



POLICY BRIEF

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Addressing the Crisis of Infant Abandonment in Nigeria: Legislative Pathways for Effective Intervention

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Executive Summary

The case of infant abandonment has emerged as a critical social and human rights crisis in Nigeria, with hundreds of cases reported annually across states. Despite existing laws such as the Child Rights Act, 2003 and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015, enforcement remains weak, and many infants continue to be abandoned in unsafe environments. However, the drivers of this crisis include economic hardship, social stigma surrounding single motherhood, mental health challenges, and inadequate family support systems. Current legal frameworks criminalize abandonment but fail to provide preventive and rehabilitative measures.

This Policy Brief highlights the urgent need for legislative intervention to strengthen child protection mechanisms, expand maternal support programmes, and introduce Safe Haven Laws that allow mothers to relinquish infants safely without criminal liability. It also calls for public awareness campaigns, improved data collection, and stronger enforcement structures to ensure accountability.

Without decisive legislative action, Nigeria risks perpetuating cycles of neglect and abuse that undermine child rights and public health. By adopting the comprehensive legislative approach combining preventive, punitive, and supportive measures, Nigeria can safeguard its most vulnerable citizens and uphold its constitutional and international obligations. The Policy Brief, therefore, recommends that:

1. The National Assembly, through the Senate and House Committee on Judiciary and Human Rights, may strengthen enforcement mechanisms for the Child Rights Act in Nigeria by encouraging and lobbying the State Houses of Assembly and the State Government to adopt the Child Rights Act across all the 36 states with the FCT inclusive, and also establish special child protection units within the Nigerian police and the social welfare agencies across Nigeria.



2. The Federal, State, and, of course, the Local Governments in Nigeria need to expand Social Safety Nets (SSN) by introducing maternal support programs such as free housing, food stipends, and counselling support for mothers in need of such. In addition, they should also provide free mental health services for mothers at risk of abandonment.
3. The National Assembly may also enact a Safe Haven Laws. That is, to legislate on designated Children Safe Drop-Off Centers where mothers can leave infants without criminal liability which can bring greater result by working closely with institutions as the Hospitals, Police Stations, Mosques, and the churches. Similar models exist in the United States of America (U.S.) and most of the European countries which has been a major factor in reducing unsafe infant abandonment in those countries.
4. The Senate and House Committees on National Orientation may through the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the Federal Ministry of Health coordinate Public Awareness Campaigns by nationwide campaigns programmes to destigmatize single motherhood in Nigeria. In the same vein, these government agencies may also partner with religious and community leaders to promote child protection.
5. Lastly, the Federal Government through the coordinated collaboration among the relevant government bodies like: Federal Ministry of Health, Federal Ministry of Environment, Federal Ministry of Communication and Digital Economy, and the Nigerian Police Force, should embark on data collection & monitoring of infant abandonment in Nigeria which will ensure mandatory reporting of abandonment cases by hospitals and law enforcement agencies nationwide in order to track incidents and interventions.

Introduction

Infant abandonment is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria; it has been documented for decades as a recurring social and public health crisis. Historically, cases were often linked to poverty, teenage pregnancies, and cultural stigma surrounding births outside of marriage. In the 1980s and 1990s, reports from urban centers such as Lagos and Ibadan highlighted growing numbers of infants found in refuse dumps, markets, and public toilets.¹ The problem intensified in the early 2000s, coinciding with rapid urbanization, economic instability, and rising

¹ Adepoju Onibokun & Adetoye Faniran (2013). *Urbanization and Urban Problems in Nigeria*, Urban Research in Nigeria. Open Edition Books. <https://books.openedition.org/ifra/pdf/544?> Retrieved on 15th June, 2026.



unemployment. The Child Rights Act (2003) was introduced to provide a legal framework for child protection, but uneven adoption across states weakened its impact. By 2012, Lagos State alone recorded over 200 cases of infant abandonment annually, underscoring the scale of the crisis.²

In recent years, the issue has become more visible due to media coverage and advocacy by civil society organizations. The National Human Rights Commission reported 339 complaints of child abandonment in February 2024 alone, reflecting both increased reporting and persistent systemic failures.³ Despite existing laws, the absence of preventive measures such as safe haven alternatives and maternal support programmes has left vulnerable mothers with few options, perpetuating cycles of abandonment.

Content

1. **Weak Enforcement of Existing Laws:** Although Nigeria has enacted the Child Rights Act (2003) and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015), enforcement remains inconsistent across states. Many offenders escape accountability due to corruption, poor policing, and a lack of awareness among citizens. For example, almost all states in Nigeria have domesticated the Child Rights Act, leaving gaps in the impact and extent of its execution and protection for children in states that have not adopted the law.⁴
2. **Socio-economic Pressures and Poverty:** There is currently widespread unemployment, homelessness, and economic hardship in Nigeria which are contributing to infant abandonment. Mothers facing extreme poverty often lack access to affordable shelters, food, or healthcare services, pushing them toward desperate measures. A 2019 report by Punch Media Foundation highlighted that economic hardship was the leading factor in over 60% of abandonment cases.⁵

² Punch Media Foundation. "Nigeria's Growing Problem of Child Abandonment". <https://punchfoundation.org/nigerias-growing-problem-of-child-abandonment/> Retrieved on 15th July, 2026

³ Editorial Board (October 9th, 2025) "Multi-dimensional imperative to stemming tide of infant abandonment". The Guardian. https://guardian.ng/opinion/multi-dimensional-imperative-to-stemming-tide-of-infant-abandonment/?utm_source=copilot.com retrieved on 15th June, 2026.

⁴ Onyesi, C. (September 23rd, 2023), "Nigeria's Implementation of Child Rights Act still at Zero-Experts". Daily Post. <https://dailypost.ng/2023/09/23/nigerias-implementation-of-child-rights-act-still-at-zero-experts/> retrieved on 15th March, 2026.

⁵ Punch Media Foundation. "Nigeria's Growing Problem of Child Abandonment". <https://punchfoundation.org/nigerias-growing-problem-of-child-abandonment/> Retrieved on 15th July, 2026



3. Social Stigma and Cultural Beliefs: Single mothers, especially teenagers, face severe stigma, leading to secrecy around pregnancies and abandonment of infants.

In some communities, infants are abandoned due to superstitious beliefs, such as being labeled witches or cursed.⁶

4. Mental Health Challenges: Postpartum depression and untreated mental health conditions are significant but under-recognized drivers of abandonment.⁷

Nigeria's mental health infrastructure is weak, with less than 300 psychiatrists serving a population of over 200 million, leaving vulnerable mothers without adequate support.

5. Absence of Safe Haven Alternatives: Unlike countries such as the United States, Nigeria lacks Safe Haven Laws that allow mothers to safely relinquish infants at hospitals or police stations without facing prosecution. This legislative gap forces mothers into unsafe abandonment practices, increasing infant mortality.⁸

Current Legal Framework

1. There exist the Child Rights Act, 2003, which guarantees protection from abuse and neglect of a Child in Nigeria, but implementation is uneven across states.
2. There is also a Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act enacted in 2015. This Act Criminalizes children abandonment in Nigeria and also prescribes up to 3 years imprisonment or ₦500,000 fine for the culprits or violators of the Law.
3. In addition, section 34(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) upholds dignity and protection of individuals, including children.
4. Lastly, state Laws (e.g., Lagos Criminal Code 2011) provides additional penalties for children abandonment.^{9,10}

⁶Editorial Board (October 9th, 2025) "*Multi-dimensional imperative to stemming tide of infant abandonment*". The Guardian. https://guardian.ng/opinion/multi-dimensional-imperative-to-stemming-tide-of-infant-abandonment/?utm_source=copilot.com retrieved on 15th June, 2026.

⁷ WHO. "*Mental Health Atlas 2020*". <https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/912699ec-18d0-4b78-be50-366c2f8ec616/content> retrieved on June 15th, 2026.

⁸ Raphael, C.V., Bamidele I., Akinleye, B., "*An examination of nigeria's legal framework for the protection of children and their mental health*". International Journal of Law. Volume 11, Issue 6, 2025, Page No. 24-31 <https://www.lawjournals.org/assets/archives/2025/vol11issue6/1112⁵.pdf> retrieved on 14th June, 2026.

⁹ Punch Media Foundation. "*Nigeria's Growing Problem of Child Abandonment*". <https://punchfoundation.org/nigerias-growing-problem-of-child-abandonment/> Retrieved on 15th July, 2026

¹⁰ Raphael, C.V., Bamidele I., Akinleye, B., "*An examination of nigeria's legal framework for the protection of children and their mental health*". International Journal of Law. Volume 11, Issue 6, 2025, Page No. 24-31 <https://www.lawjournals.org/assets/archives/2025/vol11issue6/1112⁵.pdf> retrieved on 14th June, 2026.



Unfortunately, despite these frameworks, enforcement remains weak, and many offenders escape accountability in Nigeria.

Areas for Legislative Intervention

1. The National Assembly, through the Senate and House Committee on Judiciary and Human Rights, may strengthen enforcement mechanisms for the Child Rights Act in Nigeria by encouraging and lobbying the State Houses of Assembly and the State Government to adopt the Child Rights Act across all the 36 states with the FCT inclusive, and also establish special child protection units within the Nigerian police and the social welfare agencies across Nigeria.
2. The Federal, State, and, of course, the Local Governments in Nigeria need to expand Social Safety Nets (SSN) by introducing maternal support programs such as free housing, food stipends, and counselling support for mothers in need of such. In addition, they should also provide free mental health services for mothers at risk of abandonment.
3. The National Assembly may also enact a Safe Haven Law. That is, to legislate on designated Children Safe Drop-Off Centers where mothers can leave infants without criminal liability, which can bring greater results by working closely with institutions such as the Hospitals, Police Stations, Mosques, and churches. Similar models exist in the United States of America (U.S.) and most of the European countries, which have been a major factor in reducing unsafe infant abandonment in those countries.
4. The Senate and House Committees on National Orientation may, through the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the Federal Ministry of Health, coordinate Public Awareness Campaigns by nationwide campaign programmes to destigmatize single motherhood in Nigeria. In the same vein these government agencies may also partner with religious and community leaders to promote child protection.
5. Lastly, the Federal Government through the coordinated collaboration among the relevant government bodies like: Federal Ministry of Health, Federal Ministry of Environment, Federal Ministry of Communication and Digital Economy, and the Nigerian Police Force, should embark on data collection & monitoring of infant abandonment in Nigeria which will ensure mandatory reporting of abandonment cases by hospitals and law enforcement agencies nationwide in order to track incidents and interventions.



Conclusion

In light of the above, it cannot be over emphasize that infant abandonment in Nigeria is both a human rights crisis and a public health emergency. Therefore, legislative reforms must go beyond punitive measures to include preventive, supportive, and rehabilitative interventions. By strengthening enforcement, expanding social safety nets, and introducing safe haven laws, Nigeria can significantly reduce this menace and protect its most vulnerable citizens.

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