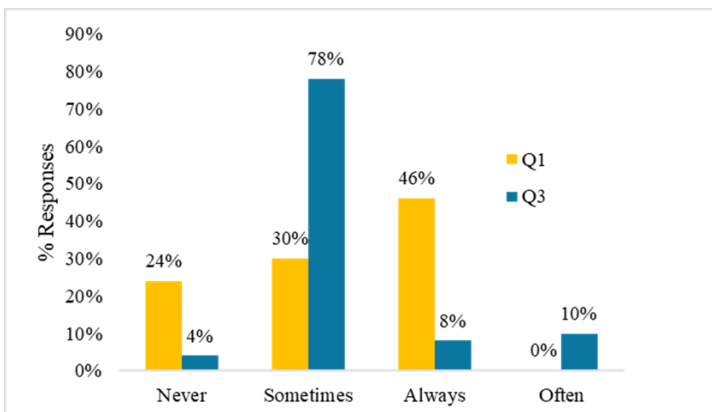


Figure 3.2: Participants' responses to Q1: How often have you been scared that your life might be at risk? And Q3: How often do you get sick?

Table 3.2: Participants' responses to accessibility to hospital when they are sick.

Access to hospital	% Response
Yes, I visit the hospital whenever I am sick	46%
No, I have never visited the hospital	26%
Treatment is by self-medication	16%
Treatment is by traditional means (herbal treatment)	2%

Table 3.3: Participants' responses to Question 2: What are the primary threats to you?

Primary Threat	% Response
Insecurity/Kidnapping	36%
Busy road/accidents	22%
Health	16%
No threat experienced	12%
Rape	8%
Heavy objects to hawk	2%
Threat to school activities	2%
Meeting strange people every day	2%

### Observations of the Participants' Physical Appearance and Environment

The condition of the houses in the areas where some participants were interviewed was poor. Some of these apartments were situated in locations with dirt piled up and gutters overflowing right in front of them. Generally, the community seems safe; however, the work environment appears to be unsafe. There were busy crowds and vehicles, and some hawkers were positioned too close to the roadside without any adult supervision.

### Behavioral Indicators

It was observed that when the researcher approached most of the younger participants, they tended to be very scared. Some moved away and refused to answer any questions, while others were very cautious not to make mistakes while speaking. This is why pictures and videos were not taken during the interview process, to help them feel more comfortable. One participant, a 7-year-old boy, mentioned that he and his 5-year-old sister were occasionally flogged by adults and sent back to the streets to hawk heavy items.

### Physical and Sexual Abuse

Table 3.4 shows a summary of the responses from the children regarding their health. Some participants explained that they experience constant fatigue. Seventy-eight percent reported that they believe their ongoing stress and fatigue are because they are always working, while 20% stated that they do not feel fatigued most of the time. Only 2% were unsure of the source of their physical weakness. Some children exhibited signs of stunted growth, and when asked, they explained that their feeding is based on their circumstances. Many showed obvious signs of physical stress, with some appearing extremely weak and displaying bruises and injuries on their bodies. Several were unwilling to discuss these bruises further.

Figure 3.4 indicates that 60% of the participants eat twice a day, while 20% reported eating only once a day. From discussions with the participants, most stated that they are responsible for preparing one of their meals each day. Many of the children did not appear very clean. As shown in Table 3.4, 12% of the children reported having been sexually assaulted at least once. The participants were reluctant to share more about their experiences, and their decision was respected. Consequently, there was limited information regarding the

nature of the sexual assault they experienced. Some participants who reported sexual abuse indicated that they sometimes tell their parents about the incidents, but no action is taken, as they are told that it will be fine. Observations revealed that some of these children had open access to adults of various genders without any form of protection. Many of the children had to interact with these adults because they needed to sell goods to them.

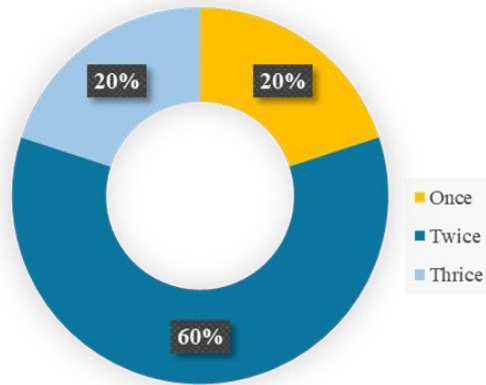


Figure 3.3: Participants' responses to how many times they eat in a day.

Table 3.4: Participants' responses to Q8: Does child labor influence your physical and mental health? And Q9: Have you experienced any form of sexual abuse?

Question	Responses	% Responses
Q8	Yes	78%
	No	20%
	Not really	2%
Q9	Yes	12%
	No	88%
	Not really	0%

### Awareness of Community

It was observed that most of the hawkers fostered a sense of community among themselves. The participants expressed joy in spending time in groups, stating that they find happiness whenever they are with their peers. Most of them look forward to meeting their fellow laborers.

### Objective 4: To determine the presence of internal or external support

The majority of children involved in hawking were unsupervised by adults. Eighty percent of the participants stated that they have living parents, while 8% indicated that both of their parents are deceased. Thirty-four percent reported having good relationships with their parents, adding that their parents search for them when they are not home at night or when they stay out very late. Twenty-eight percent stated that they do not live with their parents. Some live in communities filled with adults, some reside with specific guardians assigned to them by their parents, while others have no adult supervision. The remaining 38% reported that their relationships with their parents are very poor; some do not see their parents for days, and some parents are consistently violent toward their children.

From observations and participant responses, it is evident that none of their parents are financially stable, which is why the children engage in child labor to fend for themselves. For the 6% of participants who work



as mechanics, as shown in Table 3.1, their bosses closely monitor their movements to ensure they stay within their line of sight. Some participants reported that their bosses punish them when they make little or no income in a day.

When asked about the availability of external support for child laborers, all participants responded that they had never heard of such assistance before. When inquired about any child protection services they had received, 74% indicated that they had never experienced support from anyone other than their parents, bosses, or adults around them. Eighteen percent stated that they had received police intervention for protection once or twice, while 2% mentioned support from unknown elders in the past. The remaining 6% acknowledged that some external groups, possibly organizations, had reached out to them previously. Overall, there was little indication that they had experienced external support in the past. The participants were unaware of any specific governmental or non-governmental organizations aimed at addressing or preventing child labor in their areas.

Table 3.5: Internal and External Support for Participants

Parent condition	% Responses
Alive	80%
One is dead	12%
Both are dead	8%
Relationship with parents	% Responses
Good	34%
Stay away from parents	28%
Poor	38%
Child protection services listed	% Responses
None	74%
Police	18%
Elders	2%
External people	6%
Is there any support for child abuse?	% Responses
Yes	0%
No	100%

Some adults who were willing to talk were interviewed to gather more information about external support. Out of the ten individuals who agreed to provide information, here are some of the responses given:

**Question:** Are you aware of any children’s rights and protection agencies around?

**Answer:** Participant 1: Yes, I know of one, but they are not active.

Participant 2: I know children have rights but have adults been respected yet? Some of these children are rude, and they do not respect the adults around them.

Participant 3: In this Nigeria? I don’t think there is anything like that here

**Question:** How does the community protect children’s rights?

Participant 1: Maybe by putting vigilantes around to keep the children safe, but currently, there are none.

Participant 2: Every child is protected by the people in the community.

Participant 3: I think it is the work of the organizations set up for them, but they are not active

Participant 4: Nothing. It is the work of their parents.

Participant 5: By praying for them and watching out for them. I think they are all our responsibility.

Participant 6: I don't know.

Generally, the adults stated that the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or the community did not have a specific structure in place to protect and guide the children. Instead, the children were left to care for themselves and to be looked after by their families.

## CONCLUSION

Findings from the study provide an understanding that children who are involved in child labor are minors who should be in school and should be protected by their guardians. It also traces the major causes of child labor to poverty and cultural factors, as most of the children are from low-income families, polygamous and large families. Some challenges faced by child laborers in Nasarawa state were also identified to be associated with fear of kidnapping and accidents, which may place their lives at risk and their mental state. According to the study's findings, social and cultural factors significantly contribute to the prevalence of child labor in Lafia, Nasarawa State. Most of the children were not familiar with any form of external support to protect their rights and fight for them, making them take their protection into their own hands. Results from the research assert that social and cultural factors significantly contribute to the prevalence of child labor in Lafia, Nasarawa State. It is recommended that governments should invest in organizations that would protect the rights of the children and, most importantly, educate these parents on how they ought to protect the children and not expose them to danger and abuse. For parents who can afford to raise a large number of children, birth control should also receive more attention. Furthermore, based on the observations, there is a need for collaborations between government, NGOs, and community organizations to better address child labor and support vulnerable families.

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