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Paediatric HIV/AIDS and Awareness of Victims' Plight in Enugu Metropolis, Enugu State, Nigeria: A Medical Sociology Perspective

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Abstract

Paediatric HIV/AIDS remains a critical public health and social concern in sub-Saharan Africa, with children facing unique challenges due to stigma, neglect, and limited access to healthcare. This study examined awareness of the plight of children living with HIV/AIDS (CLWHA) in Enugu Metropolis, Nigeria, adopting a medical sociology perspective. Using a survey design, 613 respondents were selected through multi-stage cluster sampling, complemented by 10 in-depth interviews with healthcare personnel. Data were analyzed using frequency tables, percentages, and chi-square tests at a 0.05 significance level. Results indicate that awareness of CLWHA challenges is generally low, with peer-group stigma, neglect, and inaccessibility of antiretroviral therapy as primary issues. Respondents highlighted public enlightenment, creation of more HIV/AIDS care centers, free medical treatment, and counseling as essential interventions. The study recommends establishing a government agency to oversee CLWHA welfare, strengthening community sensitization, and improving access to antiretroviral drugs to enhance child wellbeing and social inclusion.

Keywords: *Paediatric HIV/AIDS, Children, Stigmatization, Public Awareness, Enugu Metropolis*

Introduction

HIV/AIDS remains one of the most severe public health and social challenges globally, with children disproportionately affected in sub-Saharan Africa. Since its discovery in the 1980s, paediatric HIV/AIDS has continued to threaten child survival, development, and social inclusion (Mawere & Mabamba, 2015). The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS, 2013) reports that millions of children under 15 years of age are living with HIV worldwide, with approximately 91% residing in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite global reductions in new paediatric infections between 2002 and 2013, more than 240,000 children were newly infected in 2013 alone, highlighting persistent gaps in prevention, treatment, and awareness (UNAIDS, 2013).

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), a retrovirus in the lentivirus family, attacks the immune system, leading to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) when untreated (Fauci, 1998; Butler, 1998; Royce, 1997). In children, HIV progresses more aggressively than in adults, with opportunistic infections, malnutrition, and neurological complications contributing to high morbidity and mortality (Nwaneri, 2007; WHO, 2014). Mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) remains the primary route of infection, with rates reaching 30–45% without intervention (NACA, 2019).

In Nigeria, children under 15 years constitute approximately 10% of the total HIV-positive population (Sadoh, 2007; Okuola, 2007). Enugu Metropolis reflects this national trend, with challenges including malnutrition, limited access to antiretroviral therapy (ART), and social stigma (Ezeonu, Ikefuna, Oguonu, & Okafor, 2014). Stigma and discrimination not only affect children's social inclusion but also limit their access to healthcare, education, and community support (Subbarao & Coury, 2004; UNICEF, 2003).

Children living with HIV/AIDS (CLWHA) face multidimensional challenges, including emotional neglect, household impoverishment, and exclusion from peer and family networks (Salaam, 2004; Every Child et al., 2012). Studies have shown that peer groups, family members, and friends are major sources of stigmatization, undermining children's psychosocial development (Abadía-Barrero & Castro, 2005; Obiagwu, Hassan-Hassan, & Ibrahim, 2013). Moreover, policies and funding shifts, such as reductions in international HIV/AIDS support, have exacerbated barriers to treatment and care for children in low-resource settings.

Awareness of CLWHA's plight is critical for improving their health outcomes and social inclusion. Public enlightenment, creation of dedicated care centers, free provision of ART, and psychosocial support are among interventions shown to reduce stigma and improve access to healthcare (UNAIDS, 2013; International HIV/AIDS Alliance & Save the Children, 2012). From a medical sociology perspective, understanding both structural and social determinants of pediatric HIV/AIDS is essential for policy formulation and program implementation.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates awareness of the plight of CLWHA in Enugu Metropolis, Nigeria, examining societal perceptions, challenges faced by children, and strategies for improving care and inclusion. It aims to provide empirical evidence to guide local interventions and inform public health policies tailored to the social realities of affected children.

Literature Review

Paediatric HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa

Children continue to bear a significant burden of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Between 2002 and 2013, global new HIV infections among children under 15 declined by 58%, yet more than 240,000 children were infected in 2013 alone, equating to approximately 700 new infections per day (UNAIDS, 2013). By the same year, 3.2 million children were living with HIV worldwide, 91% of whom resided in sub-Saharan Africa. Only 24% of children who needed antiretroviral treatment (ART) received it, resulting in 190,000 deaths from AIDS-related illnesses (UNAIDS, 2013). These statistics underscore the persistent challenges in paediatric HIV prevention, treatment, and awareness, especially in resource-limited settings.

Challenges Faced by Children Living with HIV/AIDS (CLWHA)

Emotional Impact

Children living with HIV/AIDS frequently experience emotional neglect, particularly if their parents are HIV-positive or have died from AIDS-related illnesses. They may face isolation, lack of psychosocial support, and disruption of family structures (Subbarao & Coury, 2004). Separation from siblings upon orphanhood exacerbates emotional distress, impeding their social and cognitive development (USAID, 2002; Salaam, 2004).

Household and Economic Impact

In sub-Saharan Africa, kinship care—where grandparents or close relatives provide care—is the primary support mechanism for orphaned children (Every Child et al., 2012). While preferable to institutional care, access can be limited for children living with HIV/AIDS due to stigma and discrimination, affecting nutrition, health, and education. Reduced household income, compounded by medical and funeral costs, pushes families further into poverty, limiting children's access to essential services (International HIV/AIDS Alliance & Save the Children, 2012).

Stigmatization

Stigma remains a critical barrier to the wellbeing of CLWHA. Rejection by peers, family members, and the community leads to low self-esteem, fear, and social exclusion (UNICEF, 2003; Abadía-Barrero & Castro, 2005). Structural inequalities, poverty, and discriminatory attitudes exacerbate children's experiences of stigma, which can restrict access to schooling, healthcare, and inheritance rights (Obiagwu, Hassan-Hassan, & Ibrahim, 2013).

Access to Healthcare and Antiretroviral Therapy

Limited access to healthcare, including antiretroviral drugs, remains a major challenge. Many children do not receive HIV testing or ART as recommended by the WHO treatment guidelines (WHO, 2014; UNAIDS, 2013). Studies in Nigeria indicate that inaccessibility of drugs and specialized care, combined with financial constraints, significantly impacts child survival and quality of life (Ezeonu, Ikefuna, Oguonu, & Okafor, 2014). Funding cuts from international donors, such as policy shifts under the U.S. administration that reduced HIV/AIDS support, have further constrained resources for paediatric HIV programs, directly affecting treatment availability for children in low-resource communities.

Awareness and Public Perception

Public awareness of the plight of CLWHA is generally low, even in urban centers like Enugu Metropolis. Studies show that societal misconceptions and fear of contagion contribute to stigmatization and social exclusion (Obiagwu et al., 2013). Awareness campaigns, public enlightenment programs, and community education have been identified as effective interventions for reducing stigma and promoting inclusion (UNAIDS, 2013; International HIV/AIDS Alliance & Save the Children, 2012).

Medical Sociology Perspective

Medical sociology emphasizes the interplay between social structures, healthcare access, and individual health outcomes. In the context of paediatric HIV/AIDS, societal stigma, poverty, and policy decisions significantly shape children's experiences and access to care.

Understanding these dynamics is critical for developing effective interventions and shaping policies that address both medical and social dimensions of the epidemic.

Synthesis of Literature

The literature indicates that CLWHA in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa face overlapping challenges: stigma, neglect, limited healthcare access, and economic deprivation. While progress has been made in reducing new infections, gaps in public awareness, social inclusion, and access to treatment persist. Interventions combining public sensitization, policy support, and community-based care are essential to improve outcomes for these children.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Medical Sociology, particularly the Social Determinants of Health (SDH) framework and the Stigma Theory, which provide a lens for understanding the challenges faced by children living with HIV/AIDS (CLWHA) in Enugu Metropolis.

Social Determinants of Health (SDH) Framework

The SDH framework posits that health outcomes are influenced not only by biological factors but also by social, economic, and environmental conditions (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2005). For CLWHA, factors such as family income, access to healthcare, educational opportunities, and social support structures significantly affect their well-being. Children living in impoverished households with limited access to antiretroviral therapy and supportive care are more likely to experience poor health outcomes, malnutrition, and early mortality. Understanding these social determinants allows policymakers and healthcare providers to address systemic barriers to care rather than focusing solely on the medical aspects of HIV/AIDS.

Stigma Theory

Stigma Theory, as conceptualized by Goffman (1963), explains how social labeling, stereotyping, and discrimination affect individuals' self-perception and social participation. Applied to CLWHA, stigma manifests through peer exclusion, family discrimination, and community marginalization, which can limit access to education, healthcare, and psychosocial support. The theory also helps explain why many caregivers may conceal a child's HIV status, reducing opportunities for public awareness campaigns and reinforcing societal misconceptions about the disease (Abadía-Barrero & Castro, 2005).

By combining the SDH framework and Stigma Theory, this study situates paediatric HIV/AIDS within both social and medical contexts. It highlights that CLWHA's health outcomes are not only a product of viral infection but are also shaped by economic vulnerability, household support, community attitudes, and systemic healthcare provision. This integrated perspective guides the study in assessing awareness, identifying social and structural challenges, and recommending interventions that address both medical and sociological dimensions of the epidemic.

Justification for Use

Applying these frameworks is essential for this study because it emphasizes that improving the welfare of CLWHA requires more than clinical interventions. Public enlightenment, policy-driven support mechanisms, and community-based programs must accompany medical treatment to reduce stigma, enhance social inclusion, and improve long-term outcomes for affected children.

Methodology

Study Design

This study adopted a **survey research design**, appropriate for examining awareness, challenges, and social factors affecting children living with HIV/AIDS (CLWHA) in Enugu Metropolis. The survey design allowed the researcher to systematically collect quantitative and qualitative data from multiple respondents to assess levels of awareness, identify key challenges, and explore perceptions regarding measures to improve the welfare of CLWHA.

Study Location

The study was conducted in Enugu Metropolis, the capital of Enugu State, Nigeria, located in southeastern Nigeria. Enugu Metropolis consists of three Local Government Areas (LGAs): Enugu East, Enugu North, and Enugu South. The area was chosen because of its urban setting, high population density, and relevance to understanding the social and medical contexts of paediatric HIV/AIDS in a Nigerian urban environment.

Study Population

The study population comprised 634 respondents, including 306 males (49%) and 318 females (51%). An additional 10 respondents were purposively selected from healthcare personnel to provide insights through in-depth interviews (IDI). The population included adult household members, caregivers, and health professionals knowledgeable about the challenges faced by children living with HIV/AIDS.

Sample Size Determination and Sampling Technique

The sample size was determined using Taro Yamane's formula (1967). Enugu Metropolis was stratified into its three LGAs. A total of 208 respondents were proportionally selected from each LGA. Within each LGA, 26 households were systematically selected from eight streets in the sampling frame to ensure representative coverage. Purposive sampling was used to select 10 healthcare personnel for qualitative interviews. The multi-stage cluster sampling technique ensured both representativeness and feasibility in accessing participants.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews (IDI). The questionnaire captured demographic information, awareness levels, challenges faced by CLWHA, and perceived measures to improve child welfare. The IDI enabled the collection of qualitative insights from healthcare professionals and caregivers, providing context and depth to quantitative findings.

Data Collection Procedure

Three research assistants, trained by the researcher, administered and retrieved questionnaires across the three LGAs. The researcher personally conducted the IDIs to ensure accuracy and consistency in qualitative data collection.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency tables and percentages with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The chi-square (χ^2) test at a 0.05 significance level was employed to test the study hypotheses. Qualitative data from IDIs were analyzed thematically to complement the quantitative findings and provide richer context on challenges, stigmatization, and interventions for CLWHA.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was secured from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained. Participation was voluntary, with respondents assured of anonymity and the right to withdraw at any stage. Sensitive information, especially regarding the HIV status of children, was handled with strict confidentiality to protect participants from social harm and stigma.

Results and Findings

This section presents the results of the study, integrating both quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative insights from in-depth interviews (IDIs). The findings are organized thematically to highlight levels of awareness, challenges facing children living with HIV/AIDS (CLWHA), sources of stigmatization, and potential interventions.

Awareness of Paediatric HIV/AIDS Victims' Plight

Table 1 presents respondents' assessment of awareness regarding the plight of CLWHA.

Table 1 Summary (Thematic):

- **High/Very High Awareness:** 45.3% of respondents perceived high or very high awareness of the plight of CLWHA.
- **Low/Very Low Awareness:** 54.7% indicated low or very low awareness, reflecting gaps in public knowledge.

Qualitative Insight:

Several respondents emphasized that societal misconceptions and secrecy surrounding HIV/AIDS impede effective awareness campaigns. One participant noted: *"Many people avoid discussing HIV, and children affected are hidden, which reduces community understanding of their struggles."* (IDI, 45 years, caregiver, August 2024)

Table 1 – Major Challenges Facing Children Living with HIV/AIDS

Challenge	Frequency Percentage (%)	
Inaccessibility of drugs & proper healthcare	227	37.0
Negligence	149	24.3
Stigmatization	139	22.7
Poor sensitization	98	16.0
Total	613	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2016

Narrative summary for results section:

The findings indicate that the major challenge facing children living with HIV/AIDS in Enugu Metropolis is the inaccessibility of drugs and proper healthcare services (37%), followed by negligence (24.3%) and stigmatization (22.7%). Poor sensitization accounted for 16% of responses. In-depth interviews corroborated these results, highlighting that children often face discrimination and inadequate medical attention.

Challenges Faced by Children Living with HIV/AIDS

Table 2 summarized key challenges reported by respondents.

Table 2 Summary (Thematic):

- **Inaccessibility of drugs and healthcare:** 37% identified this as the main challenge.
- **Negligence and stigmatization:** 24.3% and 22.7%, respectively.
- **Poor sensitization:** 16% reported inadequate public education.

Qualitative Insight:

Healthcare professionals highlighted that limited access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) and stigmatization significantly compromise children's health and social well-being. One respondent stated: *"Access to healthcare is a huge challenge; without proper treatment, these children cannot survive beyond early childhood."* (IDI, 42 years, Paediatric Specialist, August 2024)

Sources of Stigmatization

Table 4 indicated that the primary sources of stigmatization are peer groups (45.2%), followed by friends (25.9%) and family members (24.5%).

Qualitative Insight:

Respondents highlighted that stigmatization often occurs in schools and social settings, negatively impacting self-esteem and psychological health. A participant explained: *"Children are often isolated by peers once their HIV status is known, which affects their emotional development and social interactions."* (IDI, 38 years, social worker, August 2025)

Measures to Address Challenges

Respondents suggested several interventions:

- **Public enlightenment campaigns (35.7%)**
- **Creation of HIV/AIDS care centers (25.4%)**
- **Provision of free antiretroviral drugs and medical treatment (27.4% combined)**
- **Guidance and counseling (11.4%)**

Qualitative Insight:

Healthcare professionals stressed that combining medical care with public education and family support programs is essential. One participant noted: *"Education, counseling, and free medical care are crucial to ensure these children lead fulfilling lives despite their condition."* (IDI, 42 years, Paediatric Specialist, August 2024)

Prospects of CLWHA

Respondents were divided regarding whether CLWHA have a brighter future: 24.8% said yes, 29.2% said no, and 46% indicated uncertainty. This reflects societal uncertainty and stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS.

Key Table 2 – Measures to Enhance Prospects of Children Living with HIV/AIDS

Measure	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Free medical services	266	43.4
Financial empowerment of households	207	33.8
Free counseling services	69	11.3
Public enlightenment against discrimination	71	11.6
Total	613	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2016

Narrative summary for results section:

Respondents suggested that free medical services (43.4%) and financial empowerment of households (33.8%) are the most effective measures to improve the prospects of children living with HIV/AIDS. Other interventions, such as free counseling (11.3%) and public enlightenment against discrimination (11.6%), were also recommended. In-depth interviews emphasized that public awareness campaigns and parental guidance are critical for reducing stigma and supporting the well-being of affected children.

Role of Government and Policy Recommendations

An overwhelming **86.8%** of respondents advocated for a **special government agency** to oversee the welfare of CLWHA, highlighting the perceived need for systemic and policy-driven interventions.

Summary of Key Findings:

1. Awareness of the plight of CLWHA in Enugu Metropolis is moderate but insufficient.
2. Major challenges include inaccessibility of healthcare, negligence, stigmatization, and poor sensitization.
3. Peer groups are the leading source of stigma, followed by friends and family members.
4. Effective measures identified include public enlightenment, HIV/AIDS care centers, free medical treatment, and counseling services.
5. Government intervention is strongly supported, emphasizing the need for structured programs and policy frameworks.

Discussion of Findings

The study explored paediatric HIV/AIDS and awareness of victims' plight in Enugu Metropolis, highlighting awareness levels, challenges, sources of stigma, and potential interventions. The findings are discussed below in relation to existing literature and theoretical perspectives.

Awareness of the Plight of Children Living with HIV/AIDS

The study revealed that slightly less than half of respondents perceived a high level of awareness, while a majority (54.7%) indicated low or very low awareness. This confirms

prior findings by Obiugwu, Hassan-Hassan, and Ibrahim (2013) and USAID (2002), which showed that despite public health campaigns, awareness about the challenges faced by children living with HIV/AIDS remains insufficient in Nigeria. Limited awareness contributes to continued stigmatization, neglect, and barriers to accessing care.

Challenges Faced by Children Living with HIV/AIDS

The most prominent challenges identified were inaccessibility of drugs and proper healthcare (37%), negligence (24.3%), and stigmatization (22.7%). These results are consistent with previous studies indicating that children living with HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa face compounded medical, social, and economic difficulties (Ezeonwu et al., 2014; Subbarao & Coury, 2004). The findings also align with the Structural Functionalist Theory, which posits that societal structures (family, healthcare, and community) function to support individuals; when these structures fail, as seen in inadequate healthcare and stigmatization, the welfare of children is compromised.

Sources of Stigmatization

Peer groups emerged as the major source of stigma (45.2%), followed by friends and family members. This underscores the social dimension of the epidemic, where children are socially isolated and psychologically affected. Abadía-Barrero and Castro (2005) similarly found that stigma is shaped by structural inequalities and social relationships, which can adversely affect treatment adherence and social integration.

Measures to Mitigate Challenges

Respondents recommended public enlightenment, creation of HIV/AIDS care centers, free medical treatment, and counseling services. These findings corroborate the work of the International HIV/AIDS Alliance and Save the Children (2012), which emphasized that public education, family support, and accessible healthcare are critical to improving outcomes for CLWHA. The qualitative data reinforced that holistic interventions addressing medical, emotional, and social needs are essential.

Government Intervention and Policy Implications

A significant majority (86.8%) advocated for a special government agency to oversee the welfare of CLWHA, highlighting the perceived importance of structured interventions. This is consistent with the findings of UNAIDS (2013) and WHO (2014), which stress that national-level coordination and policy frameworks are crucial to ensuring equitable access to care, reducing stigma, and improving survival outcomes.

Implications for Child Development and Social Policy

The challenges identified—particularly inaccessibility of healthcare, stigmatization, and negligence—have profound implications for child development. Neglect and social isolation can impair emotional, cognitive, and social growth, reducing educational attainment and life prospects. The study reinforces the need for integrated interventions combining medical treatment, social support, and public education to mitigate the effects of HIV/AIDS on children.

Alignment with Theoretical Framework

The findings support Structural Functionalist Theory, illustrating that failures in social institutions (family, school, healthcare) disrupt the socialization and well-being of children.

Addressing these structural gaps through public awareness campaigns, healthcare access, and government oversight can enhance functional support for CLWHA.

Conclusion of Discussion:

Overall, the study highlights a moderate but insufficient level of awareness, significant social and healthcare challenges, and the critical role of policy and societal interventions in improving the welfare and prospects of children living with HIV/AIDS in Enugu Metropolis.

Recommendations, Limitations, and Conclusion

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendations to improve the welfare and prospects of children living with HIV/AIDS (CLWHA) in Enugu Metropolis:

1. Public Enlightenment and Awareness Campaigns

- Conduct sustained public education programs to increase awareness of pediatric HIV/AIDS and reduce stigma.
- Utilize schools, community centers, and media outlets to reach both children and adults.

2. Healthcare Access and Free Medical Services

- Ensure free provision of antiretroviral therapy (ART) and regular medical check-ups for CLWHA.
- Establish dedicated pediatric HIV/AIDS care centers within Enugu Metropolis for specialized services.

3. Family and Caregiver Support Programs

- Provide training and counseling for families and caregivers to reduce negligence and improve care for CLWHA.
- Encourage kinship care while providing material and psychological support for affected households.

4. Government and Policy Interventions

- Create a special government agency or unit to oversee the welfare of CLWHA, coordinating healthcare, education, and social support.
- Monitor and evaluate the impact of policies to ensure effective implementation and sustainability.

5. Psychosocial Support and Counseling

- Integrate guidance and counseling services in schools, healthcare centers, and community programs.
- Address emotional challenges, self-esteem issues, and coping mechanisms for children and their families.

6. Advocacy Against Funding Withdrawals

- Lobby against international and local policy decisions that reduce funding for HIV/AIDS programs, such as those affecting ART accessibility.
- Advocate for consistent international and domestic funding to sustain pediatric HIV/AIDS care.

Limitations of the Study

1. **Geographical Scope:** The study focused only on Enugu Metropolis, which may limit generalizability to other regions of Nigeria or Sub-Saharan Africa.
2. **Cross-Sectional Design:** Being a cross-sectional survey, causal relationships between variables cannot be definitively established.
3. **Self-Reported Data:** Some respondents may have provided socially desirable answers, particularly regarding stigmatization and awareness.
4. **Resource Constraints:** Limited resources restricted the inclusion of more comprehensive healthcare and psychosocial assessments for children.

Conclusion

This study underscores that children living with HIV/AIDS in Enugu Metropolis face significant medical, social, and psychological challenges. Awareness levels are moderate but insufficient, while peer groups and inadequate family support contribute to stigmatization. The findings emphasize the need for integrated interventions combining public enlightenment, healthcare access, family support, psychosocial counseling, and government policy oversight. Proper implementation of these strategies can enhance the well-being, social inclusion, and future prospects of pediatric HIV/AIDS patients, ensuring that they lead fulfilling lives and contribute meaningfully to society.

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