

# The International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) and the Curbing of Child Abuse in Rivers State, Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Child abuse remains one of the most widespread human rights violations worldwide, with serious effects on social stability and peacebuilding. In Nigeria, legal advocacy groups play a vital role in bridging the gap between statutory protections and community realities. This study explores the role of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) in reducing child abuse and fostering peacebuilding in Rivers State, Nigeria. Guided by theories such as Structural Functionalism, Systems Theory, Legal Pluralism, and the Human Rights-Based Approach, the study uses a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews. A census of FIDA members in Rivers State was conducted using structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed with descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. Results show that FIDA's activities go beyond litigation to include legal aid, community sensitization, policy advocacy, and peacebuilding efforts. However, these efforts are challenged by funding shortages, weak institutional coordination, judicial delays, and cultural practices that weaken formal legal processes. The study concludes that legal activism is crucial in protecting children's rights and strengthening community cohesion. Policy recommendations include specific actions such as improved inter-agency coordination led by the Ministry of Justice, increased funding from government and donors, engagement with traditional leaders, judicial reforms, and integrating legal activism into peacebuilding strategies. This research adds to the growing understanding of socio-legal responses to child abuse in plural legal systems and provides practical insights for practitioners and policymakers.

**Keywords:** Legal activism, Child protection, FIDA, Peacebuilding, Legal pluralism, Human rights.

## INTRODUCTION

Child abuse represents one of the most pervasive human rights violations globally, with wide-ranging implications for physical, psychological, and social development (WHO, 2002; WHO, 2016). Defined as any action or omission that threatens a child's well-being, child abuse includes physical, sexual, emotional abuse, and neglect (CAPTA, 2002; WHO, 2002). Its impact is far-reaching—compromising children's health, disrupting their education, and limiting their potential to contribute meaningfully to society. According to Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Alink, and van IJzendoorn (2015), approximately 7.6% of boys and 18% of girls globally experience sexual abuse, while 22.6% experience physical abuse and 35.3% experience emotional abuse. These figures highlight a serious global public health and human rights crisis that demands urgent and coordinated interventions (Rao & Lux, 2012; Shaw & De Jong, 2012).

In the African context, the volatile sociocultural and economic environment exacerbates the vulnerability of children, making them more susceptible to abuse and neglect (Alekseeva, 2007; Auemaneekul, 2013). Many cases remain underreported due to cultural norms, stigma, and weak institutional responses. This aligns with Sofuoğlu and Saryer's (2016) assertion that the implications of child abuse remain unidentified or under-acknowledged in many societies. Similarly, Gilbert et al. (2009) and Jütte et al. (2015) emphasize the gap between actual prevalence rates and reported cases, noting that many incidents of child maltreatment never reach legal or protective systems.

In Nigeria, child abuse persists despite international and national legal instruments aimed at protecting

children's rights. While Nigeria domesticated the Child Rights Act in 2003, many states have struggled with enforcement and implementation. Rivers State domesticated the Act in 2009, yet widespread child labor, sexual abuse, neglect, and trafficking remain prevalent (International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 2022). This situation is worsened by weak prosecution, cultural barriers, and institutional gaps that prevent adequate protection of vulnerable children.

A key player in the child protection landscape in Rivers State is the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), a non-profit, apolitical legal organization committed to defending the rights of women and children through advocacy, legal aid, and policy engagement (Ojum, Egobueze & Nseigbe, 2022; Anyanwu, 2019). FIDA has raised alarms over rising incidents of child sexual abuse in schools and communities, prosecuted over 176 rape and defilement cases between 2020 and 2021, and partnered with other agencies to address gender-based violence and child protection (International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 2022). Yet, despite these efforts, child rights abuses remain persistent, suggesting the need for a critical evaluation of FIDA's strategies and impact in addressing the problem.

While several international studies and conference reports have explored child sexual abuse broadly (Chikoko, 2022), many have failed to account for contextual differences in prevalence and intervention strategies at subnational levels. For example, the 2022 conference compiled diverse papers on sexual abuse but focused largely on global and continental perspectives, with minimal attention to regional and state-level contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptual Perspectives on Childhood, Child Abuse, and Peacebuilding

The concept of childhood has been extensively debated, with scholars offering divergent perspectives grounded in educational, psychological, biological, legal, and sociological frameworks. Childhood is widely recognized as a natural and biological stage of human development that shapes cognitive, emotional, and social capacities (Wiegerora & Gavora, 2015). Fayaz (2019) conceptualizes a child as a dynamic social being with evolving mindsets, opinions, and perceptions, emphasizing their agency and vulnerability within societal structures. Legally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) provides a binding international framework, defining a child as any individual below the age of 18 years and outlining the universal principles of protection, provision, and participation. Locke (2004) advances the notion of the child as a "blank slate," underscoring the role of education, both formal and informal, in shaping cognition, moral values, and capacity for social interaction.

Within this conceptual framework, child abuse represents a severe violation of children's rights and development. It encompasses physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, and neglect-based harms (National Library of Medicine, 2015). Child maltreatment has multidimensional consequences, influencing not only the immediate well-being of children but also their long-term social, cognitive, legal, and emotional development (Gilbert et al., 2009; Butchart et al., 2006). Global discourses increasingly recognize child abuse not merely as a social problem but as a human rights violation that requires coordinated interventions across health, social, and legal systems. From this perspective, child protection transcends welfare; it becomes a matter of justice, enforceable legal obligations, and institutional accountability.

The legal perspective provides a structured lens for understanding how societies define, regulate, and respond to child maltreatment. Legal frameworks such as the UNCRC (1989) and national instruments like the Child Rights Act in Nigeria (2003) impose statutory obligations on state and non-state actors to protect children from abuse and exploitation. These instruments enshrine rights to survival, protection, development, and participation — transforming moral concerns about children's welfare into legally enforceable entitlements. Lawyers, judges, and legal aid organizations play a central role in interpreting, applying, and enforcing these rights, often acting as critical intermediaries between vulnerable children and state structures.

Organizations like the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) exemplify the role of the legal profession in child protection. FIDA's work reflects the growing recognition that legal interventions are essential for addressing both individual violations (e.g., child rape, trafficking, neglect) and structural drivers

of abuse (e.g., cultural practices, weak enforcement). Through litigation, legal aid, advocacy, and public interest interventions, legal practitioners not only protect individual victims but also help shape normative and policy frameworks that influence broader societal practices (Oluyede, 2013; Anyanwu, 2019). This legal activism situates lawyers as agents of social change, leveraging legal tools to challenge systemic neglect and impunity.

Furthermore, peacebuilding in this context is more than the absence of conflict. It involves constructive personal, group, and institutional relationships that address both the triggers and root causes of violence, enabling sustainable reconciliation (Fisher, 2000). By linking child protection to peacebuilding, scholars and practitioners emphasize that the security and empowerment of children are central to social cohesion, human security, and national stability. Legal practitioners contribute to this process through:

- Strengthening access to justice for children and survivors of abuse;
- Advocating for legislative reforms to align domestic laws with international human rights standards;
- Challenging harmful cultural practices through legal and policy mechanisms; and
- Ensuring accountability for violations of child rights.

This conceptual integration is particularly salient in postcolonial and conflict-affected societies, where systemic child abuse perpetuates structural inequalities and social instability. Legal actors, alongside educators, social workers, and health professionals, are increasingly recognized as key peacebuilding agents, ensuring that child rights protection is not only a social aspiration but a legally grounded and enforceable imperative.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of child rights abuse and intervention requires a multi-layered theoretical approach that captures both the structural organization of society and the interdependence of its institutions, including the legal system. To this end, this study draws primarily from Structural Functionalism and Systems Theory, while integrating insights from Legal Pluralism and Human Rights-Based Approaches to explain how legal and non-legal institutions interact to shape child protection outcomes in contexts such as Rivers State, Nigeria.

### Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism, developed from the works of Herbert Spencer and Émile Durkheim, views society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote stability and social order (Durkheim, 1985). Institutions such as the family, education, religion, law, and justice systems are seen as interdependent components that fulfill distinct but complementary functions in maintaining equilibrium. Within this framework, the legal system plays a critical role as a normative regulator that establishes acceptable behavior, prescribes sanctions, and protects vulnerable populations. Legal frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and Nigeria's Child Rights Act (2003) represent formal structures designed to safeguard children from abuse and exploitation. When legal institutions function effectively — through enforcement, prosecution, and access to justice — they help sustain social stability and peace.

Organizations such as FIDA exemplify how legal actors operate as functional elements within the larger social structure. By providing legal aid, representing victims, and pushing for law reform, they fulfill a protective and integrative function: ensuring that children's rights are upheld, that perpetrators are held accountable, and that communities internalize legal norms that discourage violence and abuse. From a structural functionalist perspective, weakening these legal functions — for example, through poor enforcement or underfunding — destabilizes the social system and allows abuse to proliferate unchecked.

### Systems Theory

Systems Theory, as developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, emphasizes that society is an open, adaptive system composed of interconnected sub-units. Each sub-system — legal, social, political, educational, health, and cultural — must work in coordination to maintain the overall functioning of society (Ackoff, 1981; Schneider

& Somers, 2006). Failure or inefficiency in one subsystem disrupts the stability of the entire structure. Applied to child protection, this theory highlights that legal institutions alone cannot protect children effectively without the active involvement of families, schools, health systems, and community structures. For instance, legal frameworks criminalize child abuse, but reporting, prosecution, and rehabilitation depend on complementary actions across multiple systems. FIDA's interventions demonstrate this interdependence — legal representation alone is insufficient; the organization also engages in community sensitization, education, and advocacy, functioning as a node within a broader system of child protection.

Systems theory is particularly relevant in developing contexts where fragmentation between legal, social, and cultural systems often results in implementation gaps. This perspective underscores the need for coordinated, multi-sectoral responses to child abuse, situating legal advocacy not as an isolated action but as part of a networked system of peacebuilding and protection.

### **Legal Pluralism and Human Rights-Based Approaches**

While structural functionalism and systems theory provide a sociological lens, legal pluralism offers a jurisprudential perspective critical for understanding child protection in postcolonial societies like Nigeria. Legal pluralism recognizes that multiple legal orders, including state law, customary law, and religious law, coexist and interact, often shaping how rights are interpreted and enforced at the community level (Merry, 1988).

In many parts of Nigeria, cultural and religious norms intersect with state law to influence how child abuse cases are reported, interpreted, and resolved. Legal pluralism thus helps explain why formal child protection laws, such as the Child Rights Act, may not always translate into effective protection on the ground. FIDA's legal activism, therefore, often involves navigating and challenging competing legal orders, mediating between formal courts and informal customary systems to protect children's rights. Complementing legal pluralism is the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), which anchors child protection in international legal obligations. Under HRBA, children are rights-holders, and governments and legal institutions are duty-bearers obligated to protect these rights (UNICEF, 2014). This approach emphasizes legal empowerment, accountability, and participation, situating lawyers not just as legal technicians but as agents of social transformation who use law to promote justice, equity, and peace.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design with both qualitative and quantitative elements to examine the role of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) in curbing child abuse and promoting peacebuilding in Rivers State, Nigeria. The design was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to collect context-rich empirical data directly from individuals involved in legal advocacy, offering both measurable insights and deeper narratives that reflected respondents' lived experiences. This mixed-method approach ensured that both the breadth and depth of the research problem were captured, in line with best practices in socio-legal and peacebuilding research.

### **Area of the Study**

The study was conducted in Rivers State, located in the Niger Delta region of southern Nigeria. Rivers State is historically and economically significant, having been created in 1967 out of the old Eastern Region, partly due to its strategic economic position (Agwanwo & Bello, 2019). The state shares boundaries with Imo, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Delta States, and comprises 23 Local Government Areas. Port Harcourt serves as its capital and economic hub, historically recognized for its central role during the colonial period (Bodo, 2019; Falola, Genova & Heaton, 2018; Britannica, 2022).

According to the National Population Commission (2006), the state's population was 5,198,716, making it one of the most populous states in Nigeria at the time. The state is ethnically and linguistically diverse, home to

Ikwerre, Ogba, Etche, Ogoni, and Ijaw ethnic groups, and over 28 indigenous dialects (Cunningham, 2018). The economy is dominated by the oil sector, while the political climate is dynamic and active. Rivers State was selected as the study area due to proximity to the researcher, its diverse sociocultural landscape, and the presence of active legal and advocacy organizations, including FIDA Rivers State Chapter.

### **Study Population**

The population of the study comprised all members of the FIDA Rivers State Chapter. This group was selected because its members are the primary legal actors involved in child rights advocacy, legal protection, and peacebuilding interventions in the state. According to information provided by the Vice Chairperson of FIDA Rivers State, the chapter has 12 registered members. Their involvement in both litigation and community-level legal advocacy made them the ideal population for this study.

### **Sample Size and Sampling Technique**

Given the small and defined population size, the study employed a census method. This means that every member of the population was included in the study, ensuring comprehensive coverage of perspectives. The census approach was particularly suitable because it allowed the researcher to capture the full range of legal experiences and strategies used by FIDA members in responding to cases of child abuse. This enhances the credibility and internal validity of the study, aligning with best methodological practices for small populations.

### **Types of Data and Instruments for Data Collection**

The study utilized both primary and secondary data.

- Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire and an interview guide. The questionnaire was developed using a four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree) to capture measurable patterns in respondents' perspectives.
- In-depth interviews were conducted to provide qualitative narratives that enriched and contextualized the quantitative data. These interviews were guided by four central research questions, allowing respondents to provide detailed, experience-based responses.
- Secondary data were obtained from FIDA reports, statutory legal documents, journal articles, newspapers, magazines, and relevant published and unpublished books. This triangulation of data sources strengthened the study's methodological rigor.

### **Validity of the Research Instruments**

Content validity was employed to ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of the research instruments. The structured questionnaire and interview guide were reviewed by the researcher's supervisor and faculty experts in sociology, who evaluated the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the items with the research objectives. Their feedback informed revisions, ensuring that the instruments were both conceptually sound and methodologically robust.

### **Reliability of the Research Instruments**

Reliability was established through the test-retest method. The instruments were first administered to 10 FIDA members in Lagos State, and the responses were collected and analyzed. After ten days, the same instruments were re-administered, and the results were compared. A Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient of 0.88 was obtained, indicating a high level of reliability. This coefficient demonstrates consistency and stability of the instrument over time, aligning with standard research reliability benchmarks.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The researcher, with the assistance of trained research assistants, administered the questionnaires directly to respondents. This face-to-face administration enhanced response rates and ensured clarity where needed.

Interviews were conducted using the interview guide, allowing for a semi-structured format that encouraged open-ended responses while maintaining focus on key themes. This method was particularly important for eliciting legal practitioners' nuanced perspectives on child rights advocacy and peacebuilding. All interviews were conducted with informed consent and, where necessary, audio-recorded with permission

### Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as percentages, mean, and standard deviation on a four-point Likert scale (with a decision benchmark of 2.50). This provided a clear numerical summary of patterns and trends in respondents' views.

Qualitative interview data were analyzed through thematic content analysis, which involved coding, categorizing, and interpreting emerging themes related to legal advocacy, systemic coordination, cultural influences, and peacebuilding outcomes. This mixed-method analysis allowed for triangulation, ensuring that quantitative trends were supported by qualitative explanations, enhancing the depth and validity of the findings.

## RESULTS / FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from both the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews with members of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Rivers State Chapter. A total of 12 respondents completed the structured questionnaire, and in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants to provide context and depth to the quantitative trends.

### Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 12)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age	25–34 years	2	16.7
	35–44 years	5	41.7
	45 years and above	5	41.7
Gender	Female	12	100
Years of legal practice	1–5 years	3	25.0
	6–10 years	4	33.3
	More than 10 years	5	41.7
Educational qualification	LL.B/BL	3	25.0
	LL.M	7	58.3
	PhD	2	16.7

**Source:** Field Survey, 2025

The socio-demographic distribution indicates that the majority of respondents are mid- to senior-level legal practitioners, with more than 6 years of legal experience. All participants were female lawyers, consistent with FIDA's membership profile.

## Perception of FIDA's Strategies in Curbing Child Abuse

Table 2 shows responses to the effectiveness of FIDA's strategies in addressing various forms of child abuse. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with selected statements on a four-point Likert scale.

**Table 2:** Perception of FIDA's Child Protection Strategies

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
FIDA provides legal representation for survivors of child abuse.	10	2	0	0	3.83	Accepted
FIDA conducts awareness and sensitization programs on child rights.	8	4	0	0	3.67	Accepted
FIDA engages in community-level mediation and advocacy.	9	3	0	0	3.75	Accepted
FIDA collaborates with government agencies on child protection.	7	5	0	0	3.58	Accepted
FIDA's strategies are effective in addressing child abuse cases.	8	4	0	0	3.67	Accepted

**Source:** Field Survey, 2025

The majority of respondents strongly agreed that legal representation, community engagement, and collaboration with state actors are key strategies employed by FIDA in protecting children. Qualitative interviews supported these trends. One respondent stated:

“When families come to us, they are often at their breaking point. Our legal representation gives them hope and ensures that the perpetrators do not walk free.” (FIDA Member, IDI 3)

Another respondent added:

“Legal action alone is not enough. We combine it with community outreach to change mindsets, especially in communities where abuse is normalized.” (FIDA Member, IDI 5)

## Institutional Challenges Encountered in Legal Advocacy

Table 3 summarizes respondents' perceptions of the institutional and structural barriers confronting FIDA in its child protection work.

**Table 3:** Institutional Challenges in Child Protection Advocacy

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
Inadequate funding limits FIDA's operations.	8	4	0	0	3.67	Accepted
Weak inter-agency coordination affects case outcomes.	7	5	0	0	3.58	Accepted
Cultural practices often undermine legal interventions.	9	3	0	0	3.75	Accepted
Lack of child-friendly facilities and personnel hampers effectiveness.	6	6	0	0	3.50	Accepted
Delays in judicial processes discourage victims and families.	10	2	0	0	3.83	Accepted

**Source:** Field Survey, 2025

Respondents highlighted funding gaps, weak coordination, and judicial delays as key obstacles. Qualitative narratives reinforced these findings.

“Even when we want to pursue a case aggressively, funding becomes a bottleneck. We rely on pro bono work, which is not sustainable.” (FIDA Member, IDI 1)

“We face delays in court, poor coordination between agencies, and sometimes even resistance from the community. All these slow down justice for children.” (FIDA Member, IDI 7)

### Contributions of Legal Activism to Peacebuilding

Table 4 presents respondents’ perceptions of how FIDA’s work contributes to broader peacebuilding and social stability.

**Table 4:** Contributions of Legal Activism to Peacebuilding

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
FIDA’s work helps prevent future violence against children.	8	4	0	0	3.67	Accepted
Legal activism contributes to community awareness and collective responsibility.	9	3	0	0	3.75	Accepted
Prosecution of perpetrators reinforces trust in the legal system.	7	5	0	0	3.58	Accepted
Legal interventions reduce impunity and enhance community stability.	8	4	0	0	3.67	Accepted
Community sensitization programs foster peace and reduce conflicts.	10	2	0	0	3.83	Accepted

**Source:** Field Survey, 2025

Qualitative interviews echoed these perceptions:

“When perpetrators are prosecuted, communities see that the law works. This builds trust and discourages others from committing such crimes.” (FIDA Member, IDI 2)

Another interviewee reiterated that:

“We are not only lawyers; we are advocates for peace. By educating communities, we reduce tensions and prevent future cases.” (FIDA Member, IDI 4)

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### Legal Advocacy and Institutional Role in Child Protection

The findings of this study underscore the central role of legal advocacy in protecting children from abuse and advancing peacebuilding in Rivers State. Respondents overwhelmingly affirmed that legal representation, community sensitization, and institutional engagement are key strategies employed by FIDA. These results are consistent with the structural functionalist view that legal institutions act as stabilizing structures that maintain social order and reinforce shared norms (Durkheim, 1985).

This aligns with prior studies highlighting the protective function of legal systems in vulnerable populations (Gilbert et al., 2009; Fayaz, 2019). Legal actors, especially organizations like FIDA, serve as crucial intermediaries between victims and the justice system, ensuring not only access to justice but also reinforcing societal expectations of accountability. The combination of legal representation and community engagement reflects a dual strategy that merges formal legal intervention with social norm change, a critical approach in contexts where legal enforcement alone is insufficient (Pearson & Zenn, 2021).

This finding also mirrors international research that links access to justice with social stability. When survivors



see perpetrators held accountable, trust in legal institutions increases, thereby strengthening the social fabric (Dong et al., 2003; Shonkoff et al., 2012). In this way, legal advocacy transcends litigation and becomes a peacebuilding mechanism—especially in fragile or plural legal contexts like Nigeria.

### **Theoretical Contribution**

The multi-theoretical approach to the study explained the structural organisation of society and the influence of the interdependent of its institutions, especially the legal system. The structural functionalism theory emphasized on the way the State is structured and how the various structures function in maintaining social order and enhancing peace building. Various institutions like the family, education, religion, law, and justice systems, though independent in their components, but they complement the role of FIDA in reducing child abuse and building peace in Rivers State. Systems theory also showed its relevance in the need to situate legal advocacy not as an isolated action but as part of a networked system of peacebuilding and protection through the interaction between the legal, social, and cultural systems that enhance effective implementation.

### **Intersectoral Coordination and Systemic Gaps**

The study also revealed significant inter-agency collaboration challenges affecting the effectiveness of child protection efforts. Weak coordination between legal, governmental, and community actors often results in delayed prosecutions, fragmented responses, and diminished deterrence.

This aligns with Systems Theory, which posits that societal institutions operate interdependently and that dysfunction in one subsystem affects the entire structure (Ackoff, 1981; Schneider & Somers, 2006). Similar coordination gaps have been documented in child protection systems globally (Anda et al., 2007; Butchart et al., 2006), particularly in low-resource settings where agencies often work in silos.

The quantitative finding of high agreement regarding institutional barriers (e.g., funding gaps and weak coordination) and the qualitative testimonies describing delayed justice underscore the systemic nature of the problem. This implies that strengthening child protection in Rivers State requires not just stronger legal frameworks, but more effective integration of legal, welfare, security, and community systems.

### **Cultural Tensions and Legal Pluralism**

A prominent theme that emerged from the interviews was the tension between formal legal frameworks and cultural or customary practices. Many cases of child abuse, particularly sexual violence and forced marriage, are resolved informally at the community level, undermining legal accountability. This finding directly supports Legal Pluralism theory, which recognizes the coexistence of multiple legal orders (Merry, 1988).

Similar dynamics have been documented in many postcolonial contexts where traditional dispute resolution systems coexist with state law (Fisher, 2000; Olusegun & Idowu, 2016). While these customary mechanisms often prioritize community reconciliation, they can also perpetuate impunity and silence victims.

In this context, FIDA's role becomes particularly complex — lawyers must navigate between legal mandates and cultural expectations, often mediating in spaces where formal law is not the default mechanism for justice. This underscores the strategic importance of legal advocacy organizations in legally plural societies: they are not just litigators, but cultural mediators and agents of normative change.

### **Legal Activism as Peacebuilding**

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the evidence that legal activism contributes to peacebuilding in concrete and measurable ways. Legal activism in this context is the processes of using the law to curb all activities of child abuse and to advocate for the rights of the child in Rivers State. The legal frameworks also used as the process of enhancing peace building among the various stakeholders. Legal implications of child abuse through various enlightenment programmes are ways of building peace among the people. By holding perpetrators accountable, conducting community sensitization campaigns, and advocating

for law reform, FIDA's interventions foster collective trust in legal processes, discourage violence, and promote a culture of accountability.

This reflects a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), where legal empowerment and access to justice are central to advancing human security (UNICEF, 2014). Unlike purely welfare-based models, HRBA frames protection as a right, not a privilege, emphasizing state obligations and legal enforceability.

The findings mirror international evidence that justice interventions can help rebuild communities and prevent cycles of violence (Fayaz, 2019; Pearson & Zenn, 2021). In contexts of weak enforcement, civil society legal actors like FIDA act as translators of legal rights into lived realities, making peacebuilding tangible at the community level.

Importantly, this also reflects how legal practice can shape social norms: repeated legal actions, public awareness, and visible consequences for abusers help reframe previously normalized practices, thereby strengthening societal resilience.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the study provides valuable insights, its limited sample size (FIDA Rivers State Chapter) may affect generalizability. However, the census approach and triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data enhance the internal validity of the findings. Further studies could expand the scope to multiple states and include other actors such as social workers, law enforcement, and survivors across different legal

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusion

This study examined the role of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) in curbing child abuse and advancing peacebuilding in Rivers State, Nigeria. Using a mixed-method design that combined quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews, the study generated robust empirical evidence on how legal advocacy functions as both a protective mechanism and a peacebuilding tool.

The findings revealed that FIDA's legal interventions are not limited to litigation; they encompass community sensitization, advocacy, and systemic engagement, making the organization a central institutional actor in child protection. Legal representation of survivors, prosecution of perpetrators, and legal education initiatives collectively reinforce public trust in the legal system and discourage cycles of abuse.

However, the study also exposed persistent structural and cultural barriers—including funding constraints, weak inter-agency coordination, judicial delays, and the influence of customary practices—that undermine the effectiveness of legal interventions. These challenges reflect systemic weaknesses in Nigeria's child protection architecture and highlight the need for integrated, multi-sectoral strategies.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that legal activism, when strategically deployed, can contribute to peacebuilding, social cohesion, and the transformation of harmful social norms. Situating these findings within Structural Functionalism, Systems Theory, Legal Pluralism, and the Human Rights-Based Approach, the research contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of how legal actors operate in plural legal contexts.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen child protection mechanisms and maximize the impact of legal activism in Nigeria:

- The Federal & State Ministries of Justice, the Ministry of Women Affairs, FIDA Nigeria, NPF, NSCDC, and CSOs should establish formal inter-agency frameworks, shared referral protocols, and periodic joint meetings to improve response time and coordination in child protection cases.

- Federal & State Governments, Donor Agencies, CSR Programs should allocate dedicated budget lines for legal aid; support operational costs for FIDA; and encourage grant and CSR partnerships for child protection activities.
- Traditional/Religious Leaders, NOA, CBOs, and FIDA should conduct community sensitization campaigns and dialogues to challenge harmful practices and promote reporting of child abuse.
- The NJC, State High Courts, Legal Aid Council, NBA, and FIDA should fast-track child abuse cases through specialized courts; expand pro bono services; and equip courts with child-friendly facilities and trained personnel.
- The Ministry of Women Affairs, National Council on Peace and Security, State Peacebuilding Agencies should recognize legal advocacy as a peacebuilding tool and formally integrate FIDA and other legal NGOs into child protection and peace strategies.
- Universities, NBS, and donor agencies should support evidence-based policy through research, longitudinal studies, and improved national data on child protection and legal outcomes.
- FIDA, NOA, and media outlets should lead nationwide legal literacy campaigns using mass and community media to increase public knowledge of child rights and legal recourse.

### Limitations and Future Research

This study provides important insights into the role of legal activism in child protection and peacebuilding in Rivers State; however, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the small sample size, which was drawn exclusively from members of FIDA Rivers State Chapter, limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions or legal contexts in Nigeria. While the census approach enhanced internal validity, it did not capture the perspectives of other key stakeholders, such as law enforcement officers, social workers, or child survivors, beyond the sample.

Second, the cross-sectional design provides a snapshot in time and does not account for the long-term impacts of legal interventions on community trust or patterns of abuse. Future studies could adopt longitudinal or comparative designs across multiple states to assess broader trends and causal relationships.

Third, the study relied on self-reported data from legal practitioners, which may carry elements of professional bias or selective emphasis. Including multiple stakeholder groups in future research — such as community leaders, survivors, judges, and law enforcement officers — would enrich and balance perspectives.

Future research could examine long-term impacts of FIDA's interventions through longitudinal or case-based studies.

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