From Reporting to Protection: A Review of Nigeria's School Safeguarding and Referral Framework for Violence against Children

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ABSTRACT

Violence against children in schools requires safeguarding systems that connect disclosure and reporting with referral, protection, and follow-up. This review examined Nigeria's school safeguarding and referral framework, focusing on the connections between disclosure, reporting, and protection from violence against children. It had two objectives: to examine the responsibilities and mechanisms established for reporting, referral, protection, and follow-up, and to synthesise evidence on barriers that may interrupt movement through these stages. A qualitative desk-based design combined documentary analysis of five national policy and operational instruments with a narrative review of selected empirical literature relevant to Nigeria, drawing on nine journal articles, a national survey report, and a monitoring report. Materials were located through online searches of scholarly platforms and official websites, and were analysed across identification and disclosure, reporting, referral, protection and support, and follow-up and accountability. Four themes emerged: formal reporting and referral mechanisms; access to protection and support; barriers to disclosure and reporting; and implementation, coordination, and follow-up. The instruments established intended safeguarding arrangements, while empirical studies identified difficulties involving trust, responses to disclosure, adult reporting practices, and service access. Evidence directly tracing school cases through referral completion and continuing protection was limited. The review concludes that reporting and referral alone do not establish receipt of appropriate assistance. It recommends accessible reporting arrangements, practical safeguarding training, functional service connections, and confidential follow-up. Further research should examine referral completion and protective outcomes across diverse school settings, using retrospective record review and ethical prospective case tracking. Because the review was purposive rather than systematic, its findings are an interpretive synthesis and not a measure of national effectiveness.

Keywords: school safeguarding, violence against children, reporting, referral, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Violence against children remains an important child-protection and educational concern in Nigeria. Within school settings, children may experience physical, sexual and psychological violence, bullying and other forms of abuse that threaten their safety and well-being. Effective protection therefore requires not only prevention but also mechanisms through which affected children can disclose violence and access appropriate support.

Nigeria has developed policies and institutional mechanisms to strengthen school safety and child protection. The National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools in Nigeria with its Implementing Guidelines provides for the prevention, reporting and referral of violence in schools (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021b). This is complemented by the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools, the National School Safeguarding Referral Pathway and the National School Safeguarding Action Plan. The Managing Violence in

Schools: Handbook for Schools and Learning Centres further provides practical guidance for recognising and responding to violence (Federal Ministry of Education, 2025). However, the existence of formal mechanisms does not guarantee that cases enter or progress through the safeguarding system. Asaolu and Oladepo (2026) identified stigma, shame, distrust of adults, perpetrator manipulation and limited knowledge as barriers to reporting child sexual abuse among secondary-school students. Similarly, knowledge of child-abuse reporting among teachers may not necessarily translate into reporting practice (Adamu & Alao, 2025). Effective safeguarding also depends on coordination among schools and relevant child-protection institutions and on the capacity to implement established procedures.

This review examines how Nigeria's school safeguarding and referral framework connects the reporting of violence against children with protection and support. It has two objectives: first, to examine the responsibilities and mechanisms established for reporting, referral, protection and follow-up; and second, to synthesise evidence on barriers that may interrupt movement through these stages. The review brings policy provisions and empirical findings into a common analytical framework, distinguishing what safeguarding instruments prescribe from what available studies indicate about implementation. Its contribution lies in examining the connections between stages of the safeguarding pathway, rather than treating disclosure, reporting and service access as separate outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria has established policy and operational instruments for addressing violence against children in schools. The National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools in Nigeria, the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools and the National School Safeguarding Referral Pathway provide an intended framework for recognising concerns, reporting and initiating appropriate responses (Federal Ministry of Education, n.d.-b, 2021a, 2021b). However, the existence of these arrangements does not establish whether reported concerns consistently result in protection and support. Available empirical evidence identifies difficulties at different stages of response. Asaolu and Oladepo (2026) identified stigma, shame, distrust of adults, perpetrator manipulation and limited knowledge as perceived barriers to reporting child sexual abuse among adolescent leaders in selected secondary schools. Among primary-school teachers, high reporting knowledge was not significantly associated with reporting practices (Adamu & Alao, 2025). Additional school-based evidence describes disbelief, silence and minimisation following disclosure (Omar et al., 2026), while research on service access identifies poor referral arrangements and difficulties reaching appropriate assistance (Ikuteyijo et al., 2023).

At the institutional level, UNICEF's (2024) monitoring report provides evidence concerning implementation of the wider Minimum Standards for Safe Schools. Onaolapo and Makhasane (2025) also highlight school management practices and recommend stronger collaboration among administrators, local police and other stakeholders. These sources inform understanding of implementation conditions, although neither directly measures the progression of individual school safeguarding cases towards protection.

The reviewed evidence therefore illuminates particular stages and institutional conditions, but provides limited direct examination of the complete school safeguarding pathway. Several studies also predate the more recent instruments or concern community settings rather than school referrals. The problem addressed by this review is the relationship between prescribed safeguarding arrangements and evidence concerning barriers to their operation. By examining policy provisions alongside empirical findings, the review seeks to clarify the connections between reporting, referral and protection, and identify implementation questions requiring further investigation.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Violence Against Children and School Safeguarding

Violence against children provides the broader context within which school safeguarding must be understood. The national Violence Against Children Survey conducted in 2014 documents physical, sexual and emotional violence in Nigeria, establishing that child protection extends beyond any single form of abuse or institutional

setting (National Population Commission of Nigeria et al., 2016). For school safeguarding, this broader perspective is important because concerns affecting learners may originate within schools, homes or communities. Schools may therefore encounter children requiring protection even when the violence itself occurred elsewhere. However, the survey predates the subsequent school safeguarding instruments and should be used as contextual evidence rather than an assessment of their effectiveness.

School safeguarding consequently encompasses prevention, identification and appropriate responses to harm, alongside the physical security of educational premises. The Managing Violence in Schools handbook provides practical guidance for learners, teachers, headteachers and school managers on preventing and responding to violence (Federal Ministry of Education, 2025). Its relevance lies in locating safeguarding within everyday educational practice, including staff preparation and responses to incidents. This understanding requires attention to what happens after a concern becomes known, as well as to measures intended to prevent violence. This review uses the reporting-to-protection pathway as an analytical framework connecting identification and disclosure, reporting, referral, protection and support, and follow-up and accountability. These stages represent related activities rather than an inevitable sequence. A child may disclose violence without a formal report being made, while an institutional report or referral may occur without confirmation that appropriate assistance was received. Examining the connections between stages helps distinguish the existence of safeguarding procedures from evidence that those procedures produce protective responses.

Nigeria's School Safeguarding Policy and Operational Instruments

The National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools in Nigeria with its Implementing Guidelines establishes the overarching policy context for protecting educational environments (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021b). It positions safety and protection from violence within the responsibilities of the education sector. For this review, the policy provides the foundation against which more specific standards and operational arrangements can be examined. Its existence demonstrates a formal commitment to safeguarding, but does not by itself establish consistent implementation. The Minimum Standards for Safe Schools translates this commitment into institutional expectations (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021a). Its guiding principles include zero tolerance of violence, professional training, confidential handling of complaints, clear leadership and documentation and escalation of concerns. These provisions connect safeguarding with organisational capacity. They indicate that responding appropriately requires personnel who understand their responsibilities and institutional arrangements that support action, alongside accessible reporting channels.

The National School Safeguarding Referral Pathway addresses how concerns about learners' safety should be reported, assessed and addressed (Federal Ministry of Education, n.d.-b). Its official description identifies guidance on relevant contacts, reporting and subsequent action, while recognising the role of states in establishing suitable arrangements using national guidelines. The pathway therefore provides an operational connection between recognising a concern and initiating a wider response. Nevertheless, prescribed steps should be distinguished from evidence that cases consistently progress through them.

The National School Safeguarding Action Plan complements these arrangements by outlining strategies, initiatives and resources for implementing the referral pathway and safeguarding guidance (Federal Ministry of Education, n.d.-a). The pathway and action plan serve different but connected purposes: one addresses the progression of concerns, while the other concerns preparations intended to support implementation. Read together with the policy, standards and handbook, they constitute an interconnected set of safeguarding instruments. Their practical effectiveness remains dependent on how responsibilities and resources are translated into action.

Disclosure and the Transition to Formal Assistance

Evidence on disclosure demonstrates why safeguarding cannot be assessed solely through formal reports. Pereira et al. (2020) analysed nationally representative Violence Against Children Survey data from six countries, including Nigeria, among adolescents aged 13–17 years. They distinguished informal disclosure,

knowledge of formal sources of assistance, formal disclosure or help-seeking, and receipt of formal help. These are separate outcomes: knowing where assistance is available does not establish that it was sought, and seeking assistance does not establish that it was received.

The study supports examining the connections between disclosure and services rather than treating reporting as a sufficient outcome. However, its survey design does not follow individual school referrals through successive institutions. It informs understanding of help-seeking patterns without directly evaluating Nigeria's subsequent school safeguarding instruments.

Nguyen et al. (2021) examined sexual violence disclosure among girls and young women aged 13–24 years using survey data from Nigeria and Malawi. In Nigeria, approximately 37% of respondents who had experienced sexual violence had disclosed it. Close relationships with parents were associated with disclosure, demonstrating the relevance of interpersonal relationships to whether experiences became known.

These findings support attention to trusted adults within the safeguarding process. However, the population includes young adults as well as children, and the study addresses sexual violence rather than all forms of violence affecting learners. Disclosure to a parent also does not establish that professional assistance or a school referral followed.

David et al. (2018) provide complementary community-based evidence from South Western Nigeria. Their study involved 398 adolescents aged 10–19 years, and only 34.4% of those reporting child sexual abuse had disclosed it. This finding demonstrates that experiences of abuse may remain unknown to people or institutions capable of responding.

The study helps explain why institutional records cannot be assumed to capture the full extent of children's need for protection. Nevertheless, its community setting and inclusion of older adolescents limit its use as evidence about school reporting procedures. Its contribution concerns the visibility of abuse, rather than the effectiveness of a particular school safeguarding mechanism.

School Experiences and Barriers to Disclosure

School-based research provides more specific insight into the conditions surrounding disclosure. Asaolu and Oladepo (2026) interviewed 16 senior prefects from eight public secondary schools in Ibadan. Participants identified stigma, shame, distrust of adults, perpetrator manipulation, strained parent–child relationships and limited knowledge of child sexual abuse as barriers to reporting. These findings indicate that the availability of a reporting channel may be insufficient where children anticipate adverse reactions. However, the study represents adolescent leaders' perspectives within selected schools. It should not be presented as a nationally representative account or assumed to describe the direct experiences of all survivors.

Omar et al. (2026) examined disclosure among secondary-school adolescents in Sokoto Metropolis through a mixed-methods study comprising 308 complete quantitative responses and 25 qualitative interviews. Disclosure was limited, and qualitative findings described responses including disbelief, silence and minimisation.

Together, the Ibadan and Sokoto studies draw attention to the social reception of disclosure. Safeguarding depends partly on whether children regard adults as trustworthy and whether those who receive disclosures respond appropriately. Their different settings contribute contextual breadth, but neither study directly measures the national referral pathway's performance or establishes the prevalence of these barriers throughout Nigeria.

Teachers and Formal Reporting Practices

Teachers occupy an important position between recognising concerns and initiating formal responses. Adamu and Alao (2025) surveyed 314 public primary-school teachers in Alimosho Local Government Area, Lagos State. Although reported knowledge of child-abuse reporting was high, the study found no statistically significant relationship between knowledge and reporting practices.

The finding challenges the assumption that knowledge alone reliably produces reporting. It supports examining how responsibilities are acted upon within schools. Nevertheless, the cross-sectional association does not establish why teachers did or did not report, prove that training is ineffective, or identify the institutional conditions responsible for reporting behaviour. Its geographical scope also limits generalisation to teachers across Nigeria.

Referral and Access to Protection and Support

Evidence concerning services extends the analysis beyond disclosure and reporting. Ikuteyijo et al. (2023) used an ethnographic approach involving health providers, adolescents and young women in ten low-income communities in Lagos and Ibadan. They identified poor referral arrangements, gaps in counselling and rehabilitation services, inadequate provider training and limited knowledge of help-seeking pathways. Their findings also described difficulties completing referrals because of distance and the complexity of referral arrangements.

The study shows why issuing a referral should be distinguished from accessing assistance. For school safeguarding, it identifies service conditions that may affect what happens after a concern is escalated. However, its focus is sexual and gender-based violence within intimate relationships and community healthcare settings. It informs understanding of access barriers without directly demonstrating the performance of school-initiated referrals.

Sodipo et al. (2018) offer a contrasting perspective through a retrospective examination of 2,160 case files at the Mirabel Centre in Lagos. Minors and adolescents formed the majority of survivors, and police referrals accounted for 76.7% of cases. The study demonstrates that formal institutions can connect survivors with specialist services.

However, a service-based sample contains people who reached the centre and excludes those who never disclosed, were not referred or could not attend. It therefore cannot establish the proportion of all affected children who receive assistance, assess school referral performance nationally or demonstrate sustained protection following service contact. Read alongside Ikuteyijo et al. (2023), it distinguishes the existence and use of specialist services from the barriers affecting access to them.

Institutional Capacity and Coordination

UNICEF's (2024) monitoring report examines implementation of the wider Minimum Standards for Safe Schools. It provides relevant context for considering the institutional environment within which safeguarding responsibilities operate. However, wider school-safety monitoring is different from tracing individual cases through reporting, referral, service receipt and follow-up. It should therefore inform discussion of implementation conditions without being treated as a direct measure of successful child-protection referrals.

Onaolapo and Makhasane (2025) examined security and safety management through interviews with six managers from three rural secondary schools in Nigeria. They described school-level safety strategies and recommended greater collaboration among administrators, local police and other stakeholders. Their contribution is an organisational perspective on the relationships through which schools seek to maintain safe environments.

This perspective is relevant where safeguarding responsibilities extend beyond school personnel. Nevertheless, collaboration was recommended within a broader safety and security study; it was not demonstrated as a measured cause of successful referrals. The study consequently complements the policy and service-access literature without establishing referral completion or subsequent protection.

Synthesis and the Contribution of the Review

The reviewed literature provides evidence at different levels. The national survey establishes the wider context of violence against children. Policy and operational instruments describe intended safeguarding responsibiliti-

ties. Survey and community studies examine disclosure and help-seeking, while school-based research addresses reporting barriers and adult practices. Service research identifies both access difficulties and institutional routes through which survivors reach assistance. Monitoring and school-management studies provide contextual evidence concerning implementation and coordination.

These sources also differ in their populations, geographical coverage, time periods and research designs. Several concern sexual violence specifically, while others address broader school safety. Their findings should therefore be connected through careful interpretation rather than treated as equivalent measures of safeguarding effectiveness.

Within the reviewed materials, limited evidence directly follows school safeguarding cases through the complete reporting-to-protection pathway. The present review addresses this analytical gap by examining prescribed procedures alongside evidence concerning barriers at different stages. Its contribution is to clarify where existing research informs understanding of the pathway, where conclusions require qualification, and where further investigation of implementation and protective outcomes is needed.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative desk-based design combining documentary analysis with a narrative review of empirical literature. Documentary analysis examined the provisions of Nigeria's school safeguarding and referral instruments, while the literature review examined evidence on disclosure, reporting, service access and institutional response. This approach enabled comparison between the responsibilities established in policy documents and the implementation challenges identified in available studies.

Sources and Selection of Materials

The documentary component comprised five principal instruments: the National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools in Nigeria with its Implementing Guidelines; the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools; the National School Safeguarding Action Plan; the National School Safeguarding Referral Pathway; and Managing Violence in Schools: Handbook for Schools and Learning Centres. These materials were obtained from official Federal Ministry of Education, Ministry eLearn and UNICEF websites. Supporting implementation evidence included UNICEF's monitoring report on the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools.

Empirical materials were located through online searches and consultation of scholarly platforms and publisher websites, including African Journals Online, PubMed, SAGE, Frontiers, BMC and Healthcare. Selection was guided by relevance to violence against children in Nigeria and to one or more stages of the safeguarding pathway. Multi-country studies were included where they reported findings relevant to Nigeria.

Priority was given to recent peer-reviewed studies addressing disclosure, child-abuse reporting, referral, service access and institutional response. Earlier studies were retained where they contributed relevant evidence on help-seeking or responses following disclosure. Official reports and other contextual materials were considered where they informed the interpretation of policy provisions or implementation conditions. The review was purposive rather than exhaustive and did not employ a systematic-review protocol.

Analytical Procedure

Materials were examined against the study's two objectives: identifying the reporting, referral and protection mechanisms established within the national framework, and examining barriers affecting their implementation. The analysis was organised around five stages: identification and disclosure; reporting; referral; protection and support; and follow-up and accountability. Institutional capacity and coordination were considered across these stages.

For policy documents, attention was given to assigned responsibilities, reporting channels, referral arrangem-

ents, support services and provisions for documentation and follow-up. For empirical studies, attention was given to the study setting, population and findings relevant to movement through the safeguarding pathway. Policy provisions and empirical findings were then compared to identify points at which concerns might fail to progress towards appropriate protection and support.

The synthesis distinguished prescribed procedures from evidence of practice. The existence of a policy provision was therefore not treated as evidence of its consistent implementation. Findings from geographically limited studies were interpreted within their reported settings rather than generalised to all Nigerian schools. Evidence concerning sexual violence was also distinguished from evidence addressing violence against children more broadly.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

The review did not use a prospectively documented search strategy, formal screening counts or a standardised quality-appraisal instrument. It consequently cannot establish that all relevant studies were identified or provide a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of Nigeria's safeguarding framework.

The included evidence also varies in population, geographical coverage and focus. Several studies address sexual violence or community-based service access rather than school safeguarding directly. These studies inform understanding of barriers along the protection pathway, but do not establish how the national school referral framework operates in every setting. Similarly, monitoring of the wider Minimum Standards for Safe Schools provides contextual implementation evidence rather than a direct measure of referral outcomes.

The findings should therefore be understood as an interpretive synthesis of policy provisions and selected empirical evidence. They identify potential weaknesses and priorities for further investigation without establishing national rates of successful referral or protection.

FINDINGS

Documentary analysis and synthesis of the selected empirical literature identified four themes: formal reporting and referral mechanisms; access to protection and support; barriers to disclosure and reporting; and implementation, coordination and follow-up. Documentary findings concern prescribed arrangements, while empirical findings describe experiences and practices within the populations and settings studied.

Formal Reporting and Referral Mechanisms

The reviewed documents establish interconnected policy and operational arrangements for responding to violence affecting learners. The National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools in Nigeria with its Implementing Guidelines provides the overarching policy framework (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021b). The Minimum Standards for Safe Schools specifies institutional expectations concerning trained personnel, confidential handling of complaints, clear leadership, documentation and escalation of concerns (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021a).

Within this framework, the National School Safeguarding Referral Pathway outlines how concerns should be reported and addressed, including relevant contacts and subsequent action (Federal Ministry of Education, n.d.-b). The National School Safeguarding Action Plan identifies strategies, initiatives and resources intended to support implementation of the pathway and safeguarding guidance (Federal Ministry of Education, n.d.-a). The Managing Violence in Schools handbook complements these instruments with practical guidance for school personnel on preventing and responding to violence (Federal Ministry of Education, 2025).

The documentary synthesis therefore identified provisions covering the recognition of concerns, reporting, escalation and further response. These are findings about the formal arrangements rather than their implementation across individual schools.

Access to Protection and Support

The empirical literature reported differences between disclosure, help-seeking and receipt of assistance. Pereira et al. (2020), analysing Violence Against Children Survey data that included Nigeria, examined informal disclosure, knowledge of formal services, formal disclosure or help-seeking, and receipt of formal help as separate outcomes. Their findings showed that these activities occurred at different levels among adolescents who had experienced violence.

Studies of service access reported both barriers and established referral routes. Ikuteyijo et al. (2023), working in low-income communities in Lagos and Ibadan, identified poor referral arrangements, gaps in counselling and rehabilitation services, inadequate provider training and limited knowledge of help-seeking pathways. Participants also described difficulties attending referred services because of distance and the complexity of referral arrangements.

At the Mirabel Centre in Lagos, Sodipo et al. (2018) reviewed 2,160 case files. Minors and adolescents constituted the majority of survivors, and police referrals accounted for 76.7% of cases received. The reviewed service evidence thus included difficulties accessing assistance within community settings and documented institutional referrals to a specialist centre.

Barriers to Disclosure and Reporting

Nondisclosure was reported across national survey analyses, community research and school-based studies. The national Violence Against Children Survey documented physical, sexual and emotional violence alongside information on disclosure and access to assistance (National Population Commission of Nigeria et al., 2016). In more specific studies of sexual violence, David et al. (2018) reported disclosure among 34.4% of participants who had experienced child sexual abuse in their South Western Nigerian community sample. Nguyen et al. (2021) reported disclosure among approximately 37% of Nigerian girls and young women who had experienced sexual violence, with close parental relationships associated with disclosure.

School-based qualitative evidence identified barriers surrounding disclosure. Asaolu and Oladepo (2026), interviewing senior prefects from eight public secondary schools in Ibadan, reported perceived barriers including stigma, shame, distrust of adults, perpetrator manipulation, strained parent–child relationships and limited knowledge of child sexual abuse. Omar et al. (2026), studying secondary-school adolescents in Sokoto Metropolis, reported limited disclosure and accounts of disbelief, silence and minimisation following disclosure.

Adult reporting practices formed a further part of this theme. Adamu and Alao (2025) found high reported knowledge of child-abuse reporting among public primary-school teachers in Alimosho, Lagos State, but no statistically significant relationship between knowledge and reporting practices. Across the reviewed studies, the reported barriers concerned children's communication of abuse, responses to disclosure and adults' reporting behaviour.

Implementation, Coordination and Follow-up

The documentary materials assign importance to institutional preparation and coordination. The Minimum Standards for Safe Schools includes expectations concerning leadership, professional training, documentation and escalation, while the National School Safeguarding Action Plan addresses arrangements intended to support implementation (Federal Ministry of Education, n.d.-a, 2021a).

The implementation evidence reviewed concerned wider school-safety conditions and school management practices. UNICEF's (2024) monitoring report assessed implementation of the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools. Onaolapo and Makhasane (2025), interviewing six managers from three rural secondary schools, described school safety strategies and recommended stronger collaboration among administrators, local police and other stakeholders.

Within the selected sources, evidence directly tracking school safeguarding cases through referral completion, service receipt and subsequent follow-up was limited. The synthesis therefore identified formal implementation expectations and contextual evidence on school safety and coordination, but did not establish national outcomes for completed referrals or continuing protection.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From Formal Arrangements to Protective Outcomes

The first objective examined the reporting, referral and protection mechanisms within Nigeria's school safeguarding framework. The findings identify interconnected instruments covering policy commitments, institutional standards, reporting procedures and implementation arrangements (Federal Ministry of Education, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, 2021a, 2021b, 2025). Their significance lies in recognising safeguarding as a responsibility that extends beyond identifying and recording violence.

The central issue emerging from the synthesis is whether these prescribed connections translate into protective outcomes. Reporting brings a concern to institutional attention, but protection requires an appropriate response. Similarly, issuing a referral does not establish that a child reached a service or received assistance. The framework should therefore be examined through the progression of concerns between stages, alongside the availability of procedures at each stage.

This distinction changes how safeguarding performance is understood. Reports recorded, personnel trained and referrals issued provide useful information about activities. They do not, individually, establish that children received suitable support or experienced improved safety. The findings support examining these later outcomes while recognising that the present review does not measure them nationally.

Disclosure and the Reception of Concerns

The second objective examined barriers affecting movement through the pathway. Evidence of nondisclosure indicates that difficulties may arise before formal procedures are activated (David et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2021). School-based accounts of stigma, distrust, disbelief and minimisation further suggest that the reception children anticipate or encounter matters to whether concerns become known (Asaolu & Oladepo, 2026; Omar et al., 2026).

Reporting accessibility consequently involves relationships as well as procedures. A designated contact may be available, yet children may hesitate to approach that person if disclosure appears socially costly or unlikely to produce assistance. Child-friendly arrangements therefore need to address how concerns are received, including respectful listening, clear explanations of subsequent action and careful handling of sensitive information.

Informal relationships also matter. Nguyen et al. (2021) found that close parental relationships were associated with disclosure among Nigerian girls and young women. However, trusted disclosure is only one part of the response. Pereira et al.'s (2020) distinction between informal disclosure, formal help-seeking and receipt of assistance shows why telling someone should not be assumed to result in professional support. The safeguarding task includes connecting an initial disclosure with appropriate action.

Adult Reporting and Practical Preparation

Adults influence whether recognised concerns progress into formal response arrangements. Adamu and Alao's (2025) finding of no statistically significant relationship between reporting knowledge and reporting practices challenges reliance on awareness as a sufficient indicator of readiness to act.

The implication is to examine practical preparation alongside knowledge. Personnel need to understand how to receive concerns, document relevant information and contact appropriate services within their responsibilities. This aligns with the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools' emphasis on professional training and confidential handling of complaints (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021a).

The finding does not establish why teachers failed to report or demonstrate that training is ineffective. It does, however, support evaluating preparation through its application in practice. Knowledge assessments can show what personnel understand; additional evidence is needed to establish whether that understanding informs appropriate responses.

Referral Completion and Service Access

The service literature highlights the distinction between referring a survivor and securing access to assistance. Ikuteyijo et al. (2023) identified difficulties involving referral arrangements, distance, service availability and provider preparation. Sodipo et al. (2018), meanwhile, documented institutional routes through which survivors reached specialist assistance at the Mirabel Centre.

These findings are complementary rather than contradictory. The service-based study describes people who reached a centre, while the community research examines conditions that can obstruct access. Together, they show why the existence and use of services can coexist with barriers affecting other survivors.

For school safeguarding, the implication is that referral completion deserves attention beyond the initial transfer of a concern. Schools operate within a wider protection environment and depend on services outside education for some forms of assistance. Clear contacts and workable connections between institutions are therefore relevant to whether the intended pathway can be completed. The cited studies inform this interpretation, although they do not directly evaluate school referrals under the national framework.

Coordination, Follow-up and Accountability

The formal instruments recognise institutional preparation, while wider school-safety evidence addresses implementation conditions and collaboration (Federal Ministry of Education, n.d.-a, 2021a; UNICEF, 2024; Onaolapo & Makhasane, 2025). The practical question is how these arrangements connect responsibilities when a concern moves beyond the school.

Coordination should be assessed through the actions it enables. Relevant questions include whether referrals reach the intended service, whether receipt is acknowledged and whether responsibility for subsequent action is clear. An initial report can otherwise be documented without sufficient information about what followed.

The limited evidence tracking school cases through service receipt and continuing safety makes follow-up an important implementation question. This does not establish that follow-up is absent. It identifies a gap in the evidence available to assess continuity of response. Monitoring should therefore distinguish referrals issued from referrals completed and assistance received, with safeguards for confidentiality and access to sensitive case information.

Contribution and Limitations

This review connects national evidence on violence against children (National Population Commission of Nigeria et al., 2016) with research on disclosure, adult reporting, service access and school management, alongside the formal safeguarding instruments. Its contribution is to examine how these bodies of evidence relate to successive stages of the reporting-to-protection pathway. The synthesis identifies reporting as an entry point whose protective value depends on subsequent action.

The conclusions remain bounded by the narrative selection of sources, the geographical concentration of several studies and the predominance of sexual-violence research within the detailed disclosure evidence. Several studies also predate the more recent instruments, and no standardised quality appraisal was undertaken. The review consequently identifies relevant barriers and implementation questions rather than demonstrating the national effectiveness of the framework. The absence of a predefined search protocol also

means that relevant studies may not have been identified, and a systematic review with documented search and appraisal procedures would complement this synthesis. Differences in governance structures between

states and local government areas may further affect implementation; these were not examined in detail here and are identified below as a research priority.

Further research should follow school safeguarding concerns across institutions to examine referral completion, access to appropriate assistance and continuing safety. Such evidence would strengthen assessment of whether formal reporting arrangements result in the protection and support they are intended to provide.

CONCLUSION

This review examined Nigeria's school safeguarding and referral framework and barriers affecting movement from disclosure to protection. The documentary analysis identified interconnected policy and operational instruments. The empirical synthesis identified difficulties involving disclosure, adult reporting and service access, alongside evidence concerning implementation and coordination.

The central conclusion is that reporting and referral do not, by themselves, establish that a child received appropriate assistance. Effective safeguarding requires continuity between disclosure, responsible adult action, referral completion and support.

Although the reviewed evidence does not establish national referral or protection outcomes, it identifies priorities for strengthening implementation. These include accessible reporting, clear institutional responsibilities, functional service connections and appropriate follow-up. Retrospective record review and ethical prospective case tracking across school types and locations would allow these priorities to be tested against children's actual pathways.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below follow from the evidence reviewed. They are grouped into actions for schools and education authorities and priorities for future research, and they are limited by the scope of the sources examined.

Child-Friendly Reporting

Schools should provide reporting arrangements that learners understand and can use without intimidation. Personnel should receive concerns respectfully, explain subsequent action and protect confidentiality without promising secrecy that could prevent necessary protective action.

Practical Safeguarding Training

Training should prepare teachers and designated personnel to receive disclosures, document concerns and initiate reporting and referral. Evaluation should assess practical application alongside knowledge of procedures.

Functional Referral Connections

Schools should maintain current contacts for relevant protection services. Arrangements should clarify receiving institutions and expected action. Agencies should address access barriers while keeping professional responsibilities with appropriately qualified personnel.

Follow-up and Accountability

Safeguarding procedures should assign responsibility for confirming referral receipt and obtaining appropriate feedback. Monitoring should distinguish reports, referrals issued, referrals completed and assistance received, with case information restricted to authorised personnel.

Priorities for Future Research

The main evidence gap identified by this review is the absence of studies that follow school safeguarding concerns from the point of report through referral completion to continuing protection. Future research could address this gap through the approaches below.

Retrospective Record Review

Researchers could examine anonymised school safeguarding records alongside the records of receiving services, such as child protection agencies, health facilities and referral centres, to reconstruct how concerns were reported, referred and resolved. Such reviews would show how many concerns reach each stage of the pathway, how long each step takes and where cases stop. They are a practical starting point because they draw on existing records, although the completeness of record keeping would need to be assessed, and access would require institutional permission and strong confidentiality protections.

Ethical Prospective Case Tracking

Prospective studies could follow concerns from the initial report through referral, receipt of assistance and continuing safety. Such designs would need ethical approval, informed consent or assent as appropriate, and arrangements that never delay or replace a school's duty to act on a concern. Data collection should be trauma-informed and carried out by trained researchers, with children's safety and confidentiality taking precedence over research needs. Where tracking individual children is not appropriate, services could instead report anonymised counts and time intervals for each stage of the pathway.

Multiple School Types and Locations

Studies should include public and private schools, primary and secondary levels, and urban, semi-urban and rural settings across more than one geopolitical zone. Comparing states and local government areas would also show how differences in governance and in the capacity of local education and child protection authorities shape implementation, which this review could not examine in detail.

Forms of Violence and Groups of Children

Research should extend beyond sexual violence to the physical, emotional and psychological harm covered by the national framework. It should also include boys, children with disabilities and other children who may face additional barriers to reporting, so that differences in access to protection can be identified.

Evaluation of Recent Instruments

Several reviewed studies predate the most recent policy and operational instruments. Research that tracks implementation of the national policy, the referral pathway and the 2025 handbook over time (Federal Ministry of Education, n.d.-b, 2021b, 2025) would show whether reporting and referral outcomes have changed since their introduction.

Outcome Measures and Perspectives

Studies should measure outcomes at each stage of the pathway: whether concerns were reported, referrals issued, referrals received and completed, assistance provided and the child's continuing safety. Accounts from learners, teachers, designated personnel and service providers, combined with record data, would help explain why cases progress or stop.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was not required for this study. It is a desk-based documentary analysis and narrative literatu-

re review of published studies and publicly available policy documents. It involved no human participants or animals, and no primary data were collected.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

No new datasets were generated in this study. All policy documents, reports and published studies analysed are publicly available, and their sources and links are provided in the References.

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