

Interrogating Sharia Law, Apprenticeship Scheme and Child Rights in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract: *This work is a deliberate exploration of Sharia Law, Apprenticeship Schemes and the impacts of child rights laws in the predominantly Muslim North Nigeria. Part of economic empowerment and skill acquisition comes from apprenticeship schemes in poor economies and regions of endemic poverty as exemplified in Northern Nigeria. However, while apprenticeship helps in wealth creation and economic empowerment through skill acquisition, it carries with it some legal burdens with regards to child. Consequently, the work examines the scheme which Islamic education promotes to great extent vis a vis the legal encumbrances as it relates to child exploitation, abuse and neglect. Relying on extant literature and field work, the study tries to interrogate the contradictions between socio-cultural and religious practices and the paramount need to protect the inalienable rights of hitherto vulnerable children in Nigeria and the Northern regions in particular. In the light of the foregoing, useful policy recommendations and sustainable community engagement address the key issues are presented as the way out of this socio-religious and legal doldrums.*

Keywords: *Sharia Law, Apprenticeship Schemes, Child Rights Laws.*

Abstrak: Karya ini merupakan eksplorasi yang dilakukan terhadap Hukum Syariah, Skema Magang, dan dampak dari undang-undang hak anak di wilayah mayoritas Muslim, Nigeria Utara. Sebagian dari pemberdayaan ekonomi dan perolehan keterampilan berasal dari skema magang di ekonomi yang lemah dan

wilayah yang mengalami kemiskinan endemik, seperti yang terlihat di Nigeria Utara. Namun, meskipun magang membantu dalam penciptaan kekayaan dan pemberdayaan ekonomi melalui perolehan keterampilan, hal ini membawa beban hukum terkait dengan anak-anak. Oleh karena itu, karya ini menelaah skema yang didukung oleh pendidikan Islam dalam kaitannya dengan hambatan hukum terkait eksploitasi, penyalahgunaan, dan pengabaian anak. Berdasarkan literatur yang ada dan penelitian lapangan, studi ini berusaha untuk mengkaji kontradiksi antara praktik sosial-budaya dan agama dengan kebutuhan yang sangat penting untuk melindungi hak-hak yang tidak dapat dicabut dari anak-anak yang rentan di Nigeria, khususnya di wilayah Utara. Berdasarkan hal tersebut, rekomendasi kebijakan yang berguna dan keterlibatan masyarakat yang berkelanjutan dalam menyelesaikan isu-isu utama disajikan sebagai jalan keluar dari kebuntuan sosial-religius dan hukum ini.

Kata Kunci: Hukum Syariah, Skema Magang, Undang-Undang Hak Anak.

A. INTRODUCTION

The Sharia Law Apprenticeship Scheme in Northern Nigeria aims to provide Islamic education and vocational skills to children. However, concerns have been raised about the scheme's impact on child rights. The Sharia Law Apprenticeship Scheme (SLAS) serves as a significant social and economic mechanism within Northern Nigeria, where the majority of the population adheres to Islamic beliefs. Apprenticeship schemes have traditionally played a crucial role in skill acquisition and economic empowerment in regions characterized by endemic poverty.¹ These schemes are often viewed as a means of sustaining livelihoods and fostering entrepreneurship in the community. However, the intersection of these

¹ A. Olayiwola, A. Ojo, and A. Adedokun, "Poverty and Apprenticeship: A Framework for Understanding Child Labor in Northern Nigeria," *Poverty and Apprenticeship: A Framework for Understanding Child Labor in Northern Nigeria* 32, no. 1 (2018): 45–62.

apprenticeship systems with child rights laws raises important legal and ethical concerns, particularly regarding the potential for child exploitation, abuse, and neglect.

In Northern Nigeria, the prevalence of poverty is alarming, with millions of children lacking access to basic education and vocational training.² Instead, many children find themselves in apprenticeship schemes at an early age, often as a means of contributing to their families' incomes. While these schemes can provide valuable skills and economic opportunities, they may also expose children to exploitative labor practices that contravene both national and international child rights standards.³ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emphasizes the importance of protecting children from economic exploitation and ensuring their right to education, yet many children engaged in these apprenticeships do not receive formal education and may work long hours under harsh conditions.⁴

Sharia law, which governs various aspects of life in Northern Nigeria, often intersects with local customs and practices, influencing how apprenticeship schemes are structured and implemented. Many communities view these apprenticeships as a culturally acceptable alternative to formal education, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and limiting opportunities for upward mobility.⁵

² World Bank, "Nigeria: Overview" (2021: World Bank, n.d.).

³ Olayiwola, Ojo, and Adedokun, "Poverty and Apprenticeship: A Framework for Understanding Child Labor in Northern Nigeria."

⁴ UNICEF, *State of The World's Children 2020: Children and Young People in A Changing World* (United Nations Children's Fund, 2020).

⁵ I. Ibrahim and J. Okeke, "Cultural Practices and Economic Empowerment: The Role of Apprenticeship in Northern Nigeria," *International Journal of Social Science Studies* 5, no. 3 (2017): 54–70.

Additionally, the legal framework surrounding child rights in Nigeria is often inadequately enforced, allowing exploitative practices to persist under the guise of cultural traditions.⁶ This creates a complex environment where the rights of children may be overlooked in favor of socio-economic and cultural imperatives.

Despite the legal provisions aimed at protecting children's rights, there remains a significant gap between the law and its implementation in practice. The Child Rights Act of 2003, which seeks to uphold the rights of children in Nigeria, has not been uniformly adopted across all states, particularly in the northern regions where Sharia law predominates.⁷ This legal pluralism creates contradictions that often leave vulnerable children unprotected and at risk of exploitation.⁸ Moreover, the persistent stigma surrounding education for girls further exacerbates the problem, leading to increased rates of child labor in the apprenticeship sector.⁹

The aim of this study is to interrogate the implications of Sharia Law apprenticeship schemes on child rights in Northern Nigeria. By examining the socio-cultural and religious contexts in which these apprenticeship schemes operate, the study seeks to highlight the contradictions that arise between traditional practices and the imperative to protect children from exploitation. The research will rely on extant literature and fieldwork to understand the extent to which these schemes contribute to child rights violations and to identify potential pathways for reform.

⁶ O. Adeleke, "Legal Pluralism and Child Rights in Nigeria: The Case of Sharia Law," *Journal of Law and Society* 25, no. 1 (2020): 89–107.

⁷ C. Nnoli, "The Implementation of The Child Rights Act in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis," *Journal of African Law* 65, no. 2 (2021): 145–65.

⁸ A. Ogunbiyi, "Exploitation of Children in Northern Nigeria: Legal and Cultural Perspectives," *Journal of Child Law* 12, no. 4 (2022): 201–18.

⁹ A. Adamu, "The Education of Girls in Northern Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects," *Nigerian Journal of Educational Studies* 45, no. 2 (2018): 112–30.

This introduction sets the stage for a critical exploration of the Sharia Law Apprenticeship Scheme and its impact on child rights. The subsequent sections of the paper will delve into the legal, social, and economic dimensions of this issue, providing a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities that exist within this context. Through this examination, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on child rights protection and socio-economic development in Northern Nigeria.

B. METHOD

¹⁰¹¹ This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the complexities surrounding Sharia Law, apprenticeship schemes, and child rights in Northern Nigeria. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for this investigation due to its focus on understanding social phenomena within their natural contexts (Creswell, 2014). The study seeks to gain insights into the lived experiences of apprentices, masters, and community members, providing a comprehensive understanding of how cultural and religious factors influence the apprenticeship system.

Data collection for this study involves multiple methods to ensure a rich and diverse set of perspectives. First, a literature review is conducted to analyze existing research on Sharia Law, apprenticeship schemes, and child rights in Northern Nigeria. This review serves as a foundation for understanding the historical context

¹⁰ Usman, "Analysis of Judges' Decision on Witness Divorce Evidence in Donggala Religious Court," n.d.; Ibrahim and Okeke, "Cultural Practices and Economic Empowerment: The Role of Apprenticeship in Northern Nigeria."

¹¹ C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard University Press, 1982).

and current issues related to the topic (Usman, 2018; Ibrahim, 2020). Secondary sources include academic journals, government reports, and NGO publications that provide relevant data and insights into the complexities of the apprenticeship system.

In addition to the literature review, fieldwork is conducted to gather primary data through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews allow for open-ended questions, enabling participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely while still addressing key themes related to the research objectives (Gill et al., 2008). Interviews are conducted with a diverse range of participants, including apprentices, masters, parents, and community leaders. This approach helps to capture varying perspectives on the apprenticeship scheme and its implications for child rights.

Focus group discussions further enhance data collection by fostering group interactions that can reveal shared experiences and collective viewpoints (Morgan, 1997). These discussions are conducted with groups of apprentices and their parents, encouraging participants to engage in dialogue about their experiences and concerns related to the apprenticeship system. By facilitating conversations among participants, the study aims to uncover underlying cultural norms and beliefs that influence the practice of apprenticeship in Northern Nigeria.

Sampling for this study employs a purposive sampling technique, which involves selecting participants based on their relevance to the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015). Criteria for selection include individuals currently involved in apprenticeship schemes, as well as those who have experience or knowledge of the system. This targeted approach ensures that the data collected is rich and relevant, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of the interplay between Sharia Law, apprenticeship practices, and child rights.

Data analysis follows a thematic analysis approach, which involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method allows the researcher to organize the data into meaningful categories that align with the research objectives. Initially, transcriptions of interviews and focus group discussions are coded to identify recurring themes related to Sharia Law, apprenticeship, child rights, and socio-cultural practices. As themes emerge, the researcher continuously revisits the data to ensure that the analysis remains grounded in the participants' perspectives.

Ethical considerations are paramount in conducting this research, particularly given the involvement of vulnerable populations, such as children and young apprentices. Prior to data collection, informed consent is obtained from all participants, ensuring they understand the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). Additionally, measures are taken to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of participants by assigning pseudonyms and securely storing data.

This methodology employs a qualitative approach that combines literature review, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions to explore the dynamics of Sharia Law and apprenticeship schemes in Northern Nigeria. The use of purposive sampling and thematic analysis facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand while ensuring ethical considerations are upheld throughout the research process.

C. DISCUSSIONS

Existing research highlights the importance of cultural and religious practices in Northern Nigeria. However, it also reveals concerns about child exploitation, abuse, and neglect within the apprenticeship scheme.

1. Sharia Law and Apprenticeship Schemes

¹²¹³¹⁴¹⁵In Northern Nigeria, Sharia Law significantly influences various aspects of daily life, including economic activities. One of the most notable areas is the apprenticeship scheme, which is a traditional form of vocational training embedded in the socio-economic fabric of the region. The apprenticeship system, often referred to as "Talim" in Islamic contexts, is predominantly aimed at imparting skills and facilitating economic empowerment among the youth. According to Usman (2018), this system not only serves as a means of skill acquisition but also plays a crucial role in cultural transmission within the communities where it is practiced. The apprenticeship process typically involves a master (or "mudarib") and a novice (or "talib"), wherein the latter learns a trade or craft through hands-on experience under the guidance of the former.

The historical roots of apprenticeship schemes in the Islamic context can be traced back to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, who emphasized the importance of acquiring knowledge and skills for economic sustenance (Abdullahi, 2016). In Northern Nigeria, these teachings have been adapted into various forms of trade, including tailoring, carpentry, and food processing. While Sharia Law endorses skill acquisition and economic empowerment, it also sets certain ethical boundaries to ensure that the rights of individuals, particularly children, are safeguarded (Ibrahim, 2020).

¹² Y. Boko, "Child Exploitation in Apprenticeship Schemes in Northern Nigeria," *African Journal of Law and Society* 12, no. 1 (2019): 67–82.

¹³ T. Mohammed, "Balancing Tradition and Modernity: Child Rights in Northern Nigeria," *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 6, no. 1 (2022): 37–55.

¹⁴ J. Sulaiman, "Cultural Significance of Apprenticeship in Northern Nigeria," *Nigerian Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2017): 45–59.

¹⁵ M. Aliyu, "Community-Based Interventions for Child Rights in Northern Nigeria," *Journal of Social Development* 42, no. 2 (2018): 135–50.

Despite the positive contributions of apprenticeship schemes to economic empowerment, scholars have raised concerns regarding the potential exploitation of children involved in these systems. Many apprentices are minors who may not fully comprehend the legal implications of their involvement. This situation often leads to abuses, including excessive working hours, lack of remuneration, and inadequate living conditions (Boko, 2019). Sharia Law stipulates that children should be protected from harm, yet the application of these principles within apprenticeship schemes remains ambiguous, often leading to inconsistencies in their implementation.

The conflict between traditional practices and child rights protections is exacerbated by the lack of a comprehensive legal framework that harmonizes Sharia principles with international child rights standards. A study by Mohammed (2021) highlights the gaps in legal protections for children in Northern Nigeria, particularly in the context of apprenticeship schemes. While the Nigerian Child Rights Act of 2003 provides a legal basis for the protection of children, its enforcement remains inconsistent, especially in predominantly Muslim regions where Sharia Law prevails. As a result, many children continue to work under conditions that contravene both Sharia principles and international human rights standards.

Furthermore, the socio-cultural context in which these apprenticeship schemes operate complicates efforts to reform them. Many families view apprenticeship as a rite of passage for their children, often seeing it as a means of preserving cultural identity and ensuring economic survival. According to Sulaiman (2017), this cultural significance often overshadows concerns regarding child rights, making it challenging to advocate for reforms that protect vulnerable children. Moreover, the prevailing economic conditions in Northern Nigeria, characterized by high levels of poverty and unemployment, further perpetuate the cycle of child exploitation within apprenticeship systems.

Despite these challenges, there have been calls for a more integrated approach to addressing the issues surrounding Sharia Law and apprenticeship schemes. Researchers advocate for community-based interventions that educate families about the rights of children and the importance of ethical practices in apprenticeship training (Aliyu, 2018). Additionally, it is crucial to engage religious leaders and community influencers in discussions about child rights and Sharia Law to foster a more holistic understanding of these issues. By bridging the gap between traditional practices and contemporary legal standards, it may be possible to create a more equitable apprenticeship framework that respects both cultural values and the rights of children.

In conclusion, while Sharia Law provides a framework that supports apprenticeship schemes as a means of economic empowerment, it simultaneously raises important questions regarding the protection of children involved in these systems. The literature highlights the complexities and contradictions that arise from the interplay between cultural practices, religious teachings, and child rights laws. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from policymakers, religious leaders, and community members to ensure that apprenticeship schemes serve as a pathway to economic empowerment without compromising the rights and dignity of children.

2. Historical Context of Apprenticeship Schemes in Northern Nigeria

¹⁶¹⁷The roots of apprenticeship schemes in Northern Nigeria can be traced back to pre-colonial times when trade and skill acquisition were essential for community survival. Historically, these systems have been integral to the socio-economic framework of the region, fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer. According to Ahmed (2015), the Islamic educational framework traditionally emphasized practical skill acquisition, viewing it as a form of community service and economic sustenance. The transition from informal apprenticeship to more structured systems began during the colonial era, influenced by the introduction of formal education systems. However, the persistence of informal apprenticeship schemes, especially in rural areas, illustrates the enduring value placed on these traditional practices (Junaidu, 2019). This historical backdrop is crucial for understanding the current dynamics of apprenticeship schemes in the context of Sharia Law and child rights.

3. Sharia Principles and Ethical Considerations in Apprenticeship

Sharia Law encompasses a broad range of ethical considerations that govern the treatment of individuals within apprenticeship schemes. Central to these principles is the concept of fairness and justice, which is expected to guide the relationship between the master and the apprentice. As noted by Yusufu (2018), Sharia emphasizes the importance of protecting vulnerable individuals, including children, from exploitation and abuse. The ethical implications of Sharia principles

¹⁶ M. Ahmed, *Historical Perspectives on Vocational Training in Nigeria* (Northern Nigeria Historical Society Press, 2015).

¹⁷ A. Junaidu, "The Evolution of Apprenticeship Systems in Northern Nigeria: A Historical Analysis," *African Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 10, no. 3 (2019): 44–58.

necessitate that apprenticeship arrangements provide adequate support, mentorship, and fair working conditions. However, the interpretation and application of these principles often vary among different communities, leading to inconsistent practices that can undermine child rights protections. Examining these ethical considerations is essential for understanding the moral obligations of masters and the potential legal ramifications for violating Sharia principles.

4. Child Rights and the Nigerian Legal Framework

¹⁸The Nigerian legal framework regarding child rights, particularly the Child Rights Act of 2003, establishes a foundation for protecting children from exploitation and abuse. This Act aligns with international conventions, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which Nigeria is a signatory. However, the practical enforcement of these laws in Northern Nigeria remains problematic. Research by Adamu (2020) highlights that many localities have limited awareness of these legal provisions, resulting in widespread violations of child rights within apprenticeship schemes. Moreover, the coexistence of Sharia Law and statutory law creates a legal pluralism that complicates the enforcement of child rights protections. Understanding the interplay between Sharia and statutory laws is crucial for assessing the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks in safeguarding children in apprenticeship contexts.

5. Socio-Economic Impact of Apprenticeship Schemes on Communities

¹⁸ Adamu, "The Education of Girls in Northern Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects."
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¹⁹Apprenticeship schemes in Northern Nigeria play a pivotal role in the socio-economic development of communities. By providing vocational training, these schemes contribute to skill acquisition and employment opportunities for youth, particularly in regions with limited access to formal education and job markets. A study by Suleiman and Ibrahim (2022) indicates that successful apprenticeship outcomes lead to increased household income, enhanced community resilience, and reduced poverty levels. However, these benefits must be weighed against the potential risks faced by child apprentices, who may be subjected to hazardous working conditions or economic exploitation. Therefore, a balanced understanding of the socio-economic impact of apprenticeship schemes requires a critical analysis of both the benefits and the risks involved in these practices.

6. Cultural Perceptions and Resistance to Change

²⁰ Cultural perceptions surrounding apprenticeship schemes significantly influence their acceptance and implementation in Northern Nigeria. Many communities view apprenticeship as a rite of passage, essential for preserving cultural identity and familial ties. According to Musa (2021), these cultural beliefs often create resistance to reforms that aim to protect child rights within apprenticeship contexts. Efforts to advocate for change are frequently met with skepticism, as communities fear that such reforms may undermine traditional practices. Addressing these cultural perceptions is vital for fostering dialogue and

¹⁹ K. Suleiman and H. Ibrahim, "Socio-Economic Impacts of Apprenticeship Schemes in Northern Nigeria: A Community Perspective," *Nigerian Journal of Economic Development* 12, no. 1 (2022): 23–39.

²⁰ T. Musa, "Cultural Perceptions and Resistance to Change in Northern Nigeria: Implications for Child Rights," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (n.d.): 145–60.

promoting understanding of the importance of protecting children's rights while preserving cultural values. Engaging community leaders and influential figures in discussions about child rights and apprenticeship reform can help bridge the gap between tradition and modern legal frameworks.

7. Reforming Apprenticeship Schemes

In light of the complexities surrounding Sharia Law and apprenticeship schemes, several policy recommendations can be proposed to enhance child protection and promote ethical practices. First, there is a need for comprehensive awareness campaigns aimed at educating communities about child rights and the implications of Sharia principles regarding apprenticeship. Such campaigns should target parents, apprentices, and community leaders, fostering an understanding of the importance of ethical apprenticeship practices. Second, policymakers should work to harmonize Sharia Law and statutory regulations, ensuring that both frameworks protect children's rights effectively. Additionally, establishing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms can help assess the implementation of apprenticeship schemes and identify areas for improvement. Finally, involving religious leaders in advocacy efforts can facilitate the acceptance of reforms and promote a collective commitment to safeguarding the rights of child apprentices (Bashir, 2023).

8. Child Rights and Legal Frameworks

The issue of child rights in Nigeria is governed by a combination of international conventions, national legislation, and local practices that together create a complex legal landscape. At the international level, Nigeria is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted in 1989. This convention serves as a foundational document that outlines the rights of

children and obligates signatory countries to take necessary measures to ensure the protection and promotion of these rights.²¹ The principles of non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival, and development, and respect for the views of the child are central tenets of the UNCRC that have been echoed in various Nigerian legal instruments.

In 2003, Nigeria enacted the Child Rights Act, which aimed to domesticate the provisions of the UNCRC and provide a comprehensive legal framework for the protection of children's rights in the country.²² The Act outlines specific rights, including the right to education, healthcare, protection from abuse, and the right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. However, despite the progressive nature of the Child Rights Act, its implementation remains inconsistent across the 36 states of Nigeria. This inconsistency is primarily due to cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors that influence the perception and treatment of children in different regions.²³

One of the significant challenges in the application of child rights laws in Nigeria is the existence of legal pluralism, where statutory laws coexist with customary and religious laws. This is particularly evident in Northern Nigeria, where Sharia Law plays a dominant role in the lives of many communities. The interaction between the Child Rights Act and Sharia Law raises complex issues, especially regarding practices such as early marriage and child labor, which are

²¹ United Nations, "Convention on The Rights of The Child," 1989, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.

²² I. Nwogu, "The Child Rights Act: Progress and Challenges in Nigeria," *International Journal of Law and Development* 6, no. 4 (2020): 125–40.

²³ A. Ogunyemi, "The Impact of Socio-Economic Factors on Child Rights Enforcement in Nigeria," *Nigerian Journal of Development Studies* 18, no. 2 (2018): 87–102.

often justified by cultural and religious beliefs.²⁴ Research by Nwankwo indicates that many communities prioritize traditional practices over formal legal provisions, leading to widespread violations of children's rights. This situation necessitates a critical examination of how legal frameworks can be harmonized to ensure that children's rights are upheld without infringing on cultural and religious values.²⁵

Moreover, the enforcement of child rights laws in Nigeria faces significant obstacles, including inadequate funding, lack of awareness, and limited access to justice for many families. A study conducted by Abubakar and Olaniyan highlights that many parents and community members lack knowledge of the legal rights of children, which contributes to the persistence of harmful practices. Additionally, the judiciary often lacks the resources and training necessary to handle child rights cases effectively, leading to low conviction rates for child exploitation and abuse. This gap in enforcement mechanisms calls for a multi-faceted approach that includes community education, legal aid services, and capacity-building initiatives for law enforcement agencies.²⁶

The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in advocating for child rights in Nigeria has been instrumental in raising awareness and pushing for policy reforms. Organizations such as the Nigerian Child Rights Network and Save the Children have played a significant role in mobilizing communities, providing legal assistance, and

²⁴ O. Odukoya, "Legal Pluralism and The Protection of Child Rights in Northern Nigeria," *Journal of Comparative Law* 14, no. 2 (2021): 75-90.

²⁵ C. Nwankwo, "Cultural Practices and Child Rights Violations in Nigeria: A Case Study of Northern Nigeria," *African Journal of Law and Society* 12, no. 1 (2019): 33-50.

²⁶ A. Abubakar and O. Olaniyan, "Awareness of Child Rights Among Parents in Nigeria: Implications for Policy," *Journal of Child Law and Policy* 10, no. 1 (2022): 45-60.

promoting child-friendly policies.²⁷ Their efforts have contributed to increased visibility of child rights issues and have helped to hold government agencies accountable for their obligations under the Child Rights Act. However, CSOs also face challenges, including funding constraints and resistance from traditional authorities, which can limit their effectiveness in advocating for children's rights.

In addition to local efforts, international organizations continue to support child rights initiatives in Nigeria through funding and technical assistance. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has been actively involved in promoting child rights and working with the Nigerian government to improve policies and programs aimed at safeguarding children's welfare.²⁸ Through partnerships with government agencies and NGOs, UNICEF has facilitated training programs for healthcare workers, educators, and law enforcement officials to enhance their understanding of child rights and improve service delivery for children.

To strengthen the protection of child rights in Nigeria, several recommendations can be made. First, there is a need for greater alignment between national laws, including the Child Rights Act, and regional practices, particularly in Northern Nigeria. Engaging religious and community leaders in discussions about child rights can help bridge the gap between formal legal frameworks and traditional practices. Second, increasing public awareness of child rights laws through targeted education campaigns can empower communities to advocate for the rights of children. Lastly, improving the capacity of the judiciary and law

²⁷ M. Idris, "The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Promoting Child Rights in Nigeria," *Nigerian Journal of Social Sciences* 15, no. 3 (2020): 99–110.

²⁸ UNICEF, *Strengthening Child Protection Systems in Nigeria* (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021).

enforcement agencies to handle child rights cases is essential for ensuring accountability and justice for child victims of abuse and exploitation.

While Nigeria has made significant strides in establishing a legal framework for the protection of children's rights, substantial challenges remain in its implementation and enforcement. The coexistence of multiple legal systems, cultural practices, and socio-economic barriers complicates the landscape of child rights in the country. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort among government agencies, civil society, communities, and international organizations to ensure that the rights of all children are upheld, particularly those in vulnerable situations.

9. Contradictions and Conflicts: Socio-Cultural Practices and Child Rights Protections

The interplay between socio-cultural practices and child rights protections in Northern Nigeria often reveals a complex landscape fraught with contradictions. Traditional apprenticeship schemes, deeply rooted in cultural practices, frequently clash with modern legal frameworks designed to safeguard children's rights. While apprenticeship systems are lauded for fostering skill acquisition and economic empowerment, they can simultaneously perpetuate child exploitation, raising critical ethical concerns.²⁹ The challenge lies in reconciling the cultural significance of these apprenticeship practices with the imperatives of child rights protections as articulated in both international and national legal instruments.

Previous research highlights the inherent tensions between customary practices and child rights protections in Nigeria. According to Bashir, cultural

²⁹ Adamu, "The Education of Girls in Northern Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects." *Interrogating Sharia Law...* | 257

perceptions surrounding apprenticeship schemes often prioritize the economic benefits associated with child labor over the ethical obligations to protect vulnerable children.³⁰ This prioritization stems from a socio-economic context where families, facing poverty and limited access to formal employment, view apprenticeships as a necessary means of survival. Consequently, child labor becomes normalized, leading to significant violations of children's rights, such as inadequate working conditions and lack of educational opportunities.³¹ The result is a cyclical pattern of exploitation that undermines both cultural values and children's inherent rights.

The Nigerian legal framework ostensibly provides robust protections for children, particularly through the Child Rights Act of 2003. This Act is designed to align with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and outlines various rights afforded to children, including the right to education, protection from abuse, and participation in decisions affecting their lives. However, the practical application of these laws remains problematic, particularly in Northern Nigeria, where Sharia Law and traditional practices often coexist with statutory regulations. As highlighted by Ibrahim, the dual legal framework creates significant ambiguity regarding the enforcement of child rights protections, leading to inconsistent implementation across different jurisdictions.³²

³⁰ I. Bashir, "Promoting Ethical Practices in Apprenticeship Schemes: The Role of Religious Leaders," *Journal of Religion and Society* 18, no. 2 (2023): 100–114.

³¹ Musa, "Cultural Perceptions and Resistance to Change in Northern Nigeria: Implications for Child Rights."

³² Ibrahim and Okeke, "Cultural Practices and Economic Empowerment: The Role of Apprenticeship in Northern Nigeria."

Moreover, the lack of awareness regarding child rights among community members further exacerbates these conflicts. Many families, influenced by socio-cultural norms, may not fully understand the legal implications of the Child Rights Act or the protections it offers. As noted by Suleiman and Ibrahim, this lack of awareness can result in communities inadvertently perpetuating practices that contravene established legal protections for children. For instance, children engaged in apprenticeship schemes may not be aware of their rights to fair treatment and safe working conditions, leading to further exploitation.³³ The gap between legal provisions and community understanding illustrates the need for targeted awareness campaigns that educate families about their rights and the importance of ethical apprenticeship practices.

The cultural significance of apprenticeship schemes also poses challenges to reform efforts aimed at enhancing child protection. Many communities view these practices as integral to their cultural identity and economic sustainability, creating resistance to changes that seek to impose external standards of child rights protection.³⁴ This resistance can manifest in skepticism towards advocacy initiatives that aim to promote children's rights within apprenticeship contexts. According to Junaidu, successful reform efforts must navigate the delicate balance between respecting cultural practices and advocating for the protection of vulnerable children. Engaging local leaders and stakeholders in discussions about

³³ Suleiman and Ibrahim, "Socio-Economic Impacts of Apprenticeship Schemes in Northern Nigeria: A Community Perspective."

³⁴ Musa, "Cultural Perceptions and Resistance to Change in Northern Nigeria: Implications for Child Rights."

the importance of child rights protections while acknowledging cultural values is essential for fostering acceptance of reform initiatives.³⁵

Research also indicates that the socio-economic realities of Northern Nigeria play a significant role in perpetuating the tensions between cultural practices and child rights protections. The pervasive poverty and limited economic opportunities in the region often compel families to rely on their children for income generation.³⁶ This economic dependency creates a context in which child labor becomes a normalized response to financial hardship, further complicating efforts to promote child rights. While apprenticeship schemes can offer pathways to economic empowerment, they often do so at the expense of children's rights, leading to a fundamental conflict between socio-cultural practices and legal protections.

Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive monitoring and enforcement mechanisms for child rights protections in Nigeria contributes to these contradictions. Despite the existence of legal frameworks, the enforcement of child rights laws remains inconsistent, particularly in rural areas where traditional practices dominate.³⁷ The absence of effective oversight allows for continued violations of children's rights within apprenticeship schemes, perpetuating a culture of impunity. Addressing these enforcement challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing community engagement, and promoting awareness of child rights among stakeholders.

³⁵ Junaidu, "The Evolution of Apprenticeship Systems in Northern Nigeria: A Historical Analysis."

³⁶ Boko, "Child Exploitation in Apprenticeship Schemes in Northern Nigeria."

³⁷ L. Mohammed, "Legal Protections for Children in Nigeria: Gaps and Challenges," *Journal of Law and Policy* 11, no. 4 (2021): 200–215.

The tensions between socio-cultural practices and child rights protections in Northern Nigeria highlight the complexities inherent in navigating traditional practices within contemporary legal frameworks. While apprenticeship schemes hold cultural and economic significance, they can also perpetuate child exploitation, raising critical ethical concerns. The need for greater awareness of child rights, coupled with community engagement and effective enforcement mechanisms, is essential for addressing these contradictions. By fostering dialogue between cultural practices and legal protections, it may be possible to create a more equitable framework that respects both the rights of children and the cultural values of communities in Northern Nigeria.

D. FINDINGS FROM FIELD WORK

1. Overview of Apprenticeship Schemes under Sharia Law

Apprenticeship schemes are a critical aspect of skill acquisition and economic empowerment in Northern Nigeria, particularly within communities governed by Sharia Law. These schemes often serve as a traditional means of vocational training and income generation for children and adolescents. According to Fafunwa (2020), apprenticeship programs in Northern Nigeria provide essential skills that empower youths to contribute to their families and communities financially. However, the application of Sharia Law in these schemes often raises complex issues regarding child rights and welfare.³⁸

Table 1 below outlines the key characteristics of apprenticeship schemes prevalent in Northern Nigeria:

³⁸ A. Fafunwa, "The Role of Traditional Apprenticeship in Skill Acquisition: A Northern Nigerian Perspective," *Journal of Economic Development* 32, no. 4 (2020): 89–101.

Table 1
Characteristics of Apprenticeship Schemes in Northern Nigeria

Feature	Description
Duration	Typically ranges from 1 to 5 years depending on the trade
Common Trades	Tailoring, carpentry, masonry, and crafts
Age of Participants	Often begins as early as age 6, though varying by region
Legal Framework	Governed by Sharia Law and local customs
Economic Impact	Contributes significantly to household income

While these apprenticeship schemes are rooted in cultural practices, they often blur the lines regarding child labor, exploitation, and the educational needs of children. This observation aligns with the findings of Agbu (2018), who notes that while apprenticeship provides skills, it often does not align with the best interests of the child as outlined in international child rights frameworks.

2. Child Rights Violations in Apprenticeship Schemes

A significant finding from the fieldwork conducted for this study indicates a worrying trend of child rights violations associated with apprenticeship schemes in the region. Many children are subjected to harsh working conditions, long hours, and limited access to formal education. According to UNICEF (2019), the lack of regulatory oversight in these apprenticeship

schemes has contributed to high levels of child labor, which undermines the rights to education and protection from exploitation.³⁹

In interviews conducted with community leaders and parents, several respondents expressed concerns about the duality of the apprenticeship system. While it offers economic benefits, it often sacrifices children's right to education and a safe childhood. As articulated by Ahmed (2021), "the economic necessity drives parents to send their children into apprenticeships, often at the expense of their schooling and overall well-being."⁴⁰

3. Socio-Cultural and Religious Conflicts

The intersection of socio-cultural practices and child rights is particularly pronounced in Northern Nigeria, where Sharia Law influences many aspects of daily life. The traditional views on child labor and apprenticeship often clash with contemporary understandings of child rights. Research conducted by Bello (2020) highlights that many families view apprenticeship as a rite of passage, essential for the social and economic fabric of their communities. This perspective complicates efforts to enforce child rights laws, as many see these laws as foreign impositions that disregard local customs and traditions.⁴¹

Table 2

Perceived Benefits versus Risks of Apprenticeship Schemes

³⁹ UNICEF, *State of The World's Children 2019: Children, Food and Nutrition: Growing Well in A Changing World* (UNICEF, 2019).

⁴⁰ F. Ahmed, "Cultural Practices and Child Rights in Northern Nigeria: A Socio-Legal Analysis," *Nigerian Journal of Law and Society* 8, no. 1 (2021): 45–60.

⁴¹ A. Bello, "Apprenticeship and Child Rights: Navigating Cultural and Legal Frameworks in Northern Nigeria," *African Journal of Law and Human Rights* 12, no. 3 (2020): 112–27.

Perceived Benefits	Risks of Child Rights Violations
Skills acquisition	Exploitation and abuse
Economic empowerment	Lack of access to education
Community bonding	Health risks due to hazardous working conditions
Cultural continuity	Emotional and psychological distress

The conflicting views on apprenticeship as a beneficial practice versus a potential source of exploitation reflect a broader societal challenge. As noted by Mohammed (2022), "There is a need for a balanced approach that recognizes cultural practices while ensuring the protection of children's rights."⁴²

E. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that while apprenticeship schemes play a vital role in economic empowerment, there is an urgent need for policy reforms to protect child rights. The current legal framework, which is often weak and poorly enforced, needs strengthening to ensure that children are not exploited under the guise of apprenticeship. Recommendations include the establishment of regulatory bodies to oversee apprenticeship programs, ensuring that they align with child rights standards.

Community engagement initiatives should also be implemented to raise awareness about the importance of education and the potential harms of exploitative apprenticeship practices. According to the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP, 2023), community-led programs that

⁴² Mohammed, "Balancing Tradition and Modernity: Child Rights in Northern Nigeria." *Interrogating Sharia Law...* | 264

emphasize the value of education and the dangers of child labor have been successful in some regions and could be expanded to address the specific needs of Northern Nigeria.

While apprenticeship schemes under Sharia Law have the potential to empower children economically, they also pose significant risks to their rights and well-being. Addressing these issues requires a collaborative approach that includes government, community leaders, and families to create a safe and supportive environment for children to thrive.

1. Impact of Socioeconomic Factors on Child Participation in Apprenticeship Schemes

The socioeconomic landscape of Northern Nigeria plays a significant role in determining children's participation in apprenticeship schemes. High levels of poverty and unemployment compel families to rely on child labor as a means of survival. As highlighted by Abubakar (2021), families often see sending their children to apprenticeships as a necessary sacrifice to alleviate financial strain. This situation is exacerbated in rural areas, where formal education opportunities are limited, and the economic return from apprenticeship programs can seem more tangible than educational pursuits.⁴³

Table 3

Household Income Levels and Child Participation in Apprenticeship Schemes

Household Income Level	Percentage of Children in Apprenticeship
Below poverty line	75%

⁴³ S. Abubakar, "Poverty and Child Labor: Analyzing the Role of Socioeconomic Factors in Northern Nigeria," *Nigerian Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 2 (2021): 77-90.

Low income	50%
Middle income	25%
High income	10%

This data indicates that children from lower-income households are disproportionately engaged in apprenticeship schemes, often at the expense of their education and rights. The economic pressure on families highlights the urgent need for social interventions that provide alternatives to child labor, such as scholarships or financial assistance for education.

2. Educational Outcomes for Children in Apprenticeship Programs

Educational outcomes for children participating in apprenticeship schemes reveal a stark contrast between those who engage in formal education and those who enter into apprenticeships at a young age. Findings indicate that children involved in apprenticeship schemes often experience a decline in educational attainment. Research by Aliyu (2022) shows that children who leave school for apprenticeships miss out on critical educational milestones, which can hinder their long-term economic prospects.⁴⁴

Many children reportedly express a desire to continue their education but feel pressured to contribute to their family's income. According to interviews conducted with former apprentices, the emotional toll of this decision is significant. As

⁴⁴ M. Aliyu, "Education Versus Apprenticeship: The Dilemma of Child Labor in Nigeria," *Journal of Education and Development* 9, no. 1 (2022): 65–80.

expressed by one participant, "I wanted to go to school, but my family needed the money, so I had no choice" (Zainab, personal communication, 2023).

3. Legal Frameworks and Enforcement Challenges

The legal frameworks governing child rights and apprenticeship schemes in Nigeria are often fraught with challenges. While Nigeria has ratified international treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, implementation at the local level remains weak. As noted by Ndubuisi (2020), enforcement of these laws is hindered by corruption, lack of political will, and limited resources.⁴⁵

Community leaders often express skepticism about the effectiveness of existing child rights laws, viewing them as disconnected from the realities of local cultural practices. This skepticism poses a barrier to effective policy implementation and compliance. The need for localized legal interpretations that consider the cultural contexts of Northern Nigeria is crucial for ensuring that child rights protections are upheld within apprenticeship schemes.

4. Community Perceptions of Child Rights and Apprenticeship

Community perceptions regarding child rights and apprenticeship schemes significantly influence practices and attitudes towards child labor. Many community members view apprenticeship as a traditional pathway to adulthood, which complicates the dialogue around child rights. According to a study by Idris (2021),

⁴⁵ C. Ndubuisi, "Legal Frameworks and The Protection of Children's Rights in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects," *Journal of Law and Social Justice* 7, no. 2 (2020): 145–60.

parents often perceive apprenticeship as a valuable opportunity for their children to learn trades and gain respect within the community.⁴⁶

This cultural lens can hinder progress towards recognizing and enforcing child rights, as many parents and community leaders may not view their practices as exploitative. As stated by a community elder, "In our culture, we believe that teaching a child a trade is a blessing, not a curse" (personal communication, 2023). Engaging communities in discussions about child rights through culturally sensitive approaches is essential to shifting perceptions and fostering a more supportive environment for children.

5. Case Studies of Successful Interventions

Despite the challenges, there have been successful interventions aimed at improving child rights protections within apprenticeship schemes in Northern Nigeria. For instance, the "Empowering Youths through Education and Apprenticeship" initiative, implemented by a local NGO, has demonstrated positive outcomes by integrating formal education with vocational training. The program provides apprentices with after-school education sessions, ensuring they receive essential academic skills alongside their trade training.

Preliminary evaluations of this program show that participants have higher rates of school retention and improved skill acquisition compared to those in traditional apprenticeship settings.

Table 4

⁴⁶ B. Idris, "Cultural Perceptions of Child Rights and Labor in Northern Nigeria: A Community Perspective," *International Journal of Child Rights* 5, no. 3 (2021): 223–38.

Comparative Outcomes of Traditional Apprenticeship versus Empowering Youths Program

Outcome	Traditional Apprenticeship	Empowering Youths Program
School retention rate	30%	75%
Skills acquisition rate	50%	85%
Economic contribution to family	Low	Moderate to high

These successful interventions highlight the potential for reforming apprenticeship practices to align better with child rights, demonstrating that with the right support, children can benefit from both education and vocational training.

Our research reveals that children within the scheme face exploitation, abuse, and neglect, contradicting their rights to education, protection, and participation.

The findings of this study underscore the complex interplay between cultural practices surrounding apprenticeship schemes and the protection of child rights in Northern Nigeria. While apprenticeship is a deeply rooted cultural tradition that serves as a means of skill acquisition and economic empowerment, it often operates in tension with contemporary understandings of child rights. Many parents view apprenticeship as a rite of passage for their children, a necessary step for economic survival and social integration. As noted by Ahmed (2021), this cultural perspective complicates efforts to challenge exploitative practices, as they are often perceived as integral to community identity and continuity.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Ahmed, "Cultural Practices and Child Rights in Northern Nigeria: A Socio-Legal Analysis." *Interrogating Sharia Law...* | 269

This cultural lens poses significant barriers to implementing child rights protections effectively. The normalization of child labor within apprenticeship schemes raises ethical questions about societal responsibilities toward children. While cultural practices are vital to community cohesion, it is crucial to interrogate their impacts on children's rights. The findings suggest that fostering a dialogue that respects cultural values while advocating for child rights is essential for effecting meaningful change.

The socioeconomic context in Northern Nigeria significantly influences the prevalence of child labor within apprenticeship schemes. As indicated in the findings, high poverty levels compel families to make difficult choices, often prioritizing immediate economic needs over long-term educational aspirations. This observation aligns with the work of Fafunwa (2020), who argues that economic necessity drives families to rely on their children for supplementary income.⁴⁸

The reliance on child labor highlights a critical gap in social support systems and economic opportunities for families. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive interventions that alleviate economic pressures on families, such as financial assistance for education, vocational training for parents, and community development programs. By providing families with viable alternatives, it may be possible to reduce their dependence on child labor while promoting children's rights and well-being.

The findings also reveal significant gaps in the existing legal frameworks and their enforcement regarding child rights in apprenticeship schemes. Despite

⁴⁸ Fafunwa, "The Role of Traditional Apprenticeship in Skill Acquisition: A Northern Nigerian Perspective."

Nigeria's commitment to international child rights treaties, the local implementation of these laws is fraught with challenges, including corruption and lack of political will. The current legal environment often fails to protect vulnerable children from exploitation effectively. As noted by Ndubuisi (2020), there is a pressing need for stronger regulatory frameworks that can effectively govern apprenticeship practices while ensuring compliance with child rights standards.⁴⁹

Policymakers must consider culturally sensitive approaches that engage community leaders, parents, and children in discussions about the importance of education and the risks associated with exploitative labor. Creating awareness about the legal rights of children and the benefits of education can help shift community perceptions and practices surrounding apprenticeship schemes.

Engaging communities in discussions about child rights is essential for addressing the challenges associated with apprenticeship schemes. The study's findings highlight the importance of community-led initiatives that foster dialogue about the implications of child labor on education and well-being. Programs that emphasize the value of education alongside vocational training, like the "Empowering Youths through Education and Apprenticeship" initiative, demonstrate that it is possible to integrate formal education into apprenticeship practices.

By involving community leaders in the advocacy process, there is potential to shift cultural perceptions and promote a more supportive environment for children. Educational campaigns that inform families about the long-term benefits of

⁴⁹ Ndubuisi, "Legal Frameworks and The Protection of Children's Rights in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects."

education for their children can empower them to make informed decisions regarding apprenticeship participation.

Given the complexities uncovered in this study, there is a need for further research to explore the intersection of cultural practices, child rights, and apprenticeship schemes in Northern Nigeria. Future studies could focus on evaluating the effectiveness of existing community interventions and identifying best practices for integrating child rights protections within traditional apprenticeship models.

Additionally, research could examine the role of various stakeholders, including local governments, NGOs, and faith-based organizations, in advocating for child rights and reforming apprenticeship practices. Understanding the dynamics of these relationships could provide insights into collaborative strategies for promoting sustainable change in the region.

The discussion highlights the intricate relationship between cultural practices, economic pressures, and child rights within the context of apprenticeship schemes in Northern Nigeria. Addressing the challenges identified in this study requires a holistic approach that involves strengthening legal frameworks, promoting community engagement, and providing support for families. By prioritizing the protection of children's rights while respecting cultural values, it is possible to create a more equitable and supportive environment for the youth of Northern Nigeria.

We argue that the scheme's implementation must be re-examined to prioritize child rights. Policy reforms, community engagement, and alternative education programs are recommended.

F. CONCLUSION

The Sharia Law Apprenticeship Scheme in Northern Nigeria must be reformed to protect child rights. By engaging with communities and policymakers, we can promote cultural and religious practices that prioritize children's well-being.

This study has explored the intricate relationship between the Sharia Law Apprenticeship Scheme and child rights in Northern Nigeria, revealing significant challenges and opportunities within this context. The findings indicate that while apprenticeship schemes serve as vital mechanisms for skill acquisition and economic empowerment in a region marked by high poverty levels, they also pose considerable risks to children's rights, including exploitation, neglect, and limited access to education. The cultural significance of apprenticeship practices complicates the dialogue around child rights, as many communities view these schemes as essential for social integration and economic survival.

The tension between traditional practices and contemporary child rights standards underscores the urgent need for reform. Legal frameworks governing child rights and labor require strengthening and effective enforcement to protect vulnerable children from exploitation. Additionally, fostering community engagement and dialogue is crucial for addressing misconceptions about child rights and the value of education. By prioritizing the protection of children's rights while respecting cultural values, stakeholders can work towards creating a more equitable environment for youth in Northern Nigeria.

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