

## The "Almajiri begging" disaster: Addressing child labor in northern Nigeria

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### Abstract

The SDG 8.7 aims at securing the prohibition and elimination of worst forms of child labor<sup>1</sup>. However, Statistics have shown that there are still millions of child laborers across the world, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>2</sup>. Recent data from 2024 reveals that approximately 138 million children globally were engaged in child labor, with Sub-Saharan Africa accounting for nearly two-thirds of all children in child labor—around 87 million children<sup>3,4</sup>. In the Northern part of Nigeria, street begging remains a common sight among the Almajiri children. An Almajiri child conventionally is expected to be educationally oriented in the basics of Islam by his tutor who is referred to as the "Mallam" but instead, the child is exploited and deprived of his fundamental human rights as he is continually subjected to street begging and sometimes menial jobs by his tutor<sup>5</sup>.

Poverty, cultural practices, religious beliefs, conflicts among others are the predisposing factors to the marginalization of this group. The children have also been seen to be exposed to a plethora of health issues such as upper respiratory tract infection, psychological disorder, assault, sexual exploitation, trauma, and even death<sup>6</sup>. Recent studies from 2024 have documented severe malnutrition rates among Almajiri children, with prevalence rates ranging from 64% to 71.9% in various northern states, and most children eating only once or twice daily<sup>7</sup>.

The issue of child labor in the Northern part of Nigeria can become a potential threat to the nation and the world if not addressed. Therefore, in this policy brief, immediate, short, and long-term community interventions by the Nigerian Government will be recommended as well as a policy reform on child rights and protection.

**Keywords:** Child labour; Education; Health policy; Government; Global health; Healthcare

### 1. Introduction

The need for protection, provision and adequate preparation of a child as a nation's future is inevitable. SDG 8.7 has been dedicated to the prohibition and elimination of child labor in all its forms<sup>1</sup>. However, this still poses a major global menace as statistics show that there is an estimate of 152 million child

laborers worldwide with the largest proportion found in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>2</sup>. As of 2024, while global child labor has decreased to 138 million children, Sub-Saharan Africa continues to bear the heaviest burden with 87 million children in child labor, representing 26 percent of the region's child population aged 5-17 years<sup>3,4,8</sup>. Child labor infringes on the fundamental human rights of the child especially the rights to education, good health, mental and physical development<sup>9</sup>. According to the International

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Labour Organization (ILO), child begging is not only referred to as one of the worst forms of child labor but also a form of forced labor<sup>10</sup>. However, the act remains a common sight among the Almajiri children from the Northern part of Nigeria. The word "Almajiri" is a derivative of the Arabic word "Almuhajirun", "an immigrant." This implies one who migrates from his home to another for the sole aim of Islamic knowledge. The children are seen roaming the streets distressed, with a bowl, looking famished, and not well-groomed continually in search of food by begging for alms from well-wishers and passersby.

Recent estimates indicate that approximately 8.5 million children attend Islamic schools in Northern Nigeria, with approximately 300,000 Almajiri living in Kano State alone<sup>11</sup>. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kano State government revealed it could not care for over 5 million Almajiri children in the state, leading to deportations back to their states of origin<sup>11,12</sup>.

This policy brief aims to explain the issue of child labor among the Almajiri children in Northern Nigeria and the evidence of how this group of children are marginalized and require immediate intervention, the challenges faced by them will also be examined, and suggested interventions and policies will be further discussed.

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## 2. The issue: The Almajiri system of education

The Almajiri system of Islamic Education started way back in the 11th century in northern Nigeria in a quest to acquire Qur'anic knowledge by the Muslims and the only option adopted was the unconventional way of handing over wards to an Islamic tutor, known as Mallam. The Mallam takes up the responsibility of teaching his pupils the religious scriptures and indoctrinates them in the Islamic way of life. This was designed to be highly rewarding as they become successful in life by holding positions of judges and teachers.

However, civilization started thriving in the north and some of these Mallams out of greed migrated to the cities and towns with their pupils who are between the ages of 4 and 13 years, mostly boys, subjecting them to roaming the street begging for alms as a means of survival<sup>13</sup>. Some of these children are moved from their homes depriving them of parental care. However, this can be much of a relief to the parents who are poor rural dwellers.

Sadly, the teacher registers up to a hundred and more pupils who he single-handedly keeps, guides, and cater to. Hence, these children are sent to the streets in the city, and part of their duty is to bring back all the proceeds they were able to get from the public to the teacher who keeps the best part of it to take care of his immediate family including his children who never participates in the street begging<sup>6</sup>.

Unfortunately, these pupils are sometimes introduced into menial jobs at residences, restaurants and other public places such as markets to hawk goods and cart purchased items in wheelbarrows<sup>14</sup>. \*A typical day for an Almajiri child begins at 4:30 a.m. with prayers and Qur'anic recitation, includes three begging sessions totaling six hours daily, and ends at 10 p.m.\*<sup>15</sup>. It is quite disheartening that the Almajiri system of Education that was initially designed to be well organized and productive has now been corrupted and abused.



Source: (Nigeria: Kano repatriates 61 Almajiris to Kebbi -- WorldStage, 2020)<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 1** A picture of Almajiri children in a Nigerian northern state

## 2.1. Evidence Of Vulnerability

According to Global Estimates of Child Labour<sup>2</sup>, Africa has the highest percentage of children engaged in child labor which is about one-fifth of the world estimate, and an absolute number of 72 million children recorded. The 2024 Global Estimates reveal that Sub-Saharan Africa now has 86.6 million children in child labor as of 2020, representing a significant increase of over 16 million since 2016<sup>17,18</sup>. Statistics have also shown that there is a strong correlation between child labor and situations of conflict and disaster. The incidence of child labor in countries affected by armed conflict is 77 percent higher than the global average. The Africa region has been known to be among those most affected by situations of conflict especially with the recent invasion of the Boko Haram-related religious conflict in the northern part of the country<sup>2</sup>.

A recent report by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) states that approximately 10 million children are still roaming on the street of Nigeria<sup>14</sup>. Current estimates in 2024-2025 indicate Nigeria has between 12.4 to 15 million out-of-school children, with 69 percent located in Northern Nigeria, and 60 percent of them being girls<sup>19,20</sup>. John et al.<sup>6</sup> also asserted that the incidence of street begging is lower in southern Nigeria than the northern part of the country, which can be attributed to cultural and religious differences as the majority of Northerners practice Islam. Beggary in the South is however uncommon except among the Yoruba tribe where mothers of twins use their babies to get the attention and sympathy of passersby. The Almajirai system in the North creates the largest category of beggars in the country<sup>14</sup>. According to UNESCO reports, less than forty percent attend formal modern schools in the north compared to ninety percent seen in the southern region of Nigeria<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore,

Nigeria is a lower-middle-income country with poverty deeply embedded in most of the country, "World Bank figures from a 2016 report by Mercy Corps states that 61% of the overall Nigerian population lives on less than \$1.00 per day and the Northern region scale of poverty is significantly greater"<sup>21</sup>. As of 2024, over 106 million Nigerian families are projected to be living in extreme poverty, with worsening food insecurity particularly affecting northern Nigeria<sup>7</sup>.

## 2.2. Barriers Faced

Street begging is an indictment of the quality of governance in many societies. The major barrier faced by these children is neglect from both the parents and the Nigerian government. Poverty has been identified as the major reason parents send their children to become Almajirai<sup>22</sup>. The heavy burden on the parents to provide for the needs of their family, with little or no governmental intervention makes them embrace the informal Almajiri system of education. Besides, Polygamy is a common and unregulated practice for the Northerners as the tradition encourages large families and perceives children as assets<sup>23</sup>.

Another barrier faced by the Almajiri children is the issue of the Boko Haram Insurgency, an armed jihadist group found in the northern part of the country popular for their bombings and kidnapping, hence displacing the children from their homes and driving them to the streets. Between May 2023 and April 2024, Boko Haram activities resulted in displacement of over 2 million people and direct wealth and property loss estimated at N2.23 trillion, with an additional N9.17 trillion spent on military equipment from 2020 to 2024<sup>7</sup>.

There have been multiple calls for reform of this system, but sectors of the Islamic clerical class Politicize it and find it extremely offensive to accuse the mallams of financially exploiting the children and the mallams are also very reluctant of losing their control over the children<sup>21</sup>. Despite the National Commission for Almajiri and Out-of-School Children Act signed into law in 2023, progress on reform has been minimal due to poor governance and implementation strategies<sup>7,24</sup>.

## 2.3. Health Implications

Street begging has fatal consequences and apart from the strain it places on the beggars, it also impacts negatively on their health<sup>14</sup>. While on the street, these children are exposed to harsh weather conditions which can trigger conditions like asthma and continuous exposure to the sun can lead to cancerous and non-cancerous skin diseases like pediatric melanoma. Due to contacts made during the act of begging, they are found to be prone to communicable diseases especially upper respiratory tract infections such as pneumonia and Covid-19. The hungry children are sometimes found scavenging leftover food from refuse and as a result, they come down with diseases like diarrhea, cholera, typhoid, vomiting, and even death in extreme cases. They are also subjected to all forms of abuse on the street including sexual exploitation, physical assaults, and many a time at risk of being run over by careless drivers leading to disabilities and sometimes death<sup>25,26</sup>.

Recent comprehensive health research from 2023-2024 has documented extensive health challenges among Almajiri children, including high rates of infectious diseases, oral health problems, workplace injuries, and mental health conditions<sup>27</sup>. Studies indicate that 66.7% of Almajiri children eat only once daily and 33.3% eat twice daily, with malnutrition prevalence rates of 71.9%, 70.9%, and 68.5% reported in Zamfara State among children from Tsafe, Maradun, and Kaura-Namoda respectively<sup>7,28</sup>. Additionally, reports of abuse by mallams and community opportunists have been increasing, with children experiencing weapon use (33.3%), fights (33.3%), and flogging (33.3%) as common forms of violence<sup>28</sup>.

Lastly, studies have shown that the use of psychoactive substances is also high among the Almajiri beggars and this can predispose them to develop mental illness as many of them also grow up with the psychological torture of being denied their fundamental rights<sup>6</sup>.

## **2.4. National/Global Impact**

Street begging gradually becomes a potential threat to the societal fabric and erodes the idea of self-reliance in the country<sup>14</sup>. The children can grow up to be recruited into dubious criminal acts, from petty thievery to full-blown armed robbery. Some overzealous politicians also use them to carry out violent acts during political disputes. Another obvious effect is that the children grow up with a dependency syndrome, such children end up doing unlawful activities for survival and this diminishes the national development<sup>29</sup>. Lack of social facilities in the rural areas and increased poverty rate in Nigeria attracts a massive rural-urban drift of the young children and their Mallams to the cities to have a feel of a better life and this results in more street children in most part of the Country and even neighboring countries.

The children are also serving as a breeding ground for terrorism and criminals and this is of great threat to the nation and the World as a whole<sup>30</sup>. The Almajiri system has been identified as the biggest contributor to Boko Haram recruitment, banditry, and other security threats in Northern Nigeria<sup>7,31</sup>.

Former President Goodluck Jonathan reportedly spent approximately N15 billion building Almajiri schools to integrate basic education into the system, but many of these structures have either been converted to conventional schools or lie abandoned as pupils returned to street begging<sup>19</sup>. In 2024, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu appointed the board and management of the National Commission for Almajiri and Out-of-School Children, with Brigadier-General Lawal Ja'afar Isa (rtd) as Chairman and Dr. Idris Muhammad Sani as Executive Secretary/CEO<sup>24</sup>.

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## **3. Recommendations**

### **3.1. Immediate Community intervention:**

The Nigerian government in partnership with a committee of respected religious leaders should arrange a conference that will be directed at discussing and brainstorming the negative impact of street begging and such teachers are given the mandate to implement whatever decision the conference comes up with<sup>14</sup>.

A counseling session with Mallams who engage in the act of using the pupils for street begging to see the dehumanizing conditions that such children are exposed to.

Enlightenment campaigns through religious preachers on the psychological torture, molestation and long-term effect on the development of the child<sup>23</sup>.

### **3.2. Short Term Community Intervention**

The government should identify the location of the Qur'anic teachers in rural areas who have pupils under their tutelage and provide skill acquisition centers around the school so that both the pupils and the teachers can partake.

Skill acquisition and employment scheme for the parents<sup>5</sup>.

The School feeding program which already exists should be sustained particularly in the Northern part of the country.

The new National Commission for Almajiri and Out-of-School Children should establish learning centres for accelerated basic education to absorb 500,000 overage out-of-school children annually with specialized curriculum and trained teachers<sup>20,24</sup>.

Operationalize an open school scheme to train 500,000 overage, out-of-school children in basic skills and entrepreneurship education annually<sup>20</sup>.

### 3.3. Long term Community Intervention

Nigeria government should consider redistribution of economic resources and improvement in the standard of living of the citizens<sup>29</sup>

Rural infrastructural development along with quality education and poverty eradication must be given due priority<sup>6</sup>

The federal government should work toward reducing Nigeria's out-of-school children by 25 percent annually, targeting re-absorption of 15 million children by 2027 as outlined in the 2024 education sector reform roadmap<sup>20,24</sup>.

Provide economic empowerment opportunities for tsangaya teachers to prevent their reliance on Almajiri street activities for survival<sup>24</sup>.

Launch extensive public awareness campaigns through scholarly preaching, traditional media, and social media to shift societal perceptions about sending children away for Almajiri education<sup>24</sup>.

### 3.4. Policy Reform

Enforcing child protection law by the Nigerian Government to make provision for the rights of the child such as rights to life, education, health, dignity, and also for the prohibition of certain practices like child begging<sup>32</sup>. For instance in Ghana, Child begging is not as widespread because child protection policies are enforced<sup>33</sup>. The Child Rights Act 2003 Section 15(1) which states that "Every child has the right to free, compulsory, and universal basic education" must be fully implemented<sup>31</sup>.

The curriculum of the Almajiri system should reflect the interest of the learners in line with the National Policy on Education (NPE) goals to emulate the practices in some Muslim countries like Egypt where it has successfully achieved the purpose for which it was intended<sup>34</sup>. Integration of Almajiri schools into the formal basic education system should incorporate foundational literacy, numeracy, digital training, and skills acquisition<sup>20,24</sup>.

Population policies that would regulate birth control in the number of children each couple should have to enable parents to take up their responsibilities in giving their children quality education.

Punishments are spelled out for parents who prevent their school-age children from going to school<sup>35</sup>.

The government must address gaps in its legal and enforcement framework to protect children from the worst forms of child labor, as the Almajiri phenomenon contravenes basic rights guaranteed in Chapter IV of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria<sup>7</sup>.

Establish community monitoring mechanisms to ensure children remain with their families and do not return to life as Almajirai<sup>15</sup>.

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## 4. Conclusion

The subjection of the Almajiri pupils to begging and other menial jobs is a result of the negligence on the part of the Government and stakeholders and the negative impact it has on the children cannot be overemphasized. With Nigeria accounting for 45 percent of out-of-school children in West Africa and facing an alarming situation where one in three Nigerian children is estimated to be out of school, urgent action is imperative<sup>19,20</sup>. The need for a curriculum review of the Almajiri system of Education with professional training of teachers and engaging the learners in meaningful skill development will contribute profoundly to achieving the SDG goal of eradicating child labor in all its form. The establishment of the National Commission for Almajiri and Out-of-School Children in 2023 represents a significant step forward, but its success depends on adequate funding, genuine collaboration with state governments, effective enforcement of existing laws, and cultural sensitivity in implementation<sup>7,24</sup>. The world missed its target of eliminating child labor by 2025, making immediate and sustained action critical to protect Nigeria's most vulnerable children<sup>4</sup>.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

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