A SOCIO-LEGAL EXAMINATION OF BULLYING BEHAVIOUR IN NIGERIAN COLLEGES AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE*

Abstract

Bullying is a global phenomenon and a pervasive issue within Nigerian colleges, exerting significant socio-legal and academic consequences on affected students. This study offers a comprehensive socio-legal examination of bullying behaviour in Nigerian secondary schools, exploring its underlying causes, prevalence, and the inadequacies of current legal and institutional responses. Through a doctrinal research approach and, drawing from sociological and legal perspectives, this paper investigates how systemic factors such as weak enforcement of anti-bullying policies, cultural norms, community attitudes, institutional silence and legal gaps shape bullying behaviour and contribute to its persistence in Nigerian schools. The paper also critically analyses the Nigerian legal framework, and educational policies, assessing their effectiveness in protecting students from peer victimization. The study finds that there is a strong correlation between bullying and poor academic performance among victims, due to frequent experiences of fear, anxiety, emotional distress, reduced class participation, and academic disengagement. Moreover, the lack of robust legal protections and inadequate redress mechanisms often leave students vulnerable and without recourse. Against this backdrop, this paper advocates for a multidimensional approach to addressing bullying in Nigerian colleges. It recommends among other things, the development of enforceable institutional anti-bullying policies, legal reforms or creation of a new legal framework to recognize bullying as a distinct offence, regular student sensitization/awareness programmes, and the establishment of accessible reporting and support systems. Ultimately, the study underscores the urgent need for a socio-legal response that prioritizes an academic environment free from harassment and intimidation, for enhanced academic performance and the overall well-being of Nigerian students.

Keywords: Socio-Legal Analysis, Bullying Behaviour, Nigerian Schools, Academic Performance

1. Introduction

Bullying is a pervasive, anti-social behaviour among school children and involves the use of violence. It is a repeated aggressive behaviour intended to harm or intimidate others, and can take various forms including physical violence, verbal harassment, relational, and cyberbullying. School has always been considered as one of the safest places, beside the home in a child's life. But it is now doubtful if this is still the case, given the increasing spate of violence in our schools today[1]. The rate of violent incidents in our schools is on the increase in the past few years and is becoming more and more an intriguing issue. In recent years, concern has grown over the prevalence of bullying in Nigerian secondary schools and its adverse impacts on students' academic and psychological well-being. Violence means 'the intentional use of physical force or power, and threat against oneself, another person, or against a group of community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation'[2]. It includes generally, any condition, behaviour or act that creates an atmosphere in which the individual feels dread and intimidated in addition to being victims of assault, theft or vandalism[3]. In spite of the increase in the rate of violence in schools, the society still expects that the school should be a safe place for students[4] to learn and achieve self-development.

Although, bullying is a global concern, its ramifications are particularly severe in developing countries like Nigeria. A significant proportion of students in Nigerian secondary schools experience various types of bullying, ranging from verbal, psychological to physical abuse[5]. This results in notable declines in academic performance among victims. The prevalence of bullying is usually attributed to some underlying factors including interparental violence, school environment, societal norms, substance use, and lack of effective anti-bullying policies[6]. The Nigerian cultural context in a way equally influences the nature and acquiescence of bullying behaviours through the social norms and traditional practices that condone these acts. The legal framework for addressing bullying in Nigerian schools involves a number of stakeholders, including the government, educational institutions, and the judicial system. Although there are certain ant-bullying legal frameworks in Nigeria, such as the Child's Rights Act (2003) and various school codes of conduct, effective implementation of these rules remains a challenge. The lack of strict legal measures and oversight have encouraged the perpetuation of bullying in Nigerian educational institutions,

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[1] D O Fareo, 'Bullying in Nigerian Secondary Schools: Strategies for Counselling intervention' (2015) Educational Research and Reviews, 10(4):435-443.

[2]World Report on Violence and Health (WRVH), < https://www.who.int/groups/violence-prevention-alliance/approach>. Accessed on 6 June, 2025.

[3] D O Fareo, (n1).

[4] *Ibid*.

[5] O I Fawole, I I Okafor and A L Aderonum, 'Prevalence of Bullying in Secondary Schools in Ibadan, Nigeria' (2011) *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 16(2), 225-237.

[6] O Fenny and M I Falola, 'Prevalence and Correlates of Bullying Behaviour Among Nigerian Middle School Students' (2020) *Int J Offender Ther Comp Criminol*, 64(5): 564e585.

particularly in secondary schools[7]. The negative impacts of bullying on students' academic performance are widely recognised. Victims of bullying often exhibit lower academic achievement, higher absenteeism, and dwindled interest in school events in comparison to their free peers. This shows a significant correlation between bullying and poor academic performance among Nigerian students.[8] Bullying induces anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem in the victim which may ultimately result in psychological and emotional distress and directly affect students' ability to focus and excel academically. Bullying is a critical issue for secondary school students and poses a threat that no school or parents should deny or disregard. It can have negative consequences on the general school climate and impinges on the right of students to learn in a safe environment without fear or intimidations[9]. Bullying can also have enduring negative effects on the victims as well as the perpetrators. This paper sets to explore the concept of bullying or bullying behaviour; the types, prevalence, causes and effect of bullying. It offers a socio-legal examination of bullying behaviour in Nigerian colleges and its impact on students' academic performance. By integrating sociological perspectives with legal frameworks, the study aims to illuminate the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to bullying within the Nigerian educational system.

2. The Concept of Bullying Behaviour

Bullying is a repetitive and intentional hurting of one person or group of persons by another person or group of persons, in a kind of power imbalance relationship. It is the behaviour that is repeated over time with the goal of causing pain or injury by physical assault, verbal or psychological abuse, and characterized by a power imbalance that benefits the bully at the victim's expense[10]. This means that the perpetrator is usually, a person with greater physical strength or more social power than their victim. The power imbalance may be as a result of many factors such as size, gender, age, standing among peers, and/or assistance by other students[11]. Bullying is the act or behaviour of intentionally causing harm or discomfort to another person. It is a repeated act of aggression or hostility toward the victim other than just one-off types of peer conflict[12]. It means that, for a behaviour to be considered bullying, it has to be repetitive and habitual rather than one-off occurrence. Therefore, a more encompassing definition of bullying is that it is a 'subcategory of aggressive behaviour that is characterised by hostile intent (the harm caused is deliberate), imbalance of power (real or perceived power inequality between bully and victim), and repetition over a period of time'.[13] Bullying includes 'a written or verbal expression, or physical or electronic act or gesture, or a pattern thereof, that is intended to coerce, intimidate, or cause any physical, mental, or emotional harm to any student'[14]. It is an aggressive, goal-directed, behaviour that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance[15]. Under the relevant law[16] bullying amounts to an infringement on the victim's rights to dignity and protection. Bullying is a common experience which occurs almost in all places where there are human interactions, such as homes, schools, prisons and workplaces. However, it is more pronounced and prevalent among school children. Bullying is distinct from ordinary types of student-student conflicts, which may be considered as part of everyday school life, and are not associated with power imbalance. In contrast to more common conflicts, school bullying can cause severe harm as the perpetrators engage in the act in order to assert and/or establish power and control over their victims, whom they take to be "weaker" world. For a behaviour or an action to be considered as bullying, certain elements must be present- the action must be negative, repetitive, intentional, hostile/aggressive, hurting and unprovoked. Also, there must be power imbalance either real/actual or perceived in the relationship between the bully and the bullied. Bullying is not peculiar to Nigeria. It is a global phenomenon and is a complex social issue that can have serious negative consequences including the potential to cause physical and/or psychological injury to the victim.

A good grasp of the concept of bullying requires an interdisciplinary approach. For instance, from a sociological perspective, bullying is not just an isolated act of aggression, but rather a complex social phenomenon linked to power dynamics, social hierarchies, and group behaviours.[17] The social learning theory states that behaviours, including bullying, are learned through observation and imitation. Symbolic interactionism helps us understand how the meanings attached to actions and identities contribute to bullying. From a legal standpoint, bullying intersects with human rights laws including the Child's Rights Act, and educational policies. The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP), Cybercrime Act, also provide the legal basis for addressing bullying in Nigerian secondary schools.

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[7] C N Momah, 'The Need for Anti-bullying and Safeguarding Policies in Nigerian Educational Institutions' (2024) <*https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/need-anti-bullying-safeguarding-policies-nigerian-momah-cuadc?trk=public_post*>. Accessed on 6 June, 2025.

[8] V A Oluwamumibori *et al*, Bullying and Academic Performance: A Study of Selected Secondary Schools in Lagos, Nigeria' (2022) *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences,* Vol 13 No 5.

[9] D O Fareo, (n3).

[10] National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-free schools with Its Implementing Guidelines' (2021) *Federal Ministry of Education.*

[11] Noorden, T H J Van *et al*, *'Empathy and involvement in bullying in children and adolescents: a systematic review' (2015) Journal of Youth and Adolescence. 44 (3): 637–657.*

[12] *C Burger, School bullying is not a conflict: The interplay between conflict management styles, bullying victimization and psychological school adjustment', (2022) International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 19 (18).*

[13] *S Goldsmid and P Howie, 'Bullying by definition: An examination of definitional components of bullying'* (2014) *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. 19 (2).*

[14] *Colofado Revised Status (C.R.S.) Title 22. Section 22-23-109.1.1 (b)*

[15] A A Volk, A V Dane, and. Z A Marini, 'What is Bullying? A Theoretical Redefinition', (2014) *Developmental Review*, 34 (4) pp. 327-343.

[16] Nigerian Child's Rights Act, 2003, sections 11 &16

[17] R Thornberg, 'The Social Dynamics of School Bullying: The Necessary Dialogue Between the Blind Men Around the Elephant and the Possible Meeting Point at the Social- Ecological Square' (2015) *Confero*| Vol. 3, N0. 2.

3. Prevalence and Forms of Bullying in Nigerian Schools

Bullying is increasingly becoming a major threat in Nigerian secondary schools and its occurrences have been documented and recognised as a major issue across the country.[18] The prevalence of bullying in Nigerian schools has raised significant concerns among legal practitioners, educators, parents, policymakers and the public, due to its ripple effects on students' academic performance, their psychological well-being and the general society. Some of the notable recent bullying incidences is the bullying and physical harassment at the Lead British International School, Abuja[19]**.** Also, sometime in 2018, an 11-year-old boy in a *special school for the Deaf in Kuje, Abuja*, was allegedly being bullied and sodomised and being forced to perform oral sex on older school mates.[20] In November 2021, a student of *Dowen College, Lagos,* Sylvester Oromoni**,** died as a result of multiple internal injuries he reportedly sustained after being beaten/bullied by fellow students.[21] The list is nearly endless. The growing rate of bullying reported in several previous studies is an indication that while efforts are continually made to end bullying in Nigerian secondary schools, a lot more needs to be done particularly with regard to interventions and policies.[22] Some factors such as interparental violence, substance use, gangsterism and poor relationships with teachers have been identified as contributing to bullying behaviours[23] Despite the ugly consequences of bullying, the issue has not been given the needed attention by relevant stakeholders. The negligence of the issue of bullying in Nigerian secondary schools is precipitated by certain underlying factors including lack of documentation and underreporting,[24] tacit approval or acceptance by most Nigerian parents and school authorities which see it as a normal aspect of 'growing up'. Moreover, lack of effective policies and implementation to make secondary schools a safe place for students in Nigeria has exacerbated the problem of bullying and violence in the schools[25].

There are a number of ways in which school bullying occur. In a more general way, bullying can be categorized into *direct*, *indirect* and *pack* bullying. Direct bullying refers to an open attack on a victim by the bully[26]. This may either be physical or verbal. Indirect bullying on the other hand, is more sneaky and harder to detect, but involves one or more forms of relational hostility, such as social isolation through deliberate exclusion, spreading rumours to defame the victim's character or reputation, making faces or obscene gestures behind the victim's back, and manipulating friendships or other relationships. Pack bullying is a type of bullying undertaken by a group.

Other types or medium of bullying include:

Physical Bullying: Here, the perpetrator uses his body or weapon to hurt or scare the victim. Physical bullying is one of the most easily identifiable forms of bullying and involves any unwarranted, unwanted physical contact between the bully and the bullied. Physical bullying occurs through fighting, punching, hazing, headlocks, inappropriate touching, kicking, pinching, poking, hair pulling, pushing, slapping, spitting, stalking, or making unwanted and persistent eye contact with a victim, spilling liquids onto a victim, throwing small and lightweight objects at a victim, teasing, threatening, tickling, using weapons including improvised ones, theft and/or damaging of personal belongings[27].

Emotional Bullying: this refers to a type of bullying that harms the victim's psyche and/or emotional well-being. This can happen by way of spreading malicious rumours about the target (this can be termed 'social bullying), ignoring the victim (silent treatment or acting as if the victim does not exist at all). It also includes provoking, belittling or saying hurtful things to the victim, which also qualifies as physical or verbal bullying.

Verbal Bullying: this involves disparaging remarks or malicious allegations meant to cause the victim undue emotional discomfort. Examples of verbal bullying include the use of foul language or (profanity) directed at the victim; using derogatory remarks or deriding the victim's name; commenting negatively on person's appearance, clothes, body; mocking, taunting, teasing and belittling; threatening to cause harm, and making inappropriate sexual comments.

Cyberbullying: This is a form of verbal or social bullying that takes place through instant messaging, social gaming sites, email, texting, or social media. The advancement and increase in the use of computers, the internet and social media has moved so

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[18] I G Ighaede-Edwards *et al,* 'Prevalence and predictors of bullying among in-school adolescents in Nigeria', (2023) *Journal of Taibah University Medical Sciences*, 18 (6). pp. 1329-1341.

[19] 'Nigeria Needs an Anti-Bullying Policy' (2024) *PUNCH*. https://punchng.com/nigeria-needs-an-anti-bullying-policy/.

[20]'10 School Bullying Cases that Shocked Nigeria' (2021) *21st Century Chronicle.* https://21stcenturychronicle.com/revealed-10-school-bullying-cases-that-shocked-nigeria/. Accessed on 4 June, 2025.

[21]*Ibid*

[22] W C Obioha *et al*, 'Interparental Violence and Schooling Bullying Among Nigerian Adolescents: Moderating Role of Psychological Resilience' (2024) *Child Protection and Practice* Vol. 1.

[23]O O Akanni *et al*, 'Predictors of Bullying Reported by Perpetrators in A Sample of Senior School Students in Benin City, Nigeria' (2020) *South African Journal of Psychiatry*.

[24] O Alaude and A Adegoke, 'Managing Bullying Problems in Nigerian Secondary Schools: Some Counselling Interventions for Implementation' (2011) *Nigerian Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 15 (1).

[25]R I Asiyai, Exploring bullying in Nigerian secondary school and school administrators' strategies for its' management Department of Educational Administration and Policy Studies', (2015) *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 15 (2) pp. 305-314.

[26] *L Hirsch, C Lowen and D Santorelli, Bully: An Action Plan for Teachers and Parents to Combat the Bullying Crisis (New York: Weinstein Books, 2012).*

[27] *J Bolton and S Graeve, '*No Room for Bullies: From the Classroom to Cyberspace*' (2005). Nebraska: Boys Town Press.* ISBN 978-1-889322-67-4.

many real-world activities, including bullying, to the virtual world[28]**.** As the society is becoming more and more dependent on internet for various purposes, it equally serves as a venue and an avenue to vent their frustration and aggression which would not have been possible offline[29]. It is harder for schools to control cyberbullying since they occur off-campus, and the general perception is that their role stops at the gates of the schoolyard.

Sexual Bullying: This include any bullying behaviour, whether physical or non-physical, that is based on a person's sexuality or gender. It is any bullying behaviour with a sexual content or element. It can be carried out or perpetrated right before the victim, behind his back or through the use of technology. Examples are unsolicited hugging, kissing, distribution of sexual material (including pornography), sending photos or videos of a sexual nature.

The purpose of all types of bullying is to hurt, ridicule, embarrass, scare, and in some cases, to assert and establish control over the victim.

4. Factors Precipitating Bullying in Nigerian Secondary Schools

Certain identifiable factors are responsible for bullying and bullying behaviour in schools across the globe including Nigeria. These factors are grouped into different categories such as:

Social Factors: This includes early exposure and experiences, which influence the behaviour of the child. For instance, parental neglect, interparental violence, broken home, aggression in the society, family stress, rejection, frustration, isolation, and exposure to unhealthy media contents such as violent movies, marginalization, child abuse, substance use, antisocial acts and inconsistent reinforcements

Biological factor: Evidence through scientific research show that certain individuals manifest hostile/aggressive behaviour due to malfunctioning of the body organs or imbalance in the production of body hormones. Aggressive behaviours like bullying can also be as a result of declining mental health.[30].

Peer Influence: School children spend most of their time with their peer group than they do with their parents and teachers. Students often have shared activities, values, and norms with their peers, the influence of which can be significant in shaping their behaviours, attitudes, and identity. A child who associated with wrong group (bullies) from early age may assume that intimidating others is a good act. Bad influence of peers can contribute in encouraging or perpetuating bullying behaviours

Environment factors: The availability and efficiency of officials to play supervisory role and enforce discipline can be a serious factor. Lack of appropriate resources within schools is also associated with higher levels of school bullying. For instance, insufficient or sheer absence of counsellors in the schools may contribute to having an environment where bullying can fester[31].

Cultural Factor: Cultural or societal norms may tacitly encourage or approve school bullying as part of growing experience for young people. Society influenced by Confucian culture, including the idea of superiority, inferiority, hierarchy,[32] respect for elders and loyalty, creates an atmosphere that breeds bullying more easily. In Nigerian situation/society, there seems to be this unexpressed/tacit approval or acceptance of bullying as necessary behaviour of a stage, which students have to experience as part of maturing process and which has dynamics of taking turns.

5. Parties to Bullying Behaviour

Basically, there are two parties or categories of individuals involved in any bullying action, namely, the bully and the victim.[33] In many cases, there could be a third party known as the bystander or witness.

The Bully: The bully also referred to as the perpetrator or aggressor, is the architect or the originator of the bullying behaviour. The bully takes pleasure and satisfaction in inflicting injury and pain on others[34]. Bullies are generally associated with peculiar antisocial behaviours or attitude such as: 'impulsiveness, high opinion of self, popularity among peers, proneness to violence, supportiveness of violence, less satisfaction with the school and family, readiness to fight, tendency to take drug or alcohol'[35].

The Bullied: The bullied is also referred to as the victim or bullying target. The bullied is the recipient of attacks and repeated negative actions from other student or students. The bullying victims are usually oppressed and subjected to pain and stress by the bullies due to the fact that the former in some way seem weaker, less important and less advantaged than most of the

[28] *A Tolia, 'Cyberbullying: A Socio-Legal Perspective' (2014) Indian Journal of Applied Research, Vol. 4, Issue 11*
[29] *Ibid.*
[30] D O Fareo (n9)
[31]E O Egbochukwu, Bullying in Nigerian Schools: Prevalence Study and Implications for Counselling' (2007) *J. Soc. Sci.,* 14(1): 65-71.
[32] Q Guo, 'Research on Bullying Law and Education in the Context of Educational Informatization' (2020) *International Journal of e-Education, e-Business, e-Management and e-Learning*
[33]L Nwamadi, 'Prevalence, Causes and Consequences of Bullying Behaviour Among Secondary School Students: Implications for Counselling' (2020) *Journal of Education in Developing Areas*, Vol. 28, 1.
[34]*Ibid.*
[35]A A Neto,' Bullying- Aggressive Behaviour Among Students' (2005) *Journal de Pediatria. Brazilian Multi-Professional Association for Children and Adolescent Protection.* Discourse 1:13- 21.

students[36].The bullying victims also have common characteristics like low self-esteem, physical weakness, withdrawal from social activities, shyness, depression, anxiety, lack of social skills and friends, and truancy[37]. Victims of bullying do not usually report the incidents because they feel embarrassed, afraid or even unsure whether the school authority will support them. The bullying witnesses are categorised as helpers if they abet or partake in the bullying action; supporters if they support the bullies; and defenders if they defend or protect the victims and report the incident for attention[38].

Bystander or Witness: The bystanders or witnesses belong to the category of students who are usually present in the bullying ground but do not directly get involved.

6. Effects of Bullying on Students' Academic Performance

Bullying is anti-social, pervasive behaviour with terribly harmful consequences for the bullies, victims, schools and the community at large. It can have shattering effects on victims. For the victims of bullying, they go to school every day with fear of harassment, taunting and humiliation. Such pronged and usually concealed fear can degenerate to depression, anxiety, stress, anger, helplessness, absenteeism, and in some cases, suicidal thought.[39] They are likely to feel lonelier, dejected and have difficulties adjusting to school. All these will lead to poor academic performance as they will find it extremely difficult to concentrate on their study. Exposure to chronic bullying can make the victim feel insecure, lack trust, display extreme sensitivity or hypervigilance, develop health and/or mental issues such as avoidant personality disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)[40].

Research shows that bullying also, has enduring carry-over syndrome for the bullies. For instance, children who displayed hostile attitude normally, in their adulthood, exhibit deviant behaviours such as sexual harassment, date violence, spouse battering, gang attacks, child abuse and elder abuse.[41] Bullies sometimes tend to resort to **social isolation,** either as a consequence of their actions, and they have lower levels of adjustment to school which are inimical to good academic outcome. Besides, they are prone to carrying weapons to school which are antithetical to academic activities. In the whole, bullying has serious correlation with academic performance of students. It can create fear in the bullied who becomes afraid of going to school, resulting in higher level of absenteeism and less concentration and participation in class and school activities[42] or drop out of school completely. Victims of chronic bullying are likely to experience more academic difficulties, have lower grades and be less likely to expect going on to higher education[43]. Besides, bullying makes the learning environments unsafe and create a climate of fear and insecurity, leaving a perception that the school is not in control or is not concerned about students' welfare, which reduces the quality of education for all.[44]

7. Socio-Legal Perspectives on School Bullying

The paper examines school bullying through the lens of socio-legal perspective. Bullying as an antisocial behaviour infringes on the rights of the bullied. Its increase and prevalence in our secondary schools raise concerns regarding the safety and legal structure for the protection of school children, particularly the vulnerable ones. Bullying violates relevant provisions of the law including the Child's Right Act[45] by infringing on the rights which it affords the child. For instance, Sections 11 of the Act provides that: Every child is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person, and accordingly, no child shall be-

a. subjected to physical, mental or emotional injury, abuse, neglect or maltreatment, including sexual abuse;
b. subjected to torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment;
c. subjected to attacks upon his honour or reputation; or
d. held in slavery or servitude, while in the care of a parent, legal guardian or school authority or any other person or authority having the care of the child

The Act was enacted in 2003 in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The rights that require protection under *Sections 3* to *20* of the Act include the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria[46], including the right to survival and development, right to name, freedom of association and peaceful assembly, freedom of thoughts, conscience and religion, right

[36]L Nwamadi, (n36).
[37]T. J. Zirpoly, 'Bullying behaviour. Pearson Allyn Bacon Prentice Hall' (2009), cited in, Nwamadi, 'Prevalence, Causes and Consequences of Bullying Behaviour Among Secondary School Students: Implications for Counselling' (2020) *Journal of Education in Development Areas,* Vol.28. N0.1.
[38]L Nwamadi, (n 39).
[39]'*The Devastating Effects of School Bullying'* (2023) *Northland Child Psychiatry* < https://northlandchildpsychiatry.com/blog/2023/05/01/the-devastating-effects-of-school-bullying/>. *Accessed on 23 May, 2025.*
[40] C *Burger and L Bachmann,* 'Perpetration And Victimization In Offline And Cyber Contexts: A Variable- and Person-Oriented Examination of Associations and Differences Regarding Domain-Specific Self-Esteem and School Adjustment" *(2021) Int J Environ Res Public Health. 18 (19).*
[41] D O Fareo and H K Habilaa' Effects of Bullying on Learning Among Secondary School Students in Mubi Educational Zone of Adamawa State, Nigeria' (2018) *European Journal of Education Studies* - Volume 4
[42]UNESCO, 'School Violence and Bullying: Global Status Report' (2017) *Paris, UNESCO. pp. 17, 29.*
[43] *J Nakamoto and D Schwartz, 'Is Peer Victimization Associated with Academic Achievement? A Meta-analytic Review' (May 2010). Social Development (Meta-analysis). 19 (2): 221–242.*
[44]UNESCO, (n35).
[45]No. 26 of 2003.
[46]Section 34

to private and family life, right to freedom of movement, right to freedom from discrimination, right to dignity of a child, right to leisure, recreation and cultural activities, right to health and health services, right to parental care, protection and maintenance, right to free, compulsory and universal primary education, right of a child in need of special protection measure. Interestingly, majority of secondary school students are still below 18 years and invariably, are covered by the provisions of the Child's Right Act.

It should be noted however, that many of the face-to-face and physical bullying that occur in schools, and playgrounds have now been moved to the internet via online sites. Virtual world is gradually and increasingly becoming the main venue for bullying where the bullies abuse and play pranks, and perpetrate all manner of cyberbullying and escape the liability and consequences. Given the influx of activities including bullying behaviour, into the virtual world, there is a need of law beyond the present Child's Rights Acts, to control and discipline cyberbullying and other online menaces affecting young lives.

Legal Frameworks on School Bullying in Nigeria

Nigeria lacks a comprehensive national legal framework specifically addressing school bullying[47]. Existing laws offer some protection, but enforcement is inconsistent. Without targeted anti-bullying legislation and clear school policies, victims often remain vulnerable, and accountability for perpetrators is limited.

Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended): The Nigerian 1999 Constitution as the Grundnorm constitutes the foremost legal protection to every individual in the country, including children and the aged. In this regard, it may be right to assume that *section 17* of the Constitution which provides, among others, for social order founded on ideals of freedom, equality and justice can be invoked as a legal shield against bullying. *Subsection 2 (b)* stipulates that 'the sanctity of the human person shall be recognised and human dignity shall be maintained and enhanced'. Furthermore, in subsection 3 (a) the State is enjoined to direct its policy towards ensuring that 'all citizens, without discrimination on any group whatsoever, have the opportunity for securing adequate means of livelihood as well as adequate opportunity to secure suitable employment'. The objectives of these sections and other relevant sections of the Constitution cannot be completely achieved in a society where bullying is allowed to thrive.

Child's Rights Act: A proper interpretation of the relevant section of the Nigerian Child's Rights Act, 2023 shows that the Act prohibits bullying action. *Section 11* of the Act states that, every child is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person, and accordingly, no child shall be subjected to physical, mental or emotional injury, abuse, neglect or maltreatment, torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, attacks upon his honour or reputation or sexual abuse. Bullying comes with some detrimental effects on the physical, emotional, psychological and overall well-being of the victims in violation of the provisions of the relevant sections of the Act.

Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act*:* The VAAP Act enacted in 2015 is one of the key legal frameworks in Nigeria aimed at addressing various forms of violence, including those that occur within educational settings. While the Act does not explicitly mention "school bullying," it prohibits many actions that constitute bullying. Sections of the Act criminalize physical[48], emotional, verbal, and psychological abuse[49], all of which are common in bullying behaviours. For instance, acts causing fear, harm, or intimidation fall under emotional abuse, which the Act recognizes as a punishable offense[50]. All these constitute elements of bullying. Additionally, the VAPP Act emphasises the protection of vulnerable persons, including minors, from harm and exploitation[51], thereby reinforcing the legal obligation of schools and guardians to prevent and respond to bullying. By providing legal consequences for various forms of interpersonal violence, the VAPP Act serves as a deterrent and offers a basis for legal redress, making it a powerful tool against school bullying in Nigeria.

Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015: The Cybercrime Act typically provides a framework for the prevention and prosecution of cybercrimes. The Act is equally useful in addressing the menace of bullying, particularly cyberbullying. The Act addresses cyberbullying as 'cyberstalking', meaning, any course of conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear. Therefore, sending any type of communication through a computer or internet to intimidate, threaten, or harass another individual in a way that infuses fear of death, violence, or physical harm constitutes cyberstalking. The Act provides under its *section 24 subsection 1 (a)* and *(b)* that any person who knowingly or intentionally sends a message or other matter using computer systems or networks that is: (a) Grossly offensive, pornographic, or of an indecent, obscene, or menacing character or causes any such message or matter to be so sent; or (b) He knows to be false, to cause annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, ill will or needless anxiety to another or causes such a message to be sent commits an offense under the Act and shall be liable on conviction to a fine of not more than ₦7,000,000.00 or imprisonment for a term of not more than 3 years or to both such fine and imprisonment. *Subsection 2 (a)* stipulates that any person who intentionally transmits any communication through a computer system to bully or threaten

[47]M A Aderebigbe, 'Comprehensive Analysis of Bullying Laws and Policies and Public Schools in the United States and Nigeria' (2012) *Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia,* https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/aderibigbe_moradeke_a_201212_phd.pdf. Accessed on 5 June, 2025. P.114.

[48]The Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, 2015. Section 2 (1)

[49]*Ibid*, section 14 (1)

[50]*Ibid*, sections 3, 4 and 18

[51]*Ibid*, sections 17 and 18 criminalises stalking and intimidation.

or harass another person, where such communication places another person in fear of death, violence or bodily harm or to another person; commits an offense under the Act.

Institutional Regulations: Institutional regulations, particularly codes of conduct play a vital role in curbing bullying in Nigerian secondary schools by providing structured guidelines and disciplinary measures. Where these regulations establish clear definitions of bullying, outline prohibited behaviours, and set out penalties for offenders, they deter misconduct. Schools with well-enforced anti-bullying policies promote safer environments where students feel protected and respected. Effective regulations also require staff training, reporting mechanisms, and support systems for victims. When consistently implemented, they foster accountability and create a culture of zero tolerance for abuse. Moreover, institutional policies complement national laws like the VAPP Act, ensuring that bullying is addressed both legally and administratively. Thus, institutional regulations are essential in preventing, detecting, and responding to bullying at the school level. In some ways, the Federal Government's *National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools*[52] and the *Minimum Standards for Safe School*, adopted in 2021 can guide schools in developing effective institutional policies that can address the problem of school bullying in the country**.** Although**,** many schools have codes of conduct, the major challenge is weak enforcement. Accordingly, despite these provisions, the enforcement of anti-bullying laws remains a challenge due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of training for staff, and cultural stigmas associated with reporting abuse.

Besides these legal provisions that generally address the rights to protection, there is currently no adequate legal framework or policy in place to comprehensively address the full scope of bullying issues in Nigeria. Given the prevalence of bullying in our secondary schools and its potential to severely inhibit a child's ability to learn and develop effectively, while also creating lifelong negative impacts, there is an urgent need for a robust anti-bullying legal framework in the country. This will help to promote and secure conducive learning environment free from threat, harassment, fear, intimidation, and any type of bullying behaviour in schools.

8. Addressing School Bullying Through Socio-Legal Interventions in Nigeria

Effective intervention strategies can be initiated and implemented on various levels, to control/reduce bulling in Nigerian Secondary schools. Measures to controlling bullying behaviour range from institutional to individual and require a multi-faceted approach that involves students, teachers/educators, administrator, parents, professionals and policymakers[53]. Addressing the problem of bullying within the educational system begins with the formulation and implementation of anti-bullying policies and rules with the help of school counsellors and physiologists[54]. Such policies should clearly define what constitutes bullying while outlining the consequences for bullying behaviour. However, the enforcement must be consistent to send a clear message that bullying will not be tolerated. In addition, teachers and school administrators need training to recognize and address bullying effectively. A key strategy is fostering a positive school culture that emphasizes and promotes respect, empathy, and inclusivity. Schools can incorporate life skills and emotional intelligence education into the curriculum, teaching students how to manage conflicts, understand others' feelings, and develop better interpersonal relationships. In this regard, school professionals like counsellors and psychologists have to provide treatments to raise students' degree of compassion and empathy by including those activities that promote empathy for others' feelings. This is important since study has revealed that bullies tend to demonstrate little empathy for their victim[55]. Peer mentorship programs can also help, where senior students act as role models and mediators for younger ones, providing guidance and support. Also, parents should be actively engaged and involved in all anti-bully programmes of the school. This can be done through workshops and seminars to educate them on the signs of bullying and how to assist their children if they are either bullies or victims.

It should be noted that while bullying in secondary schools is often regarded as a form of juvenile delinquency, it should not completely be excluded from criminal procedures as this can pose challenges for accountability and prevention. In line with the provisions of the law, minors should not be subjected to the full weight of adult criminal prosecution. For instance, the law emphasises rehabilitation and reintegration of child offenders, rather than punishment,[56] encourages alternative measures, like counselling, supervision, or education in place of detention.[57] Notwithstanding, the complete absence of enforceable consequences will encourage repeat offending and victim harm. To balance protection with discipline, there is a need for a hybrid approach that incorporates rehabilitative juvenile justice measures with enforceable institutional and/even State sanctions. This ensures that bullying is addressed as a serious misconduct requiring legal intervention, while still considering the developmental stage of the offenders. A structured legal framework specifically tailored to school settings is therefore essential to achieving this aim.

[52]'National policy on safety, security and violence-free schools with its implementing guidelines'. https://healtheducationresources.unesco.org/library/documents/national-policy-safety-security-and-violence-free-schools-its-implementing. Accessed on June 5 2025.

[53] A Oluwamumibori *et al*, 'Strategies to prevent bullying behaviour among selected secondary schools in Alimosho Local Government Area, Lagos, Nigeria' (2022) *Journal of the International Academy for Case Studies, 28*(4), 1-9.

[54] H P Hailes, C J Ceccolini, E Gutowski, and B Liang, 'Ethical Guidelines for Social Justice in Psychology (2021) *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *52*(1), 1.

[55] M Tuttle, L Ricks and M Taylor, 'A Child Abuse Reporting Framework for Early Career School Counselors (2019) *Professional counselor*. *9*(3), 238-251.

[56]Child's Rights Act, 2023. Section 209

[57]*Ibid,* Section 210

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

Bullying in Nigerian secondary schools is not just a social menace but a serious legal concern/issue with far-reaching implications for students' academic performance and overall well-being. Findings in this paper reveal a complex interplay of cultural norms, institutional failures, and legal gaps that sustain bullying behaviour in Nigerian schools. The result is often poor academic outcomes, psychological trauma for victims, decline in school attendance and general negative effect on the society. Addressing this issue requires a coordinated and collaborative efforts from educational institutions, parents, students, policymakers, legal experts, and civil society to create safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments for all students. Only through comprehensive and sustained action can Nigerian schools become safe environments conducive to learning and personal development for every child.

To effectively combat bullying in Nigerian secondary schools, there is an urgent need to strengthen the existing legal frameworks. Current laws either lack clarity and specificity on bullying or are poorly enforced. Specific anti-bullying legislation tailored to educational institutions should be enacted, with clear definitions, legal responsibilities for school authorities, and outlined penalties for offenders. This will provide a firm legal basis for protecting students' rights. Furthermore, the legal system must ensure that victims have access to justice. Mechanisms such as legal aid services, student-friendly reporting procedures, and independent investigative bodies should be put in place. These systems must prioritize confidentiality, fairness, and swift resolution to encourage reporting and reduce the fear of retaliation. In addition to legal interventions, school-based strategies such as anti-bullying programs, peer mentoring, and counselling services should be implemented to address issues early and support victims. Finally, the paper recommends mandatory training for teachers and administrators to effectively recognize, prevent, and respond to bullying, as well as regular awareness campaigns involving students, parents, and the community to shift cultural attitudes that normalise such behaviour. The adoption and implementation of these strategies will foster a more accountable and protective academic environment for Nigerian students.