



STRIKING THE BALANCE: EXAMINING HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN IMO STATE AND EFFECTS ON THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

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Abstract

Imo State, Nigeria, faces a dire human rights crisis characterized by pervasive violations, including unlawful arrests, prolonged detentions, and police brutality. Security forces have been implicated in numerous abuses that erode trust and safety within the community, exacerbating political unrest. Reports of violent attacks by non-state actors, including extrajudicial killings and kidnappings, further contribute to an environment of fear and instability. Vulnerable populations, particularly women and children, are disproportionately affected by these systemic violations. The Christian Church, historically a champion of justice and human rights in Nigeria, finds itself at a crossroads. While its spiritual mandate centers on preaching the gospel and nurturing believers, the pressing social injustices in Imo State challenge it to adopt a more active role in advocating for human rights. The Church's involvement is critical, as it can provide moral guidance and humanitarian support to those affected by violence and injustice. However, the Church grapples with significant challenges, such as threats to evangelism, restrictions on worship, and the ethical dilemma of navigating political matters. The climate of fear resulting from human rights violations hampers its outreach efforts and complicates its mission. Consequently, church leaders and congregants face risks that deter their engagement in community service and advocacy. This report highlights the urgent need for the Church to assert itself as a moral voice that defends human dignity while fostering social justice. It advocates for a balanced approach, encouraging the Church to remain rooted in its spiritual values while actively addressing the pressing human rights concerns in Imo State. Only through this dual engagement can the Church contribute to a more just and peaceful society.

Keywords: Imo State, Church's Mission, Human Dignity, Human Rights, Fear and Instability.

Introduction

Imo State, located in southeastern Nigeria, has faced significant human rights challenges in recent years. Reports indicate that security forces have committed violations, including unlawful arrests, prolonged detentions without trial, and torture of detainees (Human Rights Watch, 2019). These abuses have raised concerns among international and local human rights organizations (Amnesty International, 2023). In addition to state actors, non-state armed groups



have contributed to instability through violent attacks, kidnappings, and extrajudicial killings (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

The Christian Church has historically played a pivotal role in advocating for justice and social welfare. In Nigeria, churches have been instrumental in providing social services, promoting peace, and defending the rights of the marginalized (Udeoji, 2020). By offering humanitarian aid, legal support, and platforms for advocacy, religious institutions contribute significantly to social cohesion and stability. This dual role of spiritual guidance and social responsibility positions the Church as a significant stakeholder in addressing societal issues.

However, the Church often faces a dilemma: should it remain neutral, focusing solely on spiritual matters, or actively intervene in socio-political issues? This question becomes more pressing in contexts where human rights are under threat, and the Church's silence could be perceived as complicity (Udeoji, 2020). While some argue that the Church must focus on its religious mission without engaging in political affairs, others assert that a failure to advocate for justice contradicts biblical teachings on defending the oppressed (Proverbs 31:8-9, New International Version).

This article explores the impact of human rights violations on the Church's ministerial work in Imo State. It examines the challenges these violations pose to the Church's mission and considers how religious institutions can navigate their role in advocating for justice while fulfilling their spiritual mandate.

Human Rights Violations in Imo State: A Growing Concern

Imo State has been a focal point for various human rights violations in recent years. These violations encompass political violence, police brutality, and economic hardships, profoundly affecting the general population, especially vulnerable groups.

Political Violence

The region has experienced significant political unrest, often manifesting as violent confrontations between government forces and non-state actors. For instance, on January 23, 2023, gunmen beheaded Christopher Ohizu, a local government administrator in Imo State, highlighting the severity of political violence in the area (Amnesty International, 2023). Such incidents create an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, disrupting governance and daily life.

Police Brutality

Allegations of excessive force by security agencies have been a persistent issue in Nigeria, with Imo State being no exception. The Nigerian police have been accused of using excessive force against protesters, leading to injuries and fatalities (Amnesty International, 2023). This pattern of brutality undermines public trust in law enforcement and exacerbates tensions between the state and its citizens.

Economic Hardship



Economic challenges have further compounded the human rights situation in Imo State. High inflation rates and widespread poverty have led to increased desperation among the populace. In December 2024, at least 67 people died in stampedes during Christmas charity events in Nigeria, including Imo State, as crowds rushed to receive essential donations amidst the country's severe cost-of-living crisis (Associated Press, 2024). Such tragedies underscore the dire economic conditions and the lengths to which individuals will go to secure basic necessities.

Impact on Vulnerable Populations

The cumulative effect of political violence, police brutality, and economic hardship disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups, including women, children, and the elderly. The aforementioned stampedes predominantly claimed the lives of children, highlighting the acute risks faced by the youngest members of society during times of crisis (Associated Press, 2024). Additionally, the detention of minors during protests, with some facing severe charges, reflects systemic failures in protecting children's rights (Associated Press, 2024).

The convergence of political instability, abusive security practices, and economic decline has created a precarious human rights environment in Imo State. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive reforms and a commitment to protecting the rights and well-being of all citizens.

The Church's Ministerial Mandate: Beyond the Pulpit

The Christian Church's role extends beyond spiritual guidance to encompass social justice and community service. This multifaceted mandate is rooted in biblical teachings and has been demonstrated through historical activism both in Nigeria and globally.

The Church's Responsibility in Society: Preaching, Social Justice, and Community Service

Traditionally, the Church's primary function has been to preach the gospel and nurture the spiritual growth of its congregation. However, its responsibilities also include advocating for social justice and engaging in community service. This holistic approach aligns with the biblical call to love one's neighbor and seek the welfare of the community. For instance, Proverbs 31:8-9 (New International Version) urges believers to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves" and "defend the rights of the poor and needy." Such directives highlight the Church's obligation to address societal injustices and support marginalized groups.

Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Justice, Peace, and Defending the Oppressed

Scripture consistently emphasizes themes of justice, peace, and the defense of the oppressed. The prophet Micah encapsulates this in Micah 6:8 (NIV): "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." This verse underscores the expectation for believers to pursue justice



and mercy actively. Theologically, this aligns with the concept of *imago Dei*, which posits that all humans are created in the image of God and, therefore, possess inherent dignity and worth. Consequently, any form of oppression or injustice against individuals is a violation of divine intent, compelling the Church to intervene and advocate for equitable treatment.

Historical Examples of Church Activism in Nigeria and Beyond

Throughout history, the Church has played a pivotal role in advocating for social change and justice. In Nigeria, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was established in 1976 as an umbrella organization to unify various Christian denominations in addressing national issues, including human rights abuses and political instability (Christian Association of Nigeria, 2023). CAN's formation marked a significant step in organized Church activism, providing a collective voice against societal injustices.

Globally, the Church has been instrumental in various social justice movements. For example, during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, many African American churches served as organizing centers for protests and advocacy, with leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist minister, at the forefront. Similarly, in South Africa, church leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu played a crucial role in the anti-apartheid movement, using their platforms to challenge systemic racism and promote reconciliation.

These historical instances demonstrate that the Church's ministerial mandate inherently includes active participation in societal matters, particularly in championing justice, peace, and the rights of the oppressed. By engaging in such actions, the Church not only fulfills its theological obligations but also fosters societal transformation and upholds the moral fabric of the community.

Challenges Posed by Human Rights Violations on the Church

Human rights violations in Nigeria, particularly in regions like Imo State, present significant challenges to the Church's mission and operations. These challenges encompass threats to evangelism and outreach, restrictions on worship and religious activities, an increased burden of humanitarian services, and moral dilemmas regarding the Church's role in societal issues.

Threats to Evangelism and Outreach

The pervasive atmosphere of fear and intimidation resulting from human rights abuses significantly hampers the Church's evangelistic efforts. Church leaders and members may face threats, harassment, or violence, deterring them from engaging in outreach programs. For instance, the brutal killing of 40 worshippers in a church in Ondo State by gunmen underscores the severe risks associated with religious activities in certain regions (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Such incidents instill fear among clergy and congregants, leading to reduced participation in evangelistic endeavors and a decline in community engagement.

Restriction of Worship and Religious Activities



Government policies or security concerns can lead to restrictions on religious gatherings, impeding the Church's ability to conduct worship services and community events. In southeastern Nigeria, enforced sit-at-home orders by non-state actors have led to violence against citizens attempting to attend public gatherings, including religious services (Human Rights Watch, 2023). These restrictions disrupt regular worship schedules, weaken communal bonds, and challenge the Church's capacity to provide spiritual support to its members.

Increased Burden of Humanitarian Services

In the face of governmental shortcomings in addressing social welfare, the Church often assumes the role of a humanitarian provider. Nigeria's poverty rate reached 38.9% in 2023, with an estimated 87 million Nigerians living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2023). This economic hardship compels the Church to step in, offering essential services such as food distribution, healthcare, and education. While fulfilling a critical need, this additional responsibility strains the Church's resources and diverts attention from its primary spiritual mission.

The Moral Dilemma

Balancing spiritual duties with social and political activism presents a profound moral dilemma for the Church. Engaging in advocacy against human rights violations aligns with biblical principles of justice and compassion but may expose the Church to political retaliation or societal division. For example, addressing gender-based violence—a pressing issue in Nigeria with activists calling for a state of emergency due to rising femicide rates (The Guardian, 2025)—requires the Church to navigate complex cultural and political landscapes. This balancing act necessitates wisdom to uphold moral imperatives without compromising the Church's spiritual integrity or unity.

The Church's Response: Walking the Tightrope

In the face of human rights violations, the Church in Nigeria finds itself navigating a complex landscape, striving to uphold its spiritual mission while addressing pressing social injustices. This delicate balance involves advocacy and awareness, humanitarian support, dialogue and reconciliation efforts, and engagement with policymakers.

Advocacy and Awareness

The Church utilizes its platforms to speak against injustices, raising awareness among congregants and the broader community. By addressing issues such as corruption and inequality from the pulpit, Church leaders challenge societal norms and encourage ethical behavior. However, this advocacy is not without challenges, as some Church leaders themselves have faced criticism for accumulating wealth, highlighting the need for integrity within the Church's ranks (Smith, 2023).

Humanitarian Support



In regions affected by violence and displacement, the Church often steps in to provide essential services. For instance, in response to the targeting and killing of thousands of Christians by terrorist groups, Church organizations have offered shelter, food, and medical assistance to victims (Open Doors International, 2024). These humanitarian efforts are crucial in filling gaps left by governmental agencies, offering hope and support to affected communities.

Dialogue and Reconciliation Efforts

The Church plays a pivotal role in mediating conflicts and fostering reconciliation. In Nigeria, where religious and ethnic tensions can escalate into violence, Church leaders have initiated dialogues between conflicting parties. For example, in the wake of internal conflicts within denominations over LGBTQ policies, Nigerian bishops have condemned violence and called for peace, emphasizing unity among Christians (Associated Press, 2025). Such efforts aim to bridge divides and promote harmonious coexistence.

Engagement with Policymakers

Recognizing the influence of policy on societal well-being, the Church encourages political participation and social responsibility among its members. By engaging with policymakers, Church leaders advocate for laws and policies that uphold human rights and social justice. This engagement includes initiatives to promote evidence-informed policymaking, addressing capacity constraints among policymakers to utilize research effectively (Uneke et al., 2017). Through such involvement, the Church seeks to influence systemic change that aligns with its moral and ethical teachings.

Striking the Balance: Moving Forward

In addressing human rights violations, the Church must carefully navigate its role in society, ensuring it does not become overly political while actively advocating for justice. A strategic approach allows the Church to maintain its spiritual focus while effectively engaging in social matters (Uchegbue, 2013).

Strengthening Interfaith Collaborations and Civil Rights Partnerships

Collaborating with other faith communities and civil rights organizations enables the Church to tackle human rights violations more effectively. Interfaith dialogue has been used in Nigeria to foster unity and counter religious-based violence, promoting peace and coexistence (Sojourners, n.d.). Through joint efforts with Muslim and Christian leaders, faith-based organizations have played a crucial role in conflict resolution, offering alternative narratives to extremism and violence (Sojourners, n.d.). By working together, religious groups create a more powerful voice for justice, human dignity, and peace.

Encouraging Members to Be Socially Conscious While Maintaining Spiritual Focus

The Church must inspire its members to be both spiritually devoted and socially responsible. Christian teachings emphasize justice and compassion, which require believers to engage in



social transformation (Uchegbue, 2013). In Nigeria, where corruption and injustice persist, the Church has a responsibility to educate and encourage its members to advocate for fairness, economic equity, and human dignity (Uchegbue, 2013). This approach ensures that Christians do not withdraw from societal issues but rather actively contribute to positive change while staying rooted in their faith.

Urging the Government to Uphold Human Dignity and Justice

A critical aspect of the Church's mission is to hold the government accountable for safeguarding human rights. Through public statements, policy recommendations, and civic engagement, the Church can challenge political leaders to uphold justice and equity (Uchegbue, 2013). Religious institutions have historically played a role in advocating for human rights, urging governments to implement policies that promote peace, security, and the protection of vulnerable populations (Sojourners, n.d.). By continuing this tradition, the Church in Nigeria can push for reforms that align with moral and ethical values, ensuring the dignity of all citizens.

Striking a balance between spiritual focus and social activism is essential for the Church's role in addressing human rights violations in Imo State. By advocating for justice, fostering interfaith partnerships, and urging political accountability, the Church can fulfill its ministerial mandate effectively. While avoiding extreme political entanglements, the Church must remain a strong moral voice that defends the oppressed and promotes human dignity.

Conclusion

The Church's role in addressing human rights violations in Imo State is both a moral obligation and a ministerial mandate. Throughout history, religious institutions have served as advocates for justice, defenders of the oppressed, and voices of conscience in society (Uchegbue, 2013). In the face of ongoing political violence, economic hardship, and systemic oppression, the Church cannot afford to remain passive. Instead, it must strategically engage with civil society, policymakers, and faith-based organizations to demand accountability and uphold human dignity (Sojourners, n.d.).

A holistic approach is necessary—balancing spiritual guidance with social activism. This means speaking out against injustice from the pulpit, providing humanitarian aid to victims, and fostering interfaith and civil rights partnerships to strengthen advocacy efforts. Additionally, encouraging believers to be socially conscious while maintaining their spiritual focus ensures that faith does not become detached from real-world issues (Uchegbue, 2013).

Religious leaders, believers, and civil society must work together to promote justice and peace in Imo State and beyond. Church leaders must boldly address human rights abuses while maintaining ethical integrity in their ministries. Christians should actively engage in community service, civic participation, and policy advocacy to create a more just society. Furthermore, civil society organizations must collaborate with faith-based institutions to amplify their impact in the fight for human rights (Sojourners, n.d.).



Ultimately, the Church must remain a beacon of hope, ensuring that its ministerial mandate extends beyond the walls of worship into the very heart of social transformation. In doing so, it will not only fulfill its spiritual mission but also contribute to building a more just, peaceful, and equitable society.

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