
Child Protection and Human Rights: The Role of Social Workers in Ensuring Children's Rights in Pakistan

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Abstract

Although Pakistan has legal obligation to safeguard children under the constitution and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) there still exists major loopholes in enforcing child protection acts which exposes many children to abuse and exploitation, as well as neglect. The lack of structural factors such as resources, lack of professional training, and poor coordination between the government and non-government agencies hinder the effective implementation of child protection services. The current research was conducted, to investigate the position of the social worker in advancing and protecting the rights of the children in Pakistan, to determine the major issues and obstacles facing social workers when implementing child protection, to determine the effectiveness of the existing social work interventions in ensuring the implementation of the children rights and to suggest solutions and proposals on how the social work practices can be reinforced to improve child protection and child rights advocacy in Pakistan.

The research was carried out to look at the role of social workers in supporting and defending the rights of children in Pakistan. The qualitative research design is used in the study, which is appropriate to comprehend complicated social phenomena like child protection and human rights.

There is a phenomenal approach that is made to comprehend the experiences of social workers. This method is based on the opinion of participants on their professions, issues, and practices in child protection. The sample is a group of social workers working in the governmental and non-governmental organizations dealing with child protection in Pakistan. Purposive sampling was used to sample participants who had the relevant experience and expertise. The semi-structured interviews were the method used to collect primary data, as it gave the participants a chance to discuss their experiences but within a standardized framework. The interviews examined the work of social workers, their challenges, and coping mechanisms related to the advocacy of children rights. The data was processed through thematic analysis in order to determine the patterns and themes. This was conducted by familiarization with the transcripts, coding of the important statements and clustering the codes into larger themes that are associated with the roles, challenges and strategies.

Keywords: Child Protection, Children's Rights, Social Work Practice, Human Rights

1. Introduction

In Pakistan, child protection has been a major issue of human rights which has been informed by a complicated

relationship of socio economic, cultural, and institutional factors which weaken the security and wellbeing of children. Although in 1990, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was ratified, and the legal obligation of the state to provide basic rights to children was established, there still remain gaps in the implementation because of the poor enforcement mechanisms and lack of awareness about the rights of children (Ali and Shah, 2020). Children in Pakistan are at risk of numerous forms of poverty-induced labor, early and forced marriages, and trafficking, as well as lack of access to quality education and medical care (Khan and Ahmed, 2021). Not only do these systemic deficiencies put the development of children at risk, but they also pose a dire necessity of the development of effective child protection frameworks that are in compliance with the international human rights standards.

In this respect, social workers are very much useful in mediating between policy and practice and help in creating awareness of the rights of children and address the urgent needs of the vulnerable groups. Social workers are in a privileged position to evaluate risk, organize interagency, and access to the necessary services like counseling, legal support, and shelter of the children at risk (Jamal & Hussain, 2019). They are not just involved in case management but community engagement and empowerment where the social workers organize families and communities to identify and respect the rights of the children. It has been shown that social work interventions are important to provide protective outcomes by enhancing resiliency and supporting environment as well as impacting policy amendments that value child wellbeing (Begum & Tariq, 2022). These attempts are however limited by lack of proper professional training, paucity of resources and strong sociocultural opposition toward change.

The only way of ensuring that child protection is strengthened in Pakistan is to improve the capacity of the social work practice by institutionalizing the support as well as policy integration which will entrench the rights of children at the national welfare agendas. The effective strategies are; standardized training curricula of social workers based on human rights principles, enhanced coordination, and mechanisms between governmental and non-governmental agencies, and sustainability in advocacy to raise the awareness of people on the legal rights of children (Riaz & Malik, 2023). Also, evidence based policymaking can be supported by data driven monitoring and evaluation frameworks, which can be used to evaluate the effect of interventions. By enhancing the professionalism of social workers and creation of an enabling atmosphere in which child centric practices can be put into practice, Pakistan can palpably improve the realization of human rights of all children as per not only the national law but also the international requirements.

1.2 Background of the Study

In Pakistan, child protection is a burning human rights issue that is predetermined by a multifaceted interconnection between socioeconomic inequalities, the lack of laws, and cultural customs that often hinder the safety and wellbeing of children. Pakistan is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which demands that the state must guarantee protection, survival, development and participation rights of every child (United Nations, 1989). Nevertheless, there are rates of violations that are not only alarmingly high but also include child labor, forced marriage, trafficking, and restricted access to education and health services, especially among the economically disadvantaged groups (Khan and Ahmed, 2021). These endemic issues show that there is a disparity between the constitutional and international obligations of Pakistan relating to the rights of children and the realities of millions of children on the ground, and that more vigorous means of protection and enforcement of child centric policies are needed.

In this regard, social workers would be one of the main participants of child protection shortage reduction and human rights promotion in Pakistan. The principles of human dignity, social justice, and empowerment underlie social work practice and provide practitioners with the ability to recognize potential risk factors, advocate legal safeguards, and organize multisectoral interventions favorable to the well being of children (Jamal & Hussain, 2019). In spite of these vital roles, the professional capacity and systemic support of social work in the child protection sphere is still underdeveloped because of the lack of training, resources and

institutional fragmentation (Begum & Tariq, 2022). The enhanced role of social workers thus, has a great potential of transforming policy intentions into value achievements to vulnerable children, resilience, and community participation in ensuring protection of child rights throughout Pakistan.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This research is important as it may shed light on the special importance of social workers in protecting rights of children in the complicated social, cultural and legal context of Pakistan. This study can help to gain a better insight into the possible ways to develop child protection structures that would be consistent with the international human rights standards due to the analysis of the strategies, challenges, and outcomes related to the social work interventions (Begum and Tariq, 2022). The article has a valuable policy implication as it points out the existing gaps in existing protective practices and presents the best practices that can be used by stakeholders to enhance the welfare and growth of vulnerable children (Jamal & Hussain, 2019). Moreover, it aims to develop awareness of the significance of professional social work in defending children rights, developing community involvement, and changing the system to influence Pakistan in her obligation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Khan and Ahmed, 2021). Finally, the research note shows a strong focus on strengthening the social work capacity and the incorporation of child-related approaches as a tool of providing all children in Pakistan with a chance to develop and live in safe and protective conditions.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Although the Constitution and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are legally enforced by the Constitution, and the country works to address the issue of child protection, numerous gaps still exist in the field, and numerous children remain unprotected against child abuse, exploitation, and neglect (Khan and Ahmed, 2021). A number of structural obstacles, such as resource scarcity, lack of professional training, and a poor coordination of governmental and non-governmental institutions hinder the efficient provision of child protection services (Jamal & Hussain, 2019). Furthermore, these vulnerabilities are usually aggravated by sociocultural norms and the ignorance of the general population regarding the rights of children and the low chances that children will get the care and the legal security they rightfully deserve (Ali and Shah, 2020). In such a difficult setting, it is essential that social workers play the role of advocates, facilitators, and executors of child protection programs, though its role has not been thoroughly investigated and under-funded in Pakistan. This research fills this gap by giving the importance of social workers in enhancing the implementation of children rights, the enhancement of protection intervention, and the ability to influence policy that may protect the welfare of the vulnerable children nationwide.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How do social workers in Pakistan perceive their role in promoting and protecting the human rights of children?
2. What challenges do social workers face in implementing child protection measures, and how do these challenges impact the effectiveness of children's rights enforcement?
3. How can social work interventions be strengthened to improve child protection outcomes and ensure the fulfillment of children's rights in Pakistan?
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1.6 Research Objectives

1. To examine the role of social workers in promoting and safeguarding the human rights of children in Pakistan.

2. To identify the key challenges and barriers social workers face in implementing child protection measures.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of current social work interventions in ensuring the enforcement of children's rights.
4. To propose strategies and recommendations for strengthening social work practices to enhance child protection and rights advocacy in Pakistan.

1.7 Conceptual Framework

Independent Variables	Dependent Variable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of Social Workers • Challenges in Social Work Practice • Strategies and Interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection of Children's Rights

1.8 Conceptualization and Operationalization

1.8.1 Independent Variables (IVs):

1. Role of Social Workers: comprehends advocacy, case management, counseling, facilitation of legal aid, and mobilization in the community.
2. Difficulties in Social Work Practice: This involves lack of resources, inadequate training, cultural barriers, lack of institutional support as well as inter-agency coordination problems.
3. Strategies and Interventions: This includes programs, policies and ways through which social workers use to safeguard children and increase awareness of their rights.

1.8.2 Dependent Variable (DV):

1. Protection of children Rights: The indicators are represented by the access to education, the possibility to avoid abuse and exploitation, the possibility to be involved in decision-making, and well-being in general.

2. Literature Review

The issue of child protection and human rights are international law and developmental issues that enjoy universal recognition. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is used as the reference point in the global efforts to provide children with their rights to survive and develop, protection and participation (United Nations, 1989). In Pakistan, the state was committed to implementing measures to ensure the protection of children against exploitation, abuse, neglect, and discrimination due to the ratification of the CRC in 1990 (UNICEF, 2021). Nevertheless, even with constitutional guarantees and legal frameworks, there are loopholes in the implementation of policy promises and realities of children, especially in rural and marginalized societies (Niaz and Sadaf, 2020). According to scholars, child protection can be more comprehensively viewed not as legal compliance but as a complex system that involves societal, institutional, and community level involvement (Khan and Bhatti, 2019).

The Pakistani environment with regard to child protection entails several legislative acts and regulations, such as the Juvenile Justice System Act 2018, the Children Marriage Restraint Act, and some provincial measures. These legislations capture the concepts of the CRC; yet, they are not properly implemented and there are poor enforcement channels (Ahmed and Rehman, 2019). The structural barriers to justice identified by research include bureaucratic inertia, poor training of law enforcement officers, and access to justice (Haque and Sheikh, 2018). Moreover, the gender and family honor and social status cultural norms also affect the interpretation and enforcement of child rights (Rizvi et al., 2021). Malik and Qureshi (2020) posit that a policy discourse in Pakistan is usually characterized by a conflict between universal human rights ideologies and

local sociocultural practices, which need the development of contextualized implementation strategies. Social workers are very important in ensuring that there is a policy to practice gap in child protection systems. They are supposed to perform the role of case management, psychosocial support, community advocacy, and providing access to required services (Shah and Ahmed, 2020). Literature stresses that there is no other profession than social workers that would help them respond to the individual needs and the systemic barriers because they are trained in the mechanisms of human behavior, rights based framework, and multidisciplinary collaboration (Nasir et al., 2021). Nevertheless, in Pakistan, the social work profession is characterized by the lack of formalization, standardization of professional qualifications, and the absence of governmental support, coupled with underrepresentation by social workers in the child protection agencies of the general population (Khalid and Siddiqui, 2019). Such limitations hamper the ability of the social workers to adequately champion the rights of children and respondent protective interventions.

Empirical research shows that there are various issues that face child protection practice in Pakistan. Socio economically disadvantaged groups like poverty, illiteracy, and insufficient access to health- and education-related services increase the risks among children and complicate the implementation of protective measures (Ali and Khan, 2020). Moreover, the patriarchal traditions, discrimination by the caste, and gender-based violence complicate the marginalization of girls and disadvantaged groups (Farooq and Sultana, 2021). Fragmented coordination between governmental departments, non profits, and community networks also imposes a burden on the protection infrastructure by causing gaps in services and assigning responsibilities to multiple groups (Jamil & Zafar, 2018). Social workers are often faced with insufficient supervision and caseloads, which could lead to burnout and lack of efficacy (Imran & Raza, 2017).

Comparative literature places importance on the integrated child protection systems that unite government agencies, civil society, communities, and other international partners in order to enhance the rights based approaches (Wessells and Kostelny, 2019). As an example, community based child protection committees have been proven to be effective in the early detection and elimination of rights violations in certain African and South Asian settings (UNICEF, 2020). They have been linked to having better outcomes in vulnerable children with the adoption of evidence based training modules, culturally sensitive practice frameworks and stronger policy enforcement mechanisms (Beltran & Rogers, 2020). These international lessons provide possible avenues of enhancing the Pakistani child protection system in terms of capacity building, interagency cooperation and community participation.

Although the literature explains the crucial importance of social workers in ensuring the rights of children in Pakistan, there are still substantial gaps in the empirical evidence in assessing the effectiveness of the present interventions and measuring the rights outcomes, as well as incorporating culturally responsive practices. There are limited research that has evaluated the long term effects of social work interventions on the well being of children in a systematic manner (Shafqat & Mahmood, 2022). It is also necessary to have scholarly work exploring what children own voices and experiences in protection systems. In order to fill in such gaps, future research must focus on the participatory research methodology, longitudinal research design, and policy analysis studies that can be used to inform practice and support the realisation of child rights in Pakistani context.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology employed in investigating the contribution that social workers could make in enhancing and defending the rights of children in Pakistan. It also gives the research design, approach, population, sampling, data collection, and analysis process together with the ethical considerations. The methodology will provide a rational analysis of the impact of social work interventions on child protection.

3.2 Research Design

The research design is a qualitative study, which is appropriate in explaining a very complex social phenomenon like child protection and human rights. The study is designed as a descriptive and exploratory study to help the researcher understand the experiences, perceptions and challenges of social workers as well as consider how effectively they manage to protect the rights of children.

3.3 Research Approach

The phenomenological approach is employed in order to comprehend lived experiences of social workers. The methodology is centered around the views of participants about their professional roles, issues, and intervention in child protection. It helps the researcher to attain rich, contextual information that cannot be attained in a quantitative method of research.

3.4 Population and Sampling

The sample population will be composed of social workers working in governmental and non-governmental agencies that deal with child protection in Pakistan. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants to have the pertinent experience and expertise. The method would mean the gathering of comprehensive information with those who would be most informed on child protection interventions.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Semi structured interviews and the data were gathered to collect primary data which would enable the participants to give their experiences within a similar structure. The interview on the role, challenges of social workers and strategies of protecting children rights were explored. The reports, case studies, and organizational policies were also analyzed on paper to create more background and triangulate results.

3.6 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis to establish patterns and themes. It was done by acquainting with the transcripts, coding meaningful statements, and classifying the codes into general themes in terms of roles, challenges, and strategies. Themes were reconsidered, narrowed down, and planned against the results of children rights protection and the conceptual framework of the study.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Strict ethical guidelines were observed during the research. All subjects have given informed consent to participate in the study, and the information was kept confidential by anonymizing stored data. Care was also taken to avoid psychological damage and the subjects were educated that they were allowed to pull out at any point. The institutional review board gave its ethical approval. The researcher must be trusted and the study results should be valid, with no falsehoods or misleading conclusions.

3.8 Trustworthiness and Validity

The results of the study should be valid and the researcher should be trusted without falsehood or misleading conclusions. Data triangulation was used to increase the credibility by using interviews and document analysis. Interpretations were checked to participants through member checking to ensure that they are accurate. Coding and theme development were well documented and this provided transparency to the coding process and validation to the reliability and confirmability of the results.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the data analysis on the role of social workers in ensuring the rights of children in Pakistan is

done. Interpreted data on interviews and document reviews were analyzed in terms of data themes to discover the perceptions, challenges, strategies, and the effects of the interventions of social workers. The results are summarized in three broad themes in line with the purpose of the study: the roles of social workers, practice issues, and child protection strategies.

4.2 Social Workers' Perceptions of Their Role

The social workers explained that their work was multidimensional involving advocacy, counseling, case management, legal facilitation, and community mobilization. They stressed linking policies and practice, so that children could have access to education, healthcare services and the law. Their interventions were informed by rights-based approaches, with the UNCRC being the most prominent as they focused on individual children but also brought about change in the system.

Another activity that the participants emphasized is preventive and community-based where there was creation of awareness of the rights of children and empowering parents to protect their children. All in all, the social workers felt that they were the key to ensuring the well-being of children and implementation of their rights despite problems inside the system.

4.3 Challenges in Implementing Child Protection Measures

There are various barriers to the working efficacy of child protection programs by social workers. Lack of resources such as insufficient funding, facilities and heavy caseloads were common. The lack of child rights, psychosocial support, and legal frameworks training also had an additional effect on their capacity.

Fragmented services were as a result of institutional gaps that included poor coordination between government, NGOs, and community networks. Other barriers identified by the participants were socio-cultural as they had to deal with patriarchal norms, early marriage, and lack of awareness on the rights of children, and it dampened cooperation in communities. All these issues make up a complicated environment that makes the realization of children rights difficult.

4.4 Strategies and Interventions

In spite of these difficulties, social workers use preventative techniques to defend children. The advocacy and legal support assist children in achieving justice when it comes to abuse, trafficking, and neglect. The awareness is created through community engagement programs, like workshops and child protection committees, which support the local communities.

There are also social workers who offer psychosocial support and case management which requires both short term and long term development. The NGOs, schools, and health providers are collaborative partners, which add value to the delivery of services. The respondents also highlighted the capacity building in the form of training social workers and community volunteers as essential to enhancing the child protection outcomes.

4.5 Impact of Social Work Interventions

Children had a positive impact on their well-being due to the social work interventions. The respondents said that they had better access to education, no longer feared abuse, and were more involved in the decision-making process. The community programs helped to cut down the cases of child labor and early marriages among other rights abuses.

The success of these interventions is, however, constrained by structural and socio-cultural problems. Protection programs depend on systemic advocacy because resource limitations, lack of coordination, and opposition to the programs by society limit their coverage and sustainability.

4.6 Thematic Summary

Thematic analysis made three formulations:

1. Social workers identify themselves as advocates, counselors and community mobilizers where they are policy and practice bridges.
2. The major challenges are that they have little resources, training, insufficient institutional support, and poor socio-cultural barriers.
3. Nevertheless, their approaches to legal advocacy, community involvement, psychosocial service, and partnership efforts have made a difference in the protection of children rights in a quantifiable way.

These results indicate the importance of social workers in protecting children in Pakistan and give grounds to recommend better practice of social workers and child protection measures.

5. Discussion

The results of the paper are important because they confirm that social workers have a significant role to play in the protection of the rights of children in Pakistan, and their role is multifaceted as they are both advocates, counselors, case managers and community mobilizers. Although social workers are at the heart of the bridging gap between policy and practice, the structural, institutional and socio-cultural issues that plague them such as limited resources, ineffective training, poor inter-agency coordination, and traditional norms which compromise the rights of children are persistent. However, their proactive approach, such as legal advocacy and psychosocial support as well as community engagement and capacity building, exhibit quantifiable effects on the well-being of children, such as access to education, subsequent exposure to abuse, and engagement in decision-making. These findings underscore the fact that although social workers are central to the integration of child protection frameworks, professional capacity building, institutional empowerment and culturally sensitive, community-based interventions are needed to convert policy promises, including the UNCRC, into actual outputs of vulnerable children in Pakistan.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper has identified the critical role of social workers in advancing and defending the rights of children in Pakistan and has shown that advocacy, case management, counseling, and community mobilization activities are the key areas of intervention in achieving the policy-practice overlap. Although social workers must deal with serious structural, institutional, and socio-cultural issues, such as resource scarcity, inadequate training, disrupted coordination, and fidelity to traditional norms, which do not facilitate the enforcement of rights, proactive strategies of social workers have a beneficial influence on the well-being of children, including enhanced education access, protection against abuse, and involvement in decision-making. The results highlight the need to build more social work capacity, institutional support and culturally sensitive and community-based interventions as the factors that will convert the legal commitments, including the UNCRC, into practical protection of vulnerable children. However, the bottom line is that social workers should be empowered, and child-centered methods should be included in the sustainable route to making sure that every child in Pakistan will be able to mature, develop, and exercise their basic rights under the safe and positive conditions.

7. Recommendations

1. Enhance Professional Capacity: Train and develop social workers on a regular basis in relation to child rights, psychosocial support, legal and cultural sensitivity to make them effective in child protection.
2. Increase Resources: Provide sufficient monetary, human, and infrastructural support to the social work departments and child protection agencies to alleviate the high caseloads as well as enhance service delivery.
3. Improve Inter-Agency Co-ordination: Have a formal construction of co-ordination system between government institutions, NGOs and community organizing groups to have integrated and complete child protection services.

4. Institute Community-Based Programs: Support local initiatives, e.g., child protection committees, awareness training, etc., to encourage the local community to support the rights of children and prevent abuse, neglect, and exploitation.
5. Enhance Legal Advocacy: Provide the social workers with assistance on how the children can access justice via legal assistance, rights sensitization, and enforcement of child protection legislation.
6. Culturally Sensitive Interventions: Design and implement child protection measures that recognize and respect the local socio-cultural practices but advance universal rights of the children, to enhance the community acceptance and compliance.
7. Policy Review and Reform: Regulatory Assess Child protection laws and policies (Juvenile Justice System Act and Child Marriage Restraint Act) periodically to help remove gaps in their implementation and suggest the amendments.
8. Child Participation: Child participation in the decision making process of their lives should be encouraged so that the interventions made are child friendly and child responsive.
9. Grow Awareness Campaigns: Conduct countrywide awareness campaigns to inform citizens about the rights of children and the role of social workers to guard their rights as a way of minimizing the development of socio-cultural barriers and resistance.
10. Institutional Support and Recognition: Enhance institutional support and recognition of social work practice through formalisation of distinctions, career incentives and enhanced social worker representation in child protection systems led by government.

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