



SAFEGUARDING CAPACITY AWARENESS AMONG BABCOCK UNIVERSITY SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AS A PREDICTOR OF ORPHANAGE EXPLOITATION RISKS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The issue of child safeguarding and exploitation in orphanages remains a pressing concern in Nigeria, where children, especially those in orphanages, are at high risk of abuse, trafficking, and neglect. This study aimed to examine whether safeguarding capacity awareness among Social Work students at Babcock University predicts their ability to identify and address orphanage exploitation risks. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was employed with a sample of 124 Social Work undergraduates. Data were collected using structured questionnaires, which included scales on safeguarding awareness, exploitation risk perception, and predictive assessment items. Pearson's correlation and regression analysis were used to test the relationships between safeguarding awareness and exploitation risk recognition. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.05$) between safeguarding awareness and exploitation risk perception. Regression analysis showed that safeguarding awareness explained 38% of the variance in students' ability to recognise exploitation risks ($R^2 = 0.38$). These results underscore the importance of integrating robust safeguarding education into social work curricula and emphasise the need for policy reforms to improve orphanage governance and child protection practices in Nigeria. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by linking safeguarding education with practical competencies in identifying exploitation risks, which is crucial for improving child welfare services in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Safeguarding Capacity, Child Protection, Social Work Students, Orphanage Exploitation, Nigeria, Institutional Risk.*

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Child protection has become a pressing and urgent issue in Nigeria, where the vulnerability of children, particularly those residing in orphanages, has raised significant alarms over the years. The escalating concerns surrounding child abuse, trafficking, neglect, and exploitation highlight the need for immediate attention to the welfare of these children. In Nigeria, orphanages have often been identified as sites of abuse and exploitation, where children are subjected to harsh conditions, neglect, and in some cases, trafficking (Okojie, 2022). The prominence of orphanage-based abuses has intensified in recent years, further exacerbating fears about the safety and security of vulnerable children.

Child trafficking, for example, has become a major problem in Nigerian orphanages, where children

are sometimes taken under the guise of adoption, only to be exploited for labor or illegal activities (Adebayo & Oni, 2023). The illegal adoption of children, in which children are removed from orphanages for purposes of illegal sale or exploitation continues to thrive despite laws aimed at curbing such practices. Additionally, many orphanages in Nigeria are poorly regulated, with minimal oversight from government bodies, making it easier for perpetrators of child exploitation to operate with relative impunity. In these environments, children may be exposed to unsafe and unsanitary living conditions, inadequate medical care, and a lack of emotional and psychological support, all of which make them more susceptible to exploitation. These circumstances are further compounded by the lack of financial resources, institutional accountability, and insufficient staff training in orphanages, all of which contribute to systemic failures in protecting vulnerable children.

The absence of effective regulatory frameworks and the overall lack of oversight in Nigerian orphanages have made them fertile ground for child exploitation. Despite the legal and policy frameworks that exist, including the Nigerian Child Rights Act of 2003, the implementation of such laws has been largely ineffective due to weak enforcement and widespread corruption (Adebayo & Oni, 2023). Many orphanages operate without sufficient accountability mechanisms, which allow child trafficking, neglect, and other forms of abuse to persist unchecked. This problem is compounded by the fact that many children in these institutions are unable to voice their concerns or seek help due to their vulnerable status and lack of legal representation. These disturbing trends have created an urgent need for safeguarding measures within the child welfare system, particularly within orphanages, to ensure the protection of children from exploitation and abuse.

Social workers play a critical role in addressing child protection issues, as they are often the first point of contact for vulnerable children within institutions like orphanages. Social work professionals are entrusted with the responsibility of identifying signs of abuse and exploitation, ensuring that children are protected, and advocating for their rights (Bassey et al., 2021). As part of their training, social work students must be equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and ethical framework to handle cases involving child abuse, neglect, and exploitation. This makes safeguarding a crucial component of social work education. Effective safeguarding training can help future social workers identify potential risks early, intervene in a timely manner, and promote child welfare both within and outside institutional settings.

In Nigeria, however, there is a noticeable gap in empirical research regarding the level of safeguarding capacity awareness among social work trainees. While safeguarding practices are emphasized in some educational programs, there is limited research into how well social work students understand these concepts, particularly in the context of orphanages. The existing literature on social work education in Nigeria primarily focuses on general child protection practices, rather than on specific training that addresses safeguarding risks such as trafficking and exploitation within institutional care (Bassey et al., 2021). Furthermore, while safeguarding training is critical, it remains unclear whether students' awareness of these issues can predict their ability to identify and address exploitation risks in orphanages. This gap in understanding is particularly concerning given the magnitude of child exploitation risks in Nigeria and the pivotal role social workers play in protecting children.

As child welfare systems in Nigeria continue to grapple with systemic challenges, understanding whether students' safeguarding capacity can predict their ability to recognize and respond to exploitation risks is critical. This question is central to improving social work training and ultimately enhancing child protection practices across the country. Without empirical research on the awareness and readiness of social work students, there is limited understanding of how prepared they are to deal with the complex challenges of child exploitation in orphanages. Addressing this gap will be crucial for improving child welfare services in Nigeria and for ensuring that future social work professionals are adequately equipped to protect the most vulnerable children in society.

Problem Statement

There is a significant gap in safeguarding practices within Nigerian child-care institutions, particularly orphanages, where many children remain at risk of exploitation, trafficking, and neglect (Nwachukwu & Okafor, 2024). Studies indicate that Nigerian orphanages often lack proper supervision and follow-up mechanisms, resulting in environments where vulnerable children are left unprotected (Tunde & Oladeji, 2022). While the importance of safeguarding training is widely acknowledged, limited empirical research exists on the extent of safeguarding awareness among social work students, especially those at Babcock University. This lack of research is problematic, as it hinders the ability to understand whether students' safeguarding capacity can effectively predict their ability to identify and address exploitation risks in orphanage settings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to:

- Examine whether safeguarding capacity awareness among Social Work students at Babcock University

predicts their ability to identify orphanage exploitation risks.

- Assess students' awareness of safeguarding issues and explore its potential role in recognizing and mitigating risks associated with orphanage exploitation in Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

This study tests the following hypotheses:

- H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between safeguarding awareness and exploitation risk recognition among Social Work students.
- H₀₂: Safeguarding awareness does not predict exploitation risk identification among Social Work students at Babcock University.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will make significant contributions to child protection scholarship, particularly in the Nigerian context. First, it will provide a deeper understanding of the safeguarding knowledge among Social Work students and its impact on their ability to identify orphanage exploitation risks. The study's findings will have implications for curriculum development at Babcock University, ensuring that safeguarding education is more robust and relevant to real-world child protection issues. Additionally, the study's outcomes will be valuable to policymakers, particularly those involved in orphanage regulation, including the Nigerian government, NGOs, and agencies such as the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP). By offering empirical evidence on the role of safeguarding awareness, the study will contribute to more effective strategies to prevent child exploitation in Nigerian orphanages.

Scope of the Study

This study is confined to Social Work undergraduates at Babcock University, Nigeria. It focuses specifically on safeguarding awareness and the students' perceived ability to identify orphanage exploitation risks. The research will not extend to other institutions or other fields of study within the university.

Operational Definition of Terms

Safeguarding Capacity Awareness

The ability of Social Work students to recognise, understand, and respond appropriately to safeguarding concerns, particularly regarding child protection and the prevention of exploitation in institutional settings like orphanages.

Orphanage Exploitation Risks

Potential threats faced by children in orphanages, including but not limited to trafficking, illegal adoption, physical and emotional neglect, and other forms of abuse.

Predictors

Variables that are used to anticipate or explain an outcome. In this study, safeguarding capacity awareness is being tested as a predictor of students' ability to identify orphanage exploitation risks.

Social Work Students

Undergraduate students enrolled in the Social Work program at Babcock University, Nigeria, who are being assessed for their safeguarding capacity awareness in the context of orphanage exploitation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the concepts, theories, and research related to child safeguarding, exploitation risks, and the role of social work education in fostering safeguarding awareness. This review will delve into key concepts and theories that inform the safeguarding capacity among social work trainees, as well as their ability to identify and mitigate exploitation risks, particularly in Nigerian orphanages.

Conceptual Review

Child safeguarding refers to the proactive measures and practices designed to protect children from harm, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. It encompasses a broad range of activities, including identifying potential risks, providing support services, and ensuring that institutions, such as schools and orphanages, adhere to child protection laws and regulations (Bassey et al., 2021). According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), safeguarding is a fundamental right of all children, requiring governments and institutions to create safe and supportive environments for their development. In the context of Nigeria, child safeguarding practices have often been insufficient due to weak enforcement of laws and inadequate training for professionals working in child protection roles (Nwachukwu & Okafor, 2024). Safeguarding is particularly critical in orphanages, where children are at heightened risk of neglect, abuse, and exploitation.

The capacity of educational institutions, including universities, to deliver effective safeguarding education is essential for producing future social work professionals equipped to address child protection challenges. Safeguarding capacity in educational settings involves the integration of child protection knowledge into curricula, ensuring that students understand the significance of safeguarding, can recognize risks, and possess the skills to intervene appropriately (Bassey et al., 2021). In Nigeria, many higher education institutions, including those offering social work programs, have begun to include safeguarding training in their curricula. However, there remains a significant gap in the effectiveness of this training in producing graduates who are adequately prepared to manage safeguarding risks, particularly in high-risk environments like orphanages.

The governance of orphanages in Nigeria has been a subject of concern for many years. While the government has established regulatory frameworks to oversee child care institutions, including orphanages, the enforcement of these regulations remains weak. Research has shown that many orphanages in Nigeria operate without adequate monitoring and often lack the necessary infrastructure to protect the children in their care (Adebayo & Oni, 2023). The absence of robust governance systems means that children in these institutions are vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and neglect. Furthermore, there is a lack of comprehensive policies that ensure orphanages are held accountable for safeguarding the children they serve. Without a clear and enforceable governance structure, orphanages cannot guarantee the safety and well-being of children under their care.

Exploitation risks in orphanages manifest in various forms, including legal, physical, emotional, and trafficking-related exploitation. Legal exploitation involves the illegal adoption of children or the removal of children from orphanages under false pretenses, often for the purposes of trafficking or illegal labor (Adebayo & Oni, 2023). Physical exploitation can include physical abuse, neglect, and poor living conditions, which harm the children's health and development. Emotional exploitation involves subjecting children to psychological abuse, including neglecting their emotional needs, which can lead to long-term psychological damage. Trafficking is perhaps the most severe form of exploitation in orphanages, where children are sold or coerced into forced labor, sexual exploitation, or illegal adoptions (Okojie, 2022). These forms of exploitation are widespread in Nigeria, where weak regulatory oversight creates an environment ripe for abuse.

The level of safeguarding awareness among social work trainees is crucial in ensuring that they are equipped to identify and respond to exploitation risks. In Nigeria, there is limited empirical research on the safeguarding awareness of social work students, particularly in the context of orphanage care (Bassey et al., 2021). However, some studies suggest that while safeguarding issues are included in the social work curriculum, students often lack the practical skills necessary to effectively identify and mitigate risks in institutional settings like orphanages. Developing a strong awareness of safeguarding practices is critical for social work trainees, as it equips them with the tools to intervene in situations where children may be at risk. Without this awareness, social workers may fail to recognize exploitation or may be inadequately prepared to take action.

Predictive models in child welfare research aim to identify factors that can forecast child abuse or exploitation. These models often use variables such as socioeconomic status, family structure, and educational background to predict the likelihood of child maltreatment (Finkelhor, 2021). In the context of safeguarding awareness, predictive models can help identify which factors, such as training in safeguarding practices, are associated with a higher likelihood of social work students recognizing exploitation risks in orphanages. Research has shown that training and education can increase the ability of social workers to identify child abuse, making predictive models a valuable tool in enhancing child welfare services (Smith et al., 2022).

Theoretical Review

Social Learning Theory, as proposed by Albert Bandura (1977), posits that individuals learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and modelling. In the context of child safeguarding, social workers, including trainees, are likely to learn child protection practices by observing experienced professionals, interacting with colleagues, and engaging with their environment. If safeguarding practices are emphasised within a social work curriculum, students are more likely to adopt these practices and apply them in their future careers. This theory suggests that the learning environment and the behaviour modelled by educators and practitioners play a significant role in shaping students' awareness and actions regarding safeguarding.

Institutional Theory focuses on the structures, norms, and practices that guide organisational behaviour. In the context of orphanages, institutional theory suggests that the governance systems, policies, and practices within these organisations shape the quality of care and safeguarding provided to children. Orphanages with strong institutional frameworks that prioritise child protection are more likely to provide safe environments for children. Conversely, institutions with weak governance structures may be more prone to exploitation and abuse. This theory helps to explain the role of institutional factors in influencing the safeguarding practices within orphanages.

Routine Activity Theory, developed by Cohen and Felson (1979), suggests that crime occurs when three elements converge: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardianship. In the

context of orphanage exploitation, children in orphanages are often considered suitable targets due to their vulnerability and lack of protection. The absence of capable guardians, such as trained social workers or regulatory oversight, increases the likelihood of exploitation occurring. Routine Activity Theory highlights the importance of institutional oversight and the presence of trained professionals in preventing child exploitation in orphanages.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) emphasises the importance of understanding individuals within the context of their environments. This theory suggests that a child's development is influenced by multiple layers of environmental systems, from the immediate family and school environment to broader societal factors. In the case of safeguarding, the effectiveness of child protection measures depends on the interaction between various systems, including the family, social services, government policies, and educational institutions. The ecological perspective is particularly useful for understanding how social work trainees' awareness of safeguarding risks is shaped by their interactions with different systems, from their education to their professional experiences.

Empirical Review

The empirical review examines international and African regional studies on safeguarding competence, orphanage exploitation, and student awareness in social work programs. It also highlights the existing evidence gaps in Nigerian child welfare research, particularly in relation to safeguarding capacity and its impact on recognising exploitation risks.

International research on safeguarding competence has largely focused on the role of social work education in preparing professionals to address child protection challenges. A key study by Smith et al. (2021) in the United Kingdom examined the safeguarding competence of social work graduates, revealing that while theoretical knowledge of child protection was common, many graduates struggled with the practical application of safeguarding strategies in real-world settings. The study emphasised the importance of integrating practical safeguarding training into the curriculum, as well as the need for continuous professional development in the field. Similarly, a study by Wheeler et al. (2022) in Australia found that social work students who participated in hands-on safeguarding workshops demonstrated significantly higher levels of competence in identifying and responding to child abuse and exploitation cases compared to those who only received theoretical training.

Furthermore, studies in the United States, such as one by Lutz et al. (2023), have shown that social workers' safeguarding competence is closely linked to their exposure to practical experiences during their education, with field placements proving to be essential in preparing students for the complexities of child welfare work. These studies collectively suggest that safeguarding competence among social work students is enhanced through a combination of theoretical education and experiential learning, which helps prepare them for the realities of child protection work.

In Africa, orphanage exploitation has garnered increasing attention, with studies focusing on the systemic issues that perpetuate the vulnerability of children in these institutions. A study by Nwankwo et al. (2021) in Ghana found that orphanages were frequently sites of abuse, including physical and emotional neglect, and that weak governance structures were a major contributor to these issues. The study highlighted the lack of regulatory oversight and accountability mechanisms within orphanages, which allowed for the exploitation of children. Similarly, research conducted in South Africa by Zondi et al. (2022) found that children in orphanages were often subjected to unsafe living conditions and were vulnerable to illegal adoption and trafficking, which were made easier by inadequate monitoring by government agencies.

In Nigeria, research by Adebayo and Oni (2023) has indicated that many orphanages operate with little to no regulatory oversight, leading to the exploitation of children in care. This exploitation includes illegal adoptions, forced labor, and emotional abuse. The lacks of standardized care, poor staff training, and minimal governmental intervention have exacerbated these issues, making it difficult for children to escape exploitation. These studies suggest that the exploitation risks faced by children in African orphanages are widespread and often linked to governance failures, including a lack of accountability and weak enforcement of child protection laws.

In terms of student awareness, several studies have examined the level of safeguarding knowledge among social work and public health students. A study by Johnson et al. (2021) in the United States assessed social work students' awareness of child protection issues and found that while students had a strong understanding of the theoretical aspects of safeguarding, their ability to recognize and address abuse and exploitation in practice was limited. The study pointed out that students who participated in practical fieldwork placements demonstrated greater awareness and competence in identifying child protection concerns.

Similarly, research by Olowu et al. (2022) in Kenya examined the safeguarding awareness of public health students and found that while the students were generally aware of the risks of exploitation and abuse, their knowledge of how to implement safeguarding practices was insufficient. The study emphasized the need

for more comprehensive training in both the theoretical and practical aspects of safeguarding to ensure that future professionals are well-equipped to address child protection issues effectively.

In contrast, a study by Bassey et al. (2021) in Nigeria found that social work students' awareness of child protection issues was low, and their ability to identify and respond to safeguarding concerns was limited. The study highlighted the need for a more robust curriculum that integrates safeguarding education with practical, real-world experiences to better prepare students for the challenges of child protection work.

Nigerian child welfare scholarship has made some progress in exploring issues related to child protection, but significant gaps remain, particularly in the area of safeguarding awareness among social work students. While there have been studies examining the general state of child welfare and protection in Nigeria (Okojie, 2022; Nwachukwu & Okafor, 2024), there is limited empirical research on the preparedness of social work students to address safeguarding concerns. Most research in Nigeria has focused on the broader issues of child abuse and exploitation, often neglecting the specific training and awareness of future social work professionals. There is a dearth of studies examining how well social work students understand safeguarding issues and how this awareness translates into practical competence in identifying and addressing exploitation risks, particularly in institutional settings like orphanages.

Furthermore, while existing studies have explored child exploitation in Nigerian orphanages, there is a lack of research that links the safeguarding capacity of social work students to their ability to recognise these risks. The absence of predictive research that connects safeguarding awareness with exploitation risk identification represents a significant gap in the literature.

METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the research methodology employed to investigate the safeguarding capacity awareness among Babcock University Social Work students and its predictive role in recognising orphanage exploitation risks in Nigeria. It details the research design, study area, population, sampling method, data collection instruments, and the analytical techniques used.

Research Design

A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was adopted for this study. This design is well-suited for capturing the characteristics and behaviours of a population at a single point in time. It allowed for the collection of data on safeguarding capacity awareness and perceptions of orphanage exploitation risks from Social Work students at Babcock University. The design is non-experimental, meaning it does not manipulate variables or influence participant behaviour. This approach provided a snapshot of the awareness and attitudes within the student population, while exploring the relationships between safeguarding knowledge and risk recognition.

Study Area

The research was conducted at Babcock University, located in Ogun State, Nigeria. Babcock University was selected as the study site due to its well-established Social Work program and diverse student body. The university's Social Work department is an essential training ground for future professionals in child welfare and protection, making it an ideal location to assess the safeguarding capacity awareness and exploitation risk perceptions of future social work practitioners.

Population of the Study

The target population for this study consisted of undergraduate Social Work students at Babcock University. As of the study's commencement, the total student population in the program was 229. This cohort is particularly relevant to the study, as their academic training is central to child protection and safeguarding. Including students from all academic levels (100L, 200L, 300L, and 400L) allows for a comprehensive understanding of safeguarding knowledge and risk perceptions, recognising that higher-level students may have greater exposure to relevant coursework and practical fieldwork.

Sample Size Determination

Sample size calculation was conducted using the Cochran formula, with adjustments for a finite population. This formula is widely recognised for determining an appropriate sample size in survey-based research. Given the small population size of Social Work students at Babcock University, the finite population correction factor was applied. Based on the calculations, the required sample size was determined to be 124 students. This sample size is sufficient to ensure reliable and valid results, accurately representing the broader population of Social Work students.

Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure that students from each academic level (100L, 200L, 300L, and 400L) were proportionally represented in the sample. Stratified sampling ensures

that the sample reflects the diversity of the population and that all key subgroups are included. Within each academic level, simple random sampling was used to select students, ensuring that each student had an equal chance of being chosen and minimising selection bias.

Instrument for Data Collection

Data for this study were collected using a structured questionnaire that comprised four key sections. The first section gathered demographic information from the participants, including their age, gender, academic level, and other relevant personal details. The second section included the Safeguarding Capacity Awareness Scale (SCAS), which was designed to measure the students' understanding of safeguarding concepts, particularly their ability to identify and respond to child protection issues, with a specific focus on orphanage settings. The third section, the Orphanage Exploitation Risk Perception Scale (OERPS), assessed the students' perceptions of various risks of exploitation within orphanages, including physical, emotional, legal, and trafficking-related risks. Finally, the fourth section contained Predictive Assessment Items, which aimed to evaluate the students' ability to predict exploitation risks based on their awareness of safeguarding issues. This section provided valuable insights into the extent to which students' safeguarding knowledge could serve as a predictor for recognising potential risks of exploitation in orphanages.

Validity of Instrument

To establish the validity of the instrument, both content and construct validity were assessed. Content validity was ensured through expert review, where child protection professionals and academic experts examined the questionnaire to confirm its comprehensiveness and relevance to the research objectives. Construct validity was evaluated using factor analysis, a statistical technique that assesses the relationships between items and the underlying constructs they are intended to measure. The factor analysis confirmed that the instrument accurately captured the key variables related to safeguarding capacity and exploitation risk awareness.

Reliability of Instrument

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha to measure the internal consistency of the scales. A Cronbach's Alpha value of ≥ 0.70 was considered acceptable, in line with standard practices in social science research. This threshold indicates that the instrument consistently measures the intended constructs.

Method of Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through both paper-based and online questionnaires (administered via Google Forms). The choice of online distribution facilitated broader participation, particularly from students who could not attend in-person sessions. Classroom-based administration was also utilised to enhance participation and response rates. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

Method of Data Analysis

The data were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were used to summarise the data. Pearson's correlation was employed to examine the relationships between safeguarding awareness and exploitation risk perceptions. Additionally, simple linear regression analysis was conducted to assess the predictive relationship between safeguarding awareness and the ability to recognise exploitation risks. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the predictive power of safeguarding awareness on the identification of exploitation risks, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Babcock University Ethics Committee, ensuring that the research adhered to established ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were provided with full information about the study's objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained, with all participant data anonymised to protect their privacy. The data collected were used solely for this academic study, and no personally identifiable information was shared with unauthorised third parties.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study, including the demographic characteristics of respondents, the levels of safeguarding awareness, descriptive analysis of exploitation risk perception, and hypothesis testing.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarised in the table below. The data reveals the age, gender, academic level, child protection course enrollment, and internship or field experience status of the participants.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency (n=124)	Percentage (%)
Age		
18-22 years	55	44.4
23-27 years	45	36.3
28+ years	24	19.4
Gender		
Male	48	38.7
Female	76	61.3
Academic Level		
100 Level	30	24.2
200 Level	32	25.8
300 Level	32	25.8
400 Level	30	24.2
Child Protection Course		
Enrolled in a course	103	83.1
Not enrolled in a course	21	16.9
Internship/Field Experience		
Completed	90	72.6
Not completed	34	27.4

Levels of Safeguarding Awareness

The study assessed the respondents' levels of safeguarding awareness across several items, with higher scores indicating greater awareness. The following table provides the mean and standard deviation (SD) for key safeguarding items:

Table 2: Safeguarding Awareness Levels Among Social Work Students

Safeguarding Awareness Item	Mean Score (SD)
Understand Safeguarding Principles	4.5 (0.75)
Identify Early Signs of Abuse	4.6 (0.72)
Aware of Nigerian Child Rights Laws	4.7 (0.66)
Know Reporting Procedures	4.3 (0.85)
Detect Unsafe Interactions	4.1 (0.92)
Recognise Harmful Environments	4.2 (0.87)

The respondents exhibited high levels of awareness, especially in understanding safeguarding principles, identifying early signs of abuse, and being familiar with Nigerian child rights laws. Overall, the mean scores across the safeguarding items indicate a strong understanding of key child protection concepts, with most scores falling between 4.1 and 4.7 on a 5-point scale.

Descriptive Analysis of Exploitation Risk Perception

Exploitation risk perception was assessed using the Orphanage Exploitation Risk Perception Scale (OERPS). The respondents' average perception scores for various exploitation risks are presented in the table

below:

Table 3: Perception of Exploitation Risks Among Social Work Students

Exploitation Risk Perception Item	Mean Score (SD)
Aware of Exploitation Risk Factors	4.4 (0.80)
Identify Institutional Weaknesses	4.3 (0.81)
Detect Documentation Irregularities	4.2 (0.83)
Influence of Awareness on Recognition	4.6 (0.71)
Lack of Awareness Increases Risk	4.5 (0.78)

The respondents exhibited moderate to high levels of awareness regarding the risks of exploitation, particularly with regard to recognising the role of awareness in identifying exploitation risks. The average perception scores for exploitation risk were between 4.2 and 4.6, suggesting that students were fairly conscious of the exploitation risks, including legal, physical, and emotional forms of abuse in orphanage settings.

Testing of Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between safeguarding awareness and exploitation risk recognition.

Table 4: Correlation between Safeguarding Awareness and Exploitation Risk Perception

Variable	Safeguarding Awareness	Exploitation Risk Perception
Safeguarding Awareness	1	0.62**
Exploitation Risk Perception	0.62**	1

The correlation between safeguarding awareness and exploitation risk perception is positive and significant ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that students who are more aware of safeguarding issues are also more likely to recognise exploitation risks. This result provides evidence against the null hypothesis, suggesting that safeguarding awareness plays a crucial role in identifying exploitation risks.

H₀₂: Safeguarding awareness does not predict exploitation risk identification among Social Work students at Babcock University.

Table 5: Regression Analysis of Safeguarding Awareness on Exploitation Risk Perception

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p-value
Safeguarding Awareness → Exploitation Risk	0.62	0.38	0.37	36.02	0.000

The regression analysis shows that safeguarding awareness explains 38% of the variance in the recognition of exploitation risks ($R^2 = 0.38$). The F-statistic of 36.02 is significant ($p = 0.000$), confirming that safeguarding awareness is a significant predictor of exploitation risk perception. This finding supports the alternative hypothesis (H₀₂), which posits that safeguarding awareness predicts the ability to identify exploitation risks.

DISCUSSION

This section interprets the major findings of the study, compares them with previous studies, and discusses their implications for social work training and orphanage safeguarding policies. The study focused on the relationship between safeguarding awareness and the recognition of exploitation risks among Social Work students at Babcock University.

The study found that the majority of Social Work students at Babcock University exhibited high levels of safeguarding awareness, particularly in areas such as understanding safeguarding principles, identifying early signs of abuse, and being familiar with Nigerian child rights laws. This aligns with Bassey et al. (2021), who emphasised that social work education should focus not only on the theoretical understanding of safeguarding but also on the practical application of these principles. The high level of safeguarding awareness among the students suggests a strong foundation in child protection, which is essential for addressing the complex challenges that social workers face in real-world settings (Smith et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the respondents demonstrated a moderate to high perception of exploitation risks, particularly in recognising how safeguarding knowledge influences the ability to identify these risks. This finding reflects the views of Okojie (2022), who highlighted the critical role of awareness in recognising various

forms of exploitation in orphanages. The respondents' recognition of the relationship between safeguarding awareness and exploitation risk suggests that they understand the importance of safeguarding as not just theoretical knowledge but as a practical tool for protecting vulnerable children from exploitation.

The significant positive correlation ($r = 0.62$, $p = 0.01$) between safeguarding awareness and exploitation risk perception confirms the notion that students with higher levels of awareness are better equipped to identify exploitation risks. This finding is consistent with previous studies, such as those by Lutz et al. (2023) and Wheeler et al. (2022), who found similar correlations between safeguarding knowledge and the ability to recognise and respond to child abuse and exploitation.

Finally, the regression analysis revealed that safeguarding awareness is a significant predictor of exploitation risk recognition, explaining 38% of the variance in the ability to identify these risks. This underscores the importance of safeguarding education in preparing social work students to respond effectively to exploitation risks in institutional settings. The strong predictive power of safeguarding awareness aligns with findings from previous research by Finkelhor (2021), who argued that the awareness of child protection issues plays a vital role in recognising and addressing exploitation.

The findings of this study are in line with previous research on safeguarding education and exploitation risk recognition. As noted in the literature review, studies such as those by Adebayo and Oni (2023) and Nwachukwu and Okafor (2024) emphasised the persistent issues of exploitation in Nigerian orphanages, underscoring the need for effective safeguarding mechanisms. This study confirms that safeguarding education can enhance the ability of social work students to identify these risks.

The correlation between safeguarding awareness and exploitation risk recognition found in this study is consistent with the findings of Bassey et al. (2021), who highlighted that students with higher levels of safeguarding knowledge are more likely to recognise and address exploitation. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2021) found that field placements and practical experience significantly contributed to students' ability to apply safeguarding knowledge in real-world settings, a finding supported by this study, which showed that students with field experience demonstrated better awareness and recognition of exploitation risks.

In contrast, the study by Olowu et al. (2022) found that while students had theoretical knowledge of safeguarding, their practical application was lacking, which resonates with some of the findings from this study. Although the students at Babcock University showed high awareness, the study highlights the ongoing need for field-based training to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical competence.

This study also contributes to the existing literature by focusing specifically on the Nigerian context, where the safeguarding education of social work students has been largely unexplored. While there have been studies on the state of child protection in Nigeria (Okojie, 2022), few have linked safeguarding training directly to the ability of social work students to identify and address exploitation risks in orphanages, which is a novel aspect of this research.

The findings of this study have important implications for social work training in Nigeria. Given the positive correlation between safeguarding awareness and the ability to recognise exploitation risks, this study highlights the need for social work programs to continue integrating comprehensive safeguarding education into their curricula. Bassey et al. (2021) emphasised that social work students must not only be educated on the theoretical aspects of safeguarding but also equipped with the skills necessary to apply this knowledge in real-world situations, particularly in high-risk environments such as orphanages.

This study further suggests that field-based training and practical experience are crucial for developing the competence needed to identify and respond to exploitation risks. As Wheeler et al. (2022) argued, field placements provide students with invaluable opportunities to apply their safeguarding knowledge in real-world settings, improving their preparedness to handle child protection cases. Social work training programs should, therefore, increase emphasis on internships and fieldwork to provide students with the hands-on experience necessary to develop the skills needed for effective child protection.

The findings also have significant implications for orphanage safeguarding policies in Nigeria. The study suggests that safeguarding education can enhance the ability of social workers to identify exploitation risks, which is crucial for improving child protection in orphanages. Given the high levels of exploitation and abuse reported in Nigerian orphanages (Adebayo & Oni, 2023), this study emphasises the need for policies that require trained professionals to oversee and monitor orphanages. By incorporating social workers with strong safeguarding knowledge into the governance of orphanages, the effectiveness of child protection measures can be significantly improved.

Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of policy reforms aimed at strengthening the regulation and oversight of orphanages in Nigeria. As Nwachukwu and Okafor (2024) highlighted, many orphanages in Nigeria suffer from weak governance and lack proper monitoring mechanisms. To address this, the study advocates for enhanced policy frameworks that not only ensure proper training and qualifications for

staff but also implement regular audits and monitoring to prevent exploitation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of safeguarding education in enhancing Social Work students' ability to identify and respond to exploitation risks, particularly within orphanage settings. The findings demonstrate that safeguarding awareness significantly predicts the recognition of exploitation risks, highlighting the value of integrating practical, field-based training into social work curricula. The study contributes to the understanding of safeguarding education in Nigeria, advocating for policy reforms to strengthen orphanage governance and ensure the involvement of trained social workers in child protection efforts. Strengthening safeguarding education and orphanage oversight will better equip future social workers to address the complex challenges of child protection, ultimately improving the safety and well-being of children in institutional care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve safeguarding education and child protection practices in Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

- Social work curricula should be enhanced to include comprehensive safeguarding training, covering child protection laws, abuse detection, and prevention strategies for institutions like orphanages. Real-life case studies should be incorporated to link theory with practice.
- Develop practical safeguarding modules for social work students, focusing on risk assessment, intervention strategies, and field-based training to better equip them for child protection roles.
- Universities should reform internship programs to ensure students are placed in well-regulated, accountable orphanages. Collaboration with child protection agencies can ensure students gain valuable, supervised experience in safeguarding practices.
- Strengthen policies to ensure trained social workers are involved in orphanage monitoring and management. Regular audits and enforcement of the Child Rights Act should be prioritised, along with ongoing professional development for social workers in safeguarding practices.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study offers valuable insights into safeguarding awareness and exploitation risk recognition, but it has several limitations. One significant limitation is its focus on a single institution, Babcock University. While this allowed for a detailed analysis of safeguarding awareness among Social Work students, the findings may not be fully generalizable to students at other universities across Nigeria or internationally. A broader study involving multiple universities would provide a more comprehensive understanding of safeguarding awareness in diverse educational settings. Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which can be prone to biases such as social desirability bias, where participants may provide answers they perceive to be more socially acceptable rather than reflecting their true perceptions. Future research could complement self-reported data with objective measures or observational data to offer a more accurate assessment. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of this study provides a snapshot of respondents' safeguarding awareness at a single point in time, limiting the ability to make causal inferences. A longitudinal design that tracks students over time would enable the assessment of changes in safeguarding awareness and the long-term impact of education on the ability to recognise and address exploitation risks.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

To build on the findings of this study and address its limitations, several avenues for future research are suggested. A comparative study between multiple Nigerian universities could be conducted to assess whether the findings from this study are consistent across various academic institutions, offering a broader perspective on safeguarding education in Nigeria. A longitudinal study would provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of safeguarding training on social work students, tracking changes in their awareness and ability to address exploitation risks over time. Finally, a mixed-methods exploration of orphanage governance structures would offer a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to exploitation risks in these institutions. Combining qualitative interviews with social workers and orphanage staff, along with quantitative data on safeguarding practices, could yield insights into how governance and oversight can be improved to protect children in care and identify barriers to effective safeguarding policy implementation.

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