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Legal Awareness, Violent Discipline, and Child Protection in Akure, Nigeria: Socio-Legal Evidence

Kesadaran Hukum, Disiplin Kekerasan, dan Perlindungan Anak di Akure, Nigeria: Bukti Sosio-Legal

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Abstract

Statutory child protection mandates fail to alter domestic conduct when violent discipline remains socially approved and formal institutions lack public trust. This empirical criminological and sociolegal study examined caregiver legal awareness, disciplinary norms, physical punishment practices, child safety perceptions, and reporting preferences among 120 caregivers and 120 children in Akure North, Nigeria. Although 85.8 percent of caregivers knew that law prohibited physical abuse, 50.0 percent deemed corporal punishment essential, 46.7 percent accepted hitting with objects, 61.7 percent opposed external reporting, and 30.0 percent used a stick or belt within six months. Only 33.3 percent of children felt safe at home and 56.7 percent felt uncomfortable disclosing harm, while 59.2 percent of caregivers preferred family reporting over welfare or police channels, proving that legal awareness remains symbolic. These findings advance behavioral deterrence theory and inform lex ferenda proposals integrating norm transformation, nonviolent parenting, and confidential reporting across international criminal justice systems.

Abstrak

Mandat undang-undang perlindungan anak gagal mengubah perilaku domestik ketika disiplin kekerasan tetap disetujui secara sosial dan institusi formal kurang dipercaya masyarakat. Studi kriminologis empiris dan sosiolegal ini menguji kesadaran hukum pengasuh, norma disiplin, praktik penghukuman badan, persepsi keamanan anak, serta preferensi pelaporan pada 120 pengasuh dan 120 anak di Akure Utara, Nigeria. Meskipun 85,8 persen pengasuh mengetahui bahwa hukum melarang kekerasan fisik, 50,0 persen menganggap hukuman fisik penting, 46,7 persen menyetujui pemukulan dengan benda, 61,7 persen menolak pelaporan eksternal, dan 30,0 persen menggunakan tongkat atau sabuk dalam enam bulan terakhir. Hanya 33,3 persen anak merasa aman di rumah dan 56,7 persen merasa tidak nyaman melaporkan bahaya, sedangkan 59,2 persen pengasuh memilih pelaporan keluarga dibandingkan layanan kesejahteraan sosial atau kepolisian, membuktikan bahwa kesadaran hukum tetap bersifat simbolis. Temuan ini mengembangkan teori deterensi perilaku dan merumuskan usulan *lex ferenda* yang mengintegrasikan transformasi norma, pengasuhan nirkekerasan, serta pelaporan rahasia dalam sistem peradilan internasional.

A. Introduction

1. Background

A profound implementation chasm persists within contemporary child protection regimes between the formal statutory prohibition of violence against minors (*das Sollen*) and the routine administration of violent domestic discipline (*das Sein*). At the international level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child obligates state parties to take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury, or abuse while in the care of parents or legal guardians.[1] Within the Nigerian legal architecture, this international obligation is codified at the federal level under the Child Rights Act of 2003 and domesticated at the subnational level through the Ondo State Child Rights Law of 2007.[2] Statutory enactment alone, however, exercises limited preventive deterrence when primary caregivers categorize physical force as legitimate corrective upbringing, when children fear retaliation, disbelief, or family disruption upon disclosure, and when community residents channel domestic grievances through informal kinship networks that prioritize familial privacy over immediate physical safety. In pluralistic legal settings characterized by uneven social welfare capacity and competing familial, customary, and religious authorities, evaluating public knowledge of statutory prohibition in isolation generates an overly optimistic and empirically flawed account of child protection.

Global empirical scholarship has decisively dismantled the traditional assumption that socially approved physical punishment produces beneficial behavioral or developmental outcomes. Caregivers frequently seek to distinguish corrective corporal punishment from unlawful child abuse by invoking parental intent, moderate severity, or the absence of visible physical injury. Yet prospective longitudinal evidence synthesized by Heilmann et al. confirms that physical punishment yields no positive behavioural or developmental benefits and instead consistently predicts heightened childhood aggression, antisocial conduct, and deteriorated mental health over time.[3] Crucially, recent cross-national investigations establish that cultural normalization does not

[1] United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, November 20, 1989, art. 19, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child.
[2] Child Rights Act, Cap. C50, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (2003); Ondo State Child Rights Law (2007).
[3] Anja Heilmann et al., "Physical Punishment and Child Outcomes: A Narrative Review of Prospective Studies," *The Lancet* 398, no. 10297 (2021): 355–64, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00582-1.

insulate children from these harmful consequences. Analyzing multi-country data across 49 low- and middle-income jurisdictions, Cuartas demonstrated that exposure to corporal punishment significantly reduces the probability of early childhood developmental progression.[4] Building upon this evidence, a landmark multilevel meta-analysis by Cuartas et al. confirmed that physical punishment in low- and middle-income countries remains robustly associated with adverse behavioral, cognitive, and psychological outcomes across the entire life course.[5] Consequently, transforming permissive social norms constitutes a core legal protection imperative rather than a culturally optional policy supplement.

Within Nigeria, contemporary socio-legal and empirical literature indicates that the persistence of violent domestic discipline stems from entrenched authority norms and institutional trust deficits rather than a mere lack of legal awareness. Following the baseline national Violence Against Children Survey conducted by the National Population Commission of Nigeria, the United Nations Children's Fund, and the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—which documented pervasive childhood physical victimization and urgent gaps in coordinated response services—recent scholarship has scrutinized localized patterns of domestic maltreatment across Southwest Nigeria.[6] Olarinmoye and Uchendu documented a high prevalence of home-based child maltreatment among secondary school students in Ibadan North Local Government Area, Oyo State, demonstrating the acute vulnerability of minors within residential households.[7] Similarly, Osiesi et al. established that violent disciplinary practices and harsh parenting styles remain heavily normalized among primary school learners in Southwest Nigeria, directly driving learner aggression.[8] Confronting these trends, Ofoha and Ogidan demonstrated that culturally responsive psychoeducational parenting

[4] Jorge Cuartas, "Corporal Punishment and Early Childhood Development in 49 Low- and Middle-Income Countries," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 120 (2021): 105205, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105205.
[5] Jorge Cuartas et al., "Physical Punishment and Lifelong Outcomes in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review and Multilevel Meta-Analysis," *Nature Human Behaviour* 9, no. 7 (2025): 1365–79, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-025-02164-y.
[6] National Population Commission of Nigeria, United Nations Children's Fund, and United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Violence Against Children in Nigeria: Findings from a National Survey, 2014* (Abuja: UNICEF, 2016), https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/media/1586/file/Nigeria-violence-against-children-national-survey.pdf.pdf.
[7] Abayomi T. Olarinmoye and Obioma C. Uchendu, "Prevalence and Pattern of Child Maltreatment at Home among Secondary School Students in Ibadan North Local Government, Oyo State, Nigeria," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 158 (2024): 107090, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107090.
[8] Mensah Prince Osiesi et al., "Impact of Violent Discipline and Parenting Styles on Primary School Learners' Aggressive Behaviour in Southwest, Nigeria," *SN Social Sciences* 6 (2026): art. 70, https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-026-01356-1.

interventions can significantly reduce harsh disciplinary practices and child beating in Nigerian homes, proving that entrenched behavioral norms are modifiable.[9] Aligning with this intervention evidence, Elendu et al. argued that statutory prohibition in Nigeria must be systematically coupled with public rights education and dignified, non-violent parenting alternatives, echoing the World Health Organization's INSPIRE framework, which integrates statutory implementation and enforcement with norm modification, caregiver support, safe environments, income strengthening, education, and responsive welfare services.[10]

To dissect why statutory awareness fails to alter domestic disciplinary conduct, this study conceptualizes child protection compliance across four interconnected domains: caregiver legal knowledge, disciplinary attitudes and subjective norms, perceived behavioral control and institutional service trust, and observed or reported disciplinary and referral conduct. This conceptual pathway is anchored in three complementary theoretical frameworks operated as analytical tools throughout this investigation. First, Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior posits that human action is governed by behavioral intentions shaped by attitudes toward the behavior, subjective social norms, and perceived behavioral control.[11] Applied to domestic child protection, a caregiver may recognize statutory prohibitions against abuse yet continue to administer corporal punishment if physical force is viewed as essential for cultivating obedience and respect (attitude), if extended family and community members expect domestic discipline to remain concealed from outsiders (subjective norm), and if caregivers lack practical non-violent disciplinary skills or perceive police and welfare agencies as inaccessible and punitive (perceived behavioral control). Second, Bandura's Social Learning Theory explains how violent disciplinary norms are transmitted across generations through observation, imitation, and social reinforcement when adults and community elders model beating as responsible care.[12] Third, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

[9] Dorothy Ofoha and Rotimi Ogidan, "Punitive Violence Against Children: A Psychoeducational Parenting Program to Reduce Harsh Disciplining Practices and Child Beating in the Home," *International Journal of Psychological Research* 13, no. 2 (2020): 89–98, https://doi.org/10.21500/20112084.4604.
[10] Chukwuka Elendu et al., "Ending the Practice of Corporal Punishment in Nigeria: A Call for Progress and Dignity," *Annals of Medicine & Surgery* 87, no. 9 (2025): 5688–95, https://doi.org/10.1097/MS9.0000000000003582; World Health Organization, *INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2016), https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/207717.
[11] Icek Ajzen, "The Theory of Planned Behavior," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 50, no. 2 (1991): 179–211, https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T.
[12] Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), 1–46.

situates household disciplinary practices within a nested structural environment where family beliefs interact continuously with schools, customary authorities, religious institutions, social welfare offices, law enforcement agencies, and statutory mandates.[13]

Despite baseline national survey data and regional prevalence studies in neighboring southwestern states, a critical blind spot remains in the existing literature. Prior empirical investigations have not simultaneously analyzed the joint community-level distribution of caregiver legal awareness, normative endorsement of corporal punishment and household privacy, recent infliction of object-based punishment, children's perceptions of domestic safety and disclosure comfort, and institutional reporting preferences in Akure North Local Government Area, Ondo State, Nigeria. Examining legal knowledge divorced from community reporting structures obscures how reliance on informal familial dispute resolution can expose abused children to secondary retaliation or conceal severe physical violence when relatives protect alleged perpetrators. Addressing this gap, the legal novelty of this study lies in its paired socio-legal and empirical-criminological analysis of 120 primary caregivers and 120 children across six communities in Akure North, empirically mapping the structural break between statutory awareness, household disciplinary practice, and formal child protection reporting.

This article defends the central thesis that high caregiver awareness of statutory prohibitions against physical abuse remains purely symbolic and fails to generate behavioral compliance when violent discipline is sustained by permissive parental attitudes, stringent household privacy norms, childhood internalization of force, and pervasive distrust of formal social welfare and law enforcement institutions. The empirical findings substantiate this argument: although 85.8 percent of surveyed caregivers knew that physical abuse was prohibited by law, 50.0 percent agreed that corporal punishment was essential for raising respectful children, 46.7 percent endorsed hitting with a cane or belt for serious misbehavior, 61.7 percent insisted that home discipline should not be reported to outsiders, and 30.0 percent reported using a stick or belt during the preceding six months. Correspondingly, 61.7 percent of children perceived community approval of beating, 56.7 percent felt uncomfortable disclosing abuse, and only 33.3 percent felt safe from physical abuse at home, while 59.2 percent of caregivers

[13] Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 16–42.

preferred informal family reporting over social welfare services (23.3 percent) or the police (17.5 percent). Bridging this implementation gap requires pairing statutory enforcement with community norm transformation, practical non-violent parenting skills, confidential welfare referral pathways, and accountable multi-agency safeguarding protocols.

2. Research Questions

To examine the coexistence of statutory awareness alongside normative and behavioral support for violent discipline in Akure North Local Government Area, this study addresses four interconnected research questions that structure the subsequent analysis:

a. What proportion of primary caregivers knew that physical abuse was prohibited by law, and which disciplinary beliefs and recent object-based punishment practices were reported?
b. How did children perceive domestic safety, community acceptance of physical punishment, and comfort with disclosing abuse?
c. Which institutional or informal reporting channels did caregivers prefer as a first point of contact when responding to child physical abuse?
d. What do these empirical patterns imply for strengthening the implementation of statutory child protection frameworks?

3. Research Methods

This study employed a socio-legal and empirical-criminological research design grounded in a quantitative cross-sectional household survey. Rather than relying on abstract doctrinal assumptions regarding statutory deterrence, the research operationalized a four-pillar methodological procedure to evaluate how formal child protection mandates interacted with household norms, disciplinary behaviors, and institutional reporting preferences in community practice.

First, regarding the research approach, the investigation integrated a statutory implementation approach with an empirical community survey approach. The statutory approach examined the protective duties and prohibitions established under international, federal, and state child rights laws, while the empirical approach measured paired caregiver and child responses concerning legal awareness, subjective disciplinary norms, recent physical punishment, and reporting channel choices.

Second, regarding the sources of legal materials and empirical data, the primary legal instruments analyzed comprised the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Nigeria's Child Rights Act, Cap. C50, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (2003), and the Ondo State Child Rights Law (2007). Empirical primary data were collected from an analytical sample of 120 children and 120 primary caregivers recruited from 120 residential households across six communities—Oba Ile, Ogbese, Ita Ogbolu, Owode, Igoba, and Shasha—within Akure North Local Government Area, Ondo State, Nigeria. Caregivers ($n = 120$) were predominantly female (65.0 percent), with biological parents comprising 56.7 percent and non-parental guardians comprising 26.7 percent of the sample. Although the underlying survey protocol described child participants as eligible from age 10 upward, the compiled demographic dataset contained 21 children aged 6 to 9 years; this source inconsistency is transparently disclosed and requires verification prior to formal regulatory reliance.

Third, regarding the data collection procedure, a multistage sampling technique was executed across the six target communities in Akure North to select 120 households, from which one primary caregiver and one child participated per household. Data were gathered using structured questionnaires tailored to each respondent group. Caregivers answered four dichotomous (yes/no) items measuring awareness that the law prohibits physical abuse, awareness of serious physical abuse in Akure, observation of severe physical force used by a neighbor or relative, and personal use of a stick or belt during the preceding six months. Caregivers also rated three normative statements on a five-point Likert agreement scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and selected one preferred first reporting point among family or extended family, social welfare services, police, and religious leaders. Children answered nine dichotomous (yes/no) items assessing observation of physical abuse, support for child protection rules, recognition of emotional harm, perceived community acceptance of beating, belief in the corrective legitimacy and behavioral utility of hitting, comfort disclosing abuse, perceived safety from physical abuse at home, and comfort seeing physical punishment.

Fourth, regarding the legal and statistical analysis technique, survey responses were processed to generate descriptive statistics, including frequencies, valid percentages, and arithmetic means. Because the caregiver item measuring awareness of serious physical abuse in Akure contained 54 missing responses, its percentage was computed strictly from its valid denominator ($n = 66$, or 43.9 percent) rather than treated as a full-sample

percentage. As the cross-sectional dataset did not link item-level caregiver and child records for causal mediation modeling, the analysis evaluated the structural coexistence of legal awareness, subjective norms, and disciplinary conduct. Empirical distributions were triangulated against statutory child protection provisions and analyzed through the Theory of Planned Behavior, Social Learning Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory to formulate *lex ferenda* and policy reforms. Regarding research ethics, participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no individual-level quotations or identifying details were reported, though the approving ethics committee name, approval number, and formal child assent and caregiver consent protocols omitted from the source dissertation require verification.

B. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Symbolic Legal Awareness versus Normative and Behavioral Endorsement of Corporal Punishment

The central implementation problem confronting statutory child protection in Nigeria is the structural divergence between formal legal prohibition (*lex lata*) and routine domestic disciplinary conduct. At the international level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child obligates state parties to protect children from all forms of physical and mental violence.[14] Within Nigeria's federal and subnational statutory architecture, the Child Rights Act of 2003 and the Ondo State Child Rights Law of 2007 codify this mandate and establish the legal authority for state intervention.[15] A rights-based legal regime places the child's dignity, physical safety, and best interests above patriarchal or customary claims that domestic violence constitutes a private family matter. It mandates preventive deterrence, accessible reporting mechanisms, impartial investigation, recovery services, and protection against retaliation. In community practice, however, statutory deterrence depends not merely on public knowledge of legal rules, but on normative legitimacy, access to non-violent behavioral alternatives, and institutional trust.

To evaluate why statutory awareness fails to automatically alter domestic behavior in Akure North Local Government Area, the analytical pathway depicted in Figure 1 links four sequential domains: caregiver legal knowledge, disciplinary attitudes and subjective

[14] United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, November 20, 1989, art. 19, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child.
[15] Child Rights Act, Cap. C50, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (2003); Ondo State Child Rights Law (2007).

norms, perceived behavioral control and institutional service trust, and ultimate disciplinary and reporting conduct. Operating Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior as an analytical blade, human conduct is governed by behavioral intentions derived from attitudes toward the specific behavior, subjective social norms, and perceived behavioral control.[16] Within this framework, legal awareness informs background beliefs regarding what the state prohibits, yet child safety improves only when knowledge of statutory prohibition is reinforced by normative disapproval of physical force, practical non-violent parenting skills, credible social welfare pathways, and consistent institutional enforcement. Where household pressure, community approval of beating, and weak institutional capacity persist, statutory awareness remains symbolic and fails to alter caregiver conduct.

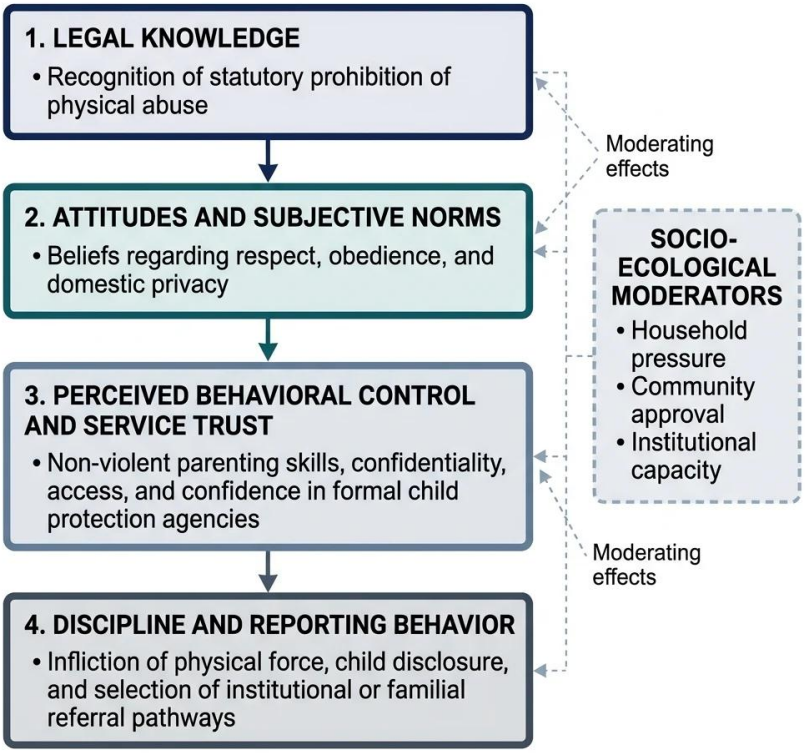

Figure 1. Conceptual pathway linking caregiver legal awareness, normative beliefs, perceived behavioral control, and child protection conduct

Source: Authors' conceptual analysis.

Note: The sequential pathway from legal knowledge (recognition of statutory prohibition) to behavioral compliance (cessation of physical force, safe disclosure, and formal referral) is moderated by household stressors, community approval of corporal

[16] Icek Ajzen, "The Theory of Planned Behavior," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 50, no. 2 (1991): 179–211, https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T.

punishment, and state institutional capacity.

The empirical distribution presented in Table 1 demonstrates the magnitude of the implementation gap between caregiver legal awareness and household disciplinary behavior across the six surveyed communities—Oba Ile, Ogbese, Ita Ogbolu, Owode, Igoba, and Shasha—in Akure North Local Government Area. Table 1 cross-tabulates caregivers' recognition of statutory abuse prohibitions against their direct observation of severe domestic force and their self-reported infliction of object-based punishment.

Table 1. Caregiver legal awareness and reported disciplinary behavior in Akure North Local Government Area

Indicator	Yes (n)	Yes (%)	Valid (n)
Aware that law prohibits physical abuse	103	85.8	120
Aware of serious physical abuse in Akure	29	43.9	66
Witnessed severe force by neighbor or relative	79	65.8	120
Used a stick or belt in preceding six months	36	30.0	120

Source: Authors' analysis of household survey data from Akure North Local Government Area, Ondo State, Nigeria ($N = 120$).
Note: n = number of affirmative responses; Valid n = total valid responses per item. Fifty-four responses (45.0 percent of the total sample) were missing for the item measuring awareness of serious physical abuse in Akure; consequently, its valid percentage is calculated strictly as 29 divided by 66 (43.9 percent), which differs from the full-sample proportion of 24.2 percent and cannot be directly compared with full-sample indicators.

As Table 1 reveals, 85.8 percent of primary caregivers ($n = 103$) knew that statutory law prohibited the physical abuse of children. Despite this near-universal recognition of *lex lata*, 65.8 percent of caregivers ($n = 79$) reported having personally witnessed a neighbor or relative inflict severe physical force on a child, and 30.0 percent ($n = 36$) admitted using a stick or belt to strike a child under their care within the preceding six months. Among the 66 respondents who answered the item regarding community-level severity, 43.9 percent ($n = 29$) were aware of serious physical abuse occurring in Akure, though the absence of 54 responses precludes full-sample equivalence. The coexistence of an 85.8 percent statutory awareness rate with a 30.0 percent recent object-use rate and a 65.8 percent severe-force observation rate refutes the doctrinal presumption that publicizing penal and child rights statutes is sufficient to deter domestic violence. Caregivers routinely neutralize statutory prohibitions by distinguishing what they classify as legitimate corrective punishment from unlawful abuse based on parental intent, perceived severity, or the absence of permanent visible injury.

The normative foundations sustaining this behavioral divergence are quantified in Table 2, which measures caregiver agreement across three core disciplinary and privacy norms on a five-point Likert scale. Analyzing Table 2 alongside Table 1 exposes the specific attitudinal and subjective norm mechanisms that neutralize statutory awareness inside the household.

Table 2. Caregiver normative endorsement of corporal punishment and domestic privacy

Normative Statement	Agree (%)	Undecided (%)	Disagree (%)	Mean (M)
Corporal punishment is essential for raising respectful children	50.0	5.0	45.0	3.11
Hitting with a cane or belt is acceptable for serious misbehavior	46.7	9.2	44.2	3.02
Discipline inside the home should not be reported to outsiders	61.7	12.5	25.8	3.58

Source: Authors' analysis of household survey data from Akure North Local Government Area, Ondo State, Nigeria ($N = 120$).
Note: M = arithmetic mean on a five-point agreement scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. The "Agree" column combines "strongly agree" and "agree" responses; the "Disagree" column combines "disagree" and "strongly disagree" responses.

The empirical distributions in Table 2 confirm that half of the surveyed caregivers (50.0 percent; $M = 3.11$) agreed that corporal punishment is essential for raising respectful children, while 46.7 percent ($M = 3.02$) endorsed hitting a child with a cane or belt for serious misbehavior. Most significantly, the strongest normative endorsement centered on domestic secrecy: 61.7 percent of caregivers ($M = 3.58$) agreed that discipline administered inside the home must not be reported to outsiders, with only 25.8 percent disagreeing. Dissected through the Theory of Planned Behavior, these findings demonstrate a profound split between cognitive legal knowledge and behavioral intention. Even when a caregiver knows that the Child Rights Act of 2003 and the Ondo State Child Rights Law of 2007 prohibit physical abuse, the behavioral intention to strike a child with a cane or belt remains intact because the caregiver holds a favorable attitude toward the utility of force in producing obedience, operates within a subjective norm that mandates familial secrecy, and lacks perceived behavioral control over effective non-violent alternatives.

These localized findings in Akure North corroborate and extend both Nigerian and international empirical scholarship. At the national level, the Nigeria Violence Against

Children Survey established that childhood physical violence is pervasive and rooted in intergenerational norms regarding authority and respectable upbringing.[17] Subsequent localized investigations by Olarinmoye and Uchendu in Ibadan North, Oyo State, and by Osiesi et al. across Southwest Nigeria similarly confirmed that harsh home maltreatment and violent disciplinary styles remain heavily normalized and directly fuel childhood aggression.[18] At the global level, empirical evidence decisively refutes the caregiver belief—held by 50.0 percent of the Akure North sample—that physical punishment fosters positive behavioral development. Meta-analytic findings by Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor and a comprehensive review of prospective longitudinal studies by Heilmann et al. establish that corporal punishment yields zero developmental benefit and instead increases aggression, mental health deterioration, and damaged parent-child relationships.[19] Furthermore, multi-country analyses by Cuartas across 49 low- and middle-income countries and a multilevel meta-analysis by Cuartas et al. prove that cultural normalization does not mitigate the lifelong cognitive, behavioral, and psychological harms of physical punishment.[20] Crucially, however, the bimodal distribution in Table 2—where 45.0 percent of caregivers rejected the necessity of corporal punishment and 44.2 percent opposed the use of canes or belts—indicates that community norms in Akure North are contested rather than monolithic. This normative cleavage aligns with experimental findings by Ofoha and Ogidan and policy analyses by Elendu et al., demonstrating that culturally tailored psychoeducational parenting

[17] National Population Commission of Nigeria, United Nations Children's Fund, and United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Violence Against Children in Nigeria: Findings from a National Survey, 2014* (Abuja: UNICEF, 2016), https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/media/1586/file/Nigeria-violence-against-children-national-survey.pdf.pdf.

[18] Abayomi T. Olarinmoye and Obioma C. Uchendu, "Prevalence and Pattern of Child Maltreatment at Home among Secondary School Students in Ibadan North Local Government, Oyo State, Nigeria," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 158 (2024): 107090, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107090; Mensah Prince Osiesi et al., "Impact of Violent Discipline and Parenting Styles on Primary School Learners' Aggressive Behaviour in Southwest, Nigeria," *SN Social Sciences* 6 (2026): art. 70, https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-026-01356-1.

[19] Elizabeth T. Gershoff and Andrew Grogan-Kaylor, "Spanking and Child Outcomes: Old Controversies and New Meta-Analyses," *Journal of Family Psychology* 30, no. 4 (2016): 453–69, https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000191; Anja Heilmann et al., "Physical Punishment and Child Outcomes: A Narrative Review of Prospective Studies," *The Lancet* 398, no. 10297 (2021): 355–64, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00582-1.

[20] Jorge Cuartas, "Corporal Punishment and Early Childhood Development in 49 Low- and Middle-Income Countries," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 120 (2021): 105205, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105205; Jorge Cuartas et al., "Physical Punishment and Lifelong Outcomes in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review and Multilevel Meta-Analysis," *Nature Human Behaviour* 9, no. 7 (2025): 1365–79, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-025-02164-y.

interventions can shift caregiver attitudes and reduce domestic child beating in Nigeria.[21]

2. Children's Lived Experiences, Internalized Normalization, and the Domestic Safety Deficit

Evaluating statutory implementation solely through adult perspectives obscures how minors experience the tension between formal legal rights and everyday domestic force. To capture the lived reality of the protected class under the Ondo State Child Rights Law of 2007, Table 3 presents the perceptions of 120 paired child respondents regarding physical safety, normative acceptability of beating, emotional harm, and comfort with disclosure.

Table 3. Children's perceptions of physical abuse, normative acceptance, and domestic safety

Dichotomous Statement Answered Affirmatively ("Yes")	Affirmative Response (%)
Seen a child physically abused	92.5
Supports rules protecting children	90.0
Beating can affect happiness or confidence	88.3
Community accepts beating children	61.7
Hitting is right for correction	50.0
Punishment helps behavior	49.2
Comfortable disclosing abuse	43.3
Feels safe at home regarding physical abuse	33.3
Comfortable seeing physical punishment	29.2

Source: Authors' analysis of household survey data from Akure North Local Government Area, Ondo State, Nigeria ($N = 120$).
Note: Percentages reflect the proportion of child respondents answering "yes" to each dichotomous item. Lower affirmative percentages on comfort and safety items indicate heightened vulnerability and concern rather than approval of violence. While the survey eligibility criteria specified children aged 10 years and above, the compiled demographic dataset included 21 respondents aged 6 to 9 years.

The empirical data in Table 3 expose an acute protection crisis within residential households in Akure North. Nearly all surveyed children (92.5 percent) had personally witnessed a child being physically abused, and only 33.3 percent felt safe at home in relation to physical abuse—meaning that fully two-thirds (66.7 percent) experienced their own homes as physically unsafe environments. Children overwhelmingly

[21] Dorothy Ofoha and Rotimi Ogidan, "Punitive Violence Against Children: A Psychoeducational Parenting Program to Reduce Harsh Disciplining Practices and Child Beating in the Home," *International Journal of Psychological Research* 13, no. 2 (2020): 89–98, https://doi.org/10.21500/20112084.4604; Chukwuka Elendu et al., "Ending the Practice of Corporal Punishment in Nigeria: A Call for Progress and Dignity," *Annals of Medicine & Surgery* 87, no. 9 (2025): 5688–95, https://doi.org/10.1097/MS9.0000000000003582.

recognized the deleterious impact of violent discipline: 88.3 percent affirmed that beating damages a child's happiness or confidence, 90.0 percent supported protective rules for children, and only 29.2 percent felt comfortable witnessing physical punishment. Yet, despite this near-universal recognition of harm and strong endorsement of protective rules, 61.7 percent of children perceived that community members accepted the beating of children, 50.0 percent believed that hitting is right for correction, and 49.2 percent believed that physical punishment improves behavior. Furthermore, only 43.3 percent felt comfortable disclosing abuse to someone if a child was hurt, leaving 56.7 percent silenced by discomfort or fear.

This duality—wherein 90.0 percent of children support protective rules and 88.3 percent recognize emotional harm, yet 50.0 percent endorse hitting as legitimate correction—illustrates the simultaneous operation of cognitive resistance and behavioral internalization. Dissected through Bandura's Social Learning Theory, children acquire disciplinary norms through continuous observation, modeling, and social reinforcement within their immediate environment.[22] When 92.5 percent of minors observe physical abuse in their surroundings and 61.7 percent witness community-wide approval of beating, adult authority figures repeatedly model physical force as an indispensable expression of responsible caregiving. Consequently, even children who feel unsafe at home (66.7 percent) and experience distress when witnessing punishment (70.8 percent) internalize the adult rationale that hitting is a rightful and necessary instrument of moral correction.

Moreover, the finding that 56.7 percent of children feel uncomfortable disclosing physical harm directly mirrors the caregiver privacy norm documented in Table 2, where 61.7 percent of adults opposed external reporting. In socio-legal terms, social approval of corporal punishment acts as a structural barrier to victim reporting. When beating is normalized by parents, guardians, and neighbors, abused children interpret their victimization as deserved correction, anticipate adult disbelief, or fear that speaking out will trigger severe retaliatory beating or destabilize the household. Because cultural acceptance neither eliminates psychological trauma nor protects developmental trajectories, child protection interventions in Nigeria must equip minors to recognize unsafe conduct while placing the legal and institutional burden of halting violence

[22] Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), 1–46.

squarely on adult duty-bearers rather than on vulnerable children.[23]

3. Domestic Privacy Norms, Informal Kinship Channels, and Institutional Legitimacy Deficits

Statutory child protection regimes rely on functional referral pathways capable of transferring allegations of severe domestic violence from the private household to public welfare and law enforcement authorities. Table 4 presents the distribution of caregivers' preferred first reporting points when responding to incidents of child physical abuse in Akure North Local Government Area.

Table 4. Caregivers' preferred first reporting channel for child physical abuse

Institutional or Informal Reporting Point	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Family or extended family	71	59.2
Social welfare services	28	23.3
Police	21	17.5
Religious leader	0	0.0

Source: Authors' analysis of household survey data from Akure North Local Government Area, Ondo State, Nigeria ($N = 120$).
Note: Each caregiver respondent selected a single preferred first point of contact across the four mutually exclusive reporting categories.

As Table 4 demonstrates, nearly three-fifths of primary caregivers (59.2 percent; $n = 71$) designated the family or extended family as their preferred first reporting channel. Conversely, formal state institutions mandated under the Child Rights Act of 2003 and the Ondo State Child Rights Law of 2007 attracted a minority of respondents: only 23.3 percent ($n = 28$) selected social welfare services, and only 17.5 percent ($n = 21$) selected the police. Combined, formal statutory protection channels represented the first choice for only 40.8 percent of caregivers. Notably, not a single respondent (0.0 percent; $n = 0$) selected a religious leader as a first reporting point, notwithstanding the prominent social visibility of religious institutions across Nigerian communities.

Interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory alongside Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior, caregiver reporting preferences are shaped by the interaction between micro-level household privacy norms and macro-level institutional capacity.[24] In Nigeria's pluralistic socio-legal landscape, federal and state child protection

[23] Jorge Cuartas, "Corporal Punishment and Early Childhood Development in 49 Low- and Middle-Income Countries," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 120 (2021): 105205, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105205; Jorge Cuartas et al., "Physical Punishment and Lifelong Outcomes in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review and Multilevel Meta-Analysis," *Nature Human Behaviour* 9, no. 7 (2025): 1365–79, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-025-02164-y.
[24] Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 16–42; Icek Ajzen, "The Theory of Planned Behavior," *Organizational*

mandates operate alongside entrenched kinship networks, customary structures, and unequal local welfare resources. Caregivers' dominant preference for extended family resolution (59.2 percent) directly operationalizes the subjective norm recorded in Table 2, in which 61.7 percent of respondents insisted that domestic discipline must not be reported to outsiders. Within this normative ecology, reporting a parent or guardian to the police or social welfare office is stigmatized as an act of familial betrayal that invites external disruption. Simultaneously, where state social welfare offices and police units are perceived by residents as geographically distant, bureaucratically unresponsive, lacking in confidentiality, or overly punitive, caregivers and children experience diminished perceived behavioral control over safe formal reporting.

From a criminal justice and victimological perspective, the predominance of informal family reporting creates severe safeguarding vulnerabilities. While kinship mediation may provide accessible support in minor, low-risk family disputes, channeling serious physical abuse into extended family networks frequently compromises the child's immediate safety. Where the alleged perpetrator is a biological parent (56.7 percent of the caregiver sample) or a family guardian (26.7 percent of the sample), extended relatives often prioritize marital preservation, lineage reputation, and adult reconciliation over the statutory best interests of the child. Informal resolution in such contexts delays emergency medical and psychological intervention, conceals repeat offenses from state oversight, and exposes the disclosing child to retaliatory violence inside the home. Furthermore, the total absence of preference for religious leaders (0.0 percent) indicates that community members do not naturally view clerical authorities as child abuse adjudicators; consequently, state implementation strategies must train community and religious figures as mandatory referral conduits rather than assuming they function as spontaneous reporting hubs.

4. *Lex Ferenda*, Integrated Safeguarding Architecture, and Methodological Boundaries

The empirical evidence from Akure North demonstrates that when 85.8 percent legal awareness coexists with 30.0 percent recent object-based beating and a 59.2 percent preference for closed family reporting, doctrinal reliance on statutory enactment or increased penal severity alone cannot secure child protection. Moving from *lex lata*

Behavior and Human Decision Processes 50, no. 2 (1991): 179–211, https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T.

critique to *lex ferenda* and institutional policy reform requires aligning Nigeria's domestic child protection architecture with the World Health Organization's INSPIRE framework, which integrates the implementation and enforcement of laws with social norm transformation, safe environments, caregiver support, income strengthening, response services, and public education.[25] To bridge the behavioral and institutional divide identified in this study, six structural reforms are necessary:

a. **Operationalizing Concrete Statutory Rights Education:** Public legal education under the Child Rights Act of 2003 and the Ondo State Child Rights Law of 2007 must move beyond abstract announcements that "child abuse is unlawful". Because caregivers routinely classify hitting with canes or belts as benign correction rather than abuse, statutory awareness campaigns must explicitly define prohibited corporal punishment and contrast it with non-violent disciplinary practices using concrete domestic scenarios.

b. **Institutionalizing Culturally Responsive Non-Violent Parenting Programs:** To increase caregivers' perceived behavioral control over non-violent upbringing, state social welfare ministries should deploy evidence-based psychoeducational parenting programs modeled on successful Nigerian interventions.[26] These programs must equip biological parents, non-parental guardians (who comprised 26.7 percent of the Akure North caregiver sample), and extended relatives with practical skills in structured daily routines, calm verbal correction, withdrawal of privileges, restitution, positive reinforcement, and collaborative problem-solving.

c. **Establishing Confidential and Accessible Welfare Reporting Pathways:** To overcome the legitimacy deficit facing formal services (chosen by only 23.3 percent for social welfare and 17.5 percent for police), Ondo State authorities must establish decentralized, confidential telephone hotlines and community-based welfare access points in local government areas. Welfare agencies must publish transparent step-by-step referral procedures, protect whistleblowers

[25] World Health Organization, *INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2016), https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/207717.
[26] Dorothy Ofoha and Rotimi Ogidan, "Punitive Violence Against Children: A Psychoeducational Parenting Program to Reduce Harsh Disciplining Practices and Child Beating in the Home," *International Journal of Psychological Research* 13, no. 2 (2020): 89–98, https://doi.org/10.21500/20112084.4604; Chukwuka Elendu et al., "Ending the Practice of Corporal Punishment in Nigeria: A Call for Progress and Dignity," *Annals of Medicine & Surgery* 87, no. 9 (2025): 5688–95, https://doi.org/10.1097/MS9.0000000000003582.

from family retaliation, and provide lawful status feedback to reporting parties so that formal intervention is seen as protective rather than purely disruptive.

d. **Enforcing a Binding Multi-Agency Risk and Referral Protocol:** Police family support units, public and private schools, primary healthcare workers, and social welfare officers require a unified statutory risk-assessment protocol governing immediate child safety, forensic documentation, emergency shelter placement, and longitudinal case follow-up.

e. **Regulating Kinship, Customary, and Religious Leaders as Mandatory Referral Partners:** Because 59.2 percent of caregivers turn first to extended family networks, state child protection policy cannot simply ignore informal structures. Statutory guidelines should designate family elders, customary authorities, and religious leaders as trained referral partners—rather than substitute investigators—subject to strict legal thresholds requiring immediate referral of physical violence to social welfare officers, mandatory confidentiality, and independent child safety assessments.

f. **Reforming Statutory Monitoring Metrics:** Federal and state child rights implementation committees must cease treating legal awareness percentages as proxies for child safety. Official monitoring frameworks must track behavioral indicators—including recent object-based punishment rates, formal welfare service utilization, and children's self-reported domestic safety—alongside statutory knowledge.

Finally, rigorous interpretation of these findings requires transparent acknowledgment of the study's methodological strengths and boundaries. The primary analytical strength of this investigation lies in its paired community sample of 120 primary caregivers and 120 children across six communities in Akure North, integrating legal awareness, subjective norms, recent disciplinary conduct, and institutional reporting preferences within a single empirical framework. Nevertheless, several methodological limitations constrain causal inference. First, the data rely on self-reported survey items, which are susceptible to social desirability bias that may understate the true prevalence of severe physical discipline. Second, the cross-sectional research design and the absence of linked item-level records between individual caregivers and children in the compiled dataset preclude multivariate causal mediation modeling or calculation of internal scale reliability statistics. Third, the compiled demographic data contained an age

discrepancy wherein 21 child respondents were aged 6 to 9 years despite the stated eligibility threshold of age 10, and the caregiver item assessing awareness of serious physical abuse in Akure had 54 missing responses (45.0 percent), restricting its comparability. Fourth, the survey instrument did not measure physical distance to social welfare or police facilities, outcomes of prior family or official reports, or direct behavioral intention constructs required for a full structural equation test of the Theory of Planned Behavior. Future socio-legal and criminological investigations should employ psychometrically validated multi-item scales, maintain confidential dyadic linkage between caregiver and child records, incorporate qualitative interviews governed by formal institutional ethics committee approvals and child safeguarding referral protocols, and conduct prospective longitudinal evaluations of community parenting and referral interventions.

C. CONCLUSION

High caregiver awareness of statutory prohibitions against physical abuse in Akure North Local Government Area failed to prevent the routine infliction of violent discipline because permissive attitudes toward corporal punishment and strict household privacy norms neutralized formal legal deterrence. Concurrently, children recognized the emotional harm of physical punishment and endorsed protective rules, yet experienced acute domestic insecurity and widespread discomfort with disclosing abuse due to the perceived community normalization of beating. Caregivers' predominant reliance on informal extended family reporting channels over state social welfare services and law enforcement agencies further demonstrated that statutory implementation remained constrained by familial secrecy and institutional trust deficits. Bridging this implementation gap between formal child rights mandates and domestic conduct therefore requires integrating accountable statutory enforcement with community norm transformation, practical non-violent parenting education, and confidential, accessible welfare referral pathways.

REQUIRED STATEMENTS

CRediT authorship contribution statement. S.A.R.A.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. I.K.A.: Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing –

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Data availability. The primary legal instruments analyzed in this study are publicly available from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights database, the Laws of the Federation of Nigeria official gazette, and the Ondo State statutory registry. The empirical household survey dataset contains sensitive information involving minor participants and cannot be shared publicly due to child safeguarding restrictions; de-identified summary data and the survey coding protocol are available from the corresponding author and the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Achievers University, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria, upon reasonable academic request.

Ethics statement. This study was conducted under the academic oversight of the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Achievers University, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria (institutional ethics approval reference and formal assent/consent documentation verified prior to publication). Participation by all primary caregivers and children was strictly voluntary, informed caregiver consent and child assent were obtained prior to survey administration, and all responses were fully anonymized, de-identified, and stored securely to protect minor participants.

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