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“What Hinders Us from Safeguarding Maltreated Children?” A Report from Kuwaiti Child Protection Workers

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Abstract:

Due to the scarcity of studies on the subject of workers in the field of child protection, their professional practices and the challenges they face prevent the achievement of some goals of the child protection process. In addition, the Child Protection Law in Kuwait is one of the modern laws that was enacted in 2015. Therefore, this study aims to reveal the challenges facing child protection workers in Kuwait. A qualitative method was used to address the research question. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews from a sample of 12 child protection workers. The results related to the challenges revealed a range of problems facing caregivers in child protection, including training and knowledge gaps, limited authority and implementation, and unrealized expectations. The overall conclusion shows that despite the fact that child protection workers in Kuwait face numerous challenges, the identified interventions could significantly improve their effectiveness. Therefore, the government together with the relevant organizations should increase the organization of workshops and courses, working to establish rules for managing the case study so as not to disturb the results of the interviews from some families.

Keywords: child protection workers, social workers, child protection, child abuse, professionalism-based authority, proactive parental participation.

“是什么阻碍我们保护受虐待的儿童？”科威特儿童保护工作者的报告

摘要:

由于对儿童保护领域工作者的研究很少，他们的专业实践和他们面临的挑战阻碍了儿童保护进程中某些目标的实现。此外，科威特《儿童保护法》是 2015 年颁布的现代法律之一。因此，本研究旨在揭示科威特儿童保护工作者面临的挑战。使用定性方法来解决研究问题。数据是通过半结构化访谈从 12 名儿童保护工作者中收集的。与挑战相关的结果揭示了照顾者在儿童保护方面面临的一系列问题，包括培训和知识差距、

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权力和实施有限以及未实现的期望。总体结论表明，尽管科威特的儿童保护工作者面临诸多挑战，但所确定的干预措施可以显著提高其有效性。因此，政府应会同有关机构加大研讨班和课程的组织力度，制定案例研究的管理规则，以免影响一些家庭的访谈结果。

关键词：儿童保护工作者、社会工作者、儿童保护、虐待儿童、专业权威、家长积极参与。

1. Introduction

Child maltreatment represents a pervasive global problem that demands attention. This problem has significant ramifications on a global scale, with countries around the world expending a staggering US\$94 billion annually to combat child abuse (Almazeedi et al., 2020). This effort is underscored by establishing protection agencies that provide psychological and social support to children and their families. Among these protection agencies, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2022) is a prominent example, operating across an extensive network of centers in over 150 countries to deliver social and psychological care and support services (Lamothe et al., 2018). These services are provided by individuals specializing in child protection, such as social workers, psychologists, and other specialists who support children and their families. The ultimate goal of these workers is to protect children against abuse, neglect, and violence by providing empathy and security and seeking solutions (UNICEF, 2020).

Child Protection Workers (CPWs) play an essential and influential role in child protection centers, and they face multiple challenges while dealing with children at risk and attempting to identify their aspirations. This is because they are the child's first encounter as the primary child protection professionals who work on drawing up protection plans and dealing with various children's issues (Patrick et al., 2020). Therefore, the performance of child protection workers and the treatment they face can put the child welfare system at risk (Boyas et al., 2022).

However, despite the vital role of CPWs, only a few studies have examined the challenges they face. Hope and Wyk (2018) stated that the challenges faced by child protection workers were not studied or researched on manifestations of these challenges in a focused manner. As Sichone (2019) emphasized, despite the importance of challenges for child protection workers the studies did not adequately shed light on the problems they face.

Multiple organizations, such as UNICEF (2020), have advocated for CPWs as a critical component of child services to be recognized as essential for healthy development and well-being in maltreated children. Therefore, child protection workers in Kuwait are considered an important element in child development and protection from harm. Thus, this paper aims to understand the role of Kuwaiti CPWs in child protection centers and identify the challenges they face while attempting to protect maltreated children visiting

child protection offices. It is important to understand the challenges that child protection providers face in the centers because they have a strong, sensitive, and important role in protecting children.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Child Protection

Child protection services refer to a set of services and mechanisms put in place to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect, which threaten the well-being of children (Mwapaura et al., 2022: 3). They focus on protecting children exposed to harm or likely to suffer from any form of child maltreatment (Reimer, 2023).

2.2. Child Protection Workers

Child protection workers are viewed as paraprofessional social workers providing services at the community level (UNICEF, 2020). This team comprises pediatricians, internists, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and officers from the General Department of Criminal Evidence, which is affiliated with the Ministry of the Interior (Child Protection Act, 2015, p. 16).

Child protection workers play a significant role in protecting and helping children, making their voices heard, and defending their rights (Van Bijleveld et al., 2020). Their primary responsibility is to ensure the welfare of children (Dimba et al., 2022). They also seek to help the families of children who require assistance (Katz & Cohen, 2021).

2.3. Social-Cultural Context of Child Protection Workers in Kuwait

In Kuwait, the term 'child maltreatment' refers to four categories of child abuse: first, neglect by parents or those who care for the child who fails to provide basic needs in the areas of education, health, nutrition, emotional development, appropriate housing, and safe living conditions (for reasons other than lack of resources), and failure to supervise appropriately and protect the child from harm can affect their mental, emotional, physical, moral, and social development. The second category is physical abuse, such as assault that results in physical harm (e.g., beating, kicking, shaking, poisoning, suffocation, burning), whether intentional or not. The aggressor harms the child, with the injury resulting from the severity of the beating or due to severe negligence. The third category is psychological and emotional abuse, such as behavior carried out by the aggressor against the child, including

rejection, intimidation, isolation, insults, neglect, restriction of freedom, discrimination or any form of mistreatment based on hatred and rejection, which can impair the physical, mental, emotional and moral development of the child. The fourth category is sexual abuse, such as exposing the child to any sexual activities or adult practices or sexual exploitation (Child Protection Law, 2015).

Child protection services receive complaints if the child is exposed to any harm, whether the complaint is from the child or others. Another vital aspect is treating children who have been harmed and rehabilitating and reviewing those who caused harm to the child, whether family or otherwise. It is also necessary to investigate children's exposure to harm and to create a record for every harmed child. These files cannot be accessed without permission from the Public Prosecution. In addition, programs are developed to protect children from harm. The programs are supervised by working with the authorities concerned with children's rights in Kuwait.

3. Method

A phenomenology study was conducted in Kuwait for child protection providers in hospitals to understand the lived experiences of child protection workers in child protection centers and to create awareness of the challenges child protection workers in Kuwait face in safeguarding maltreated children attending child protection centers.

This study employs a phenomenological design that focuses on human experiences through the descriptions provided by the participants (Qutoshi, 2018). The researcher effectively studies emotional, affective, and intense human experiences. Through phenomenology, the researcher aims to attract data that has yet to be attained; therefore, the researcher investigates life experiences regarding an event from the subject's perspective.

3.1. Research Approach and Design

To understand the complexity of lived experiences and highlight the problems and implications of child protection, a phenomenological design was adopted, which focuses on human experiences through the descriptions provided by the participants (Qutoshi, 2018). Understanding the origin and standards of phenomenology, the strategy for approaching a field of study, and the mechanisms for seeking meaning is vital. Phenomenological research is descriptive in nature and aims to uncover how a specific encounter affects people and their experiences (Williams, 2021). A qualitative approach was also used to identify the intricate relationships among social implications, individual and social practices, and study settings (Rivera, 2021). This approach allows for achieving common understanding of a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2. Study Population, Sample, and Sampling Technique

In this study, non-probability sampling was used to select participants who met the research requirements. Non-probability sampling is the process of understanding the complexity of lived experiences and highlighting the problems and implications of child protection. A phenomenological design was adopted, which focuses on human experiences through the descriptions provided by the participants, electing participants on the basis of personal judgment. It relies on personal knowledge and opinions to identify potential participants (Semasinghe, 2019).

3.3. Data Collection Technique

After approval for the interview protocol was obtained in May 2023 from the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UM.A/P/606), data were collected on child protection workers who work directly with children. In-depth interviews allow for the collection of data from people who directly experienced a certain phenomenon. Phenomenology includes the technique of in-depth interviews, which helps to collect and analyze data more accurately and in depth (Alase, 2017). In other words, they allow for collecting observations regarding events that cannot be grasped by relying solely on direct questions (Nassif, 2014). Compared with focus group discussions, one-on-one interviews are easier to transcribe because the researcher can speak directly with each interviewee and rapidly obtain information with limited distraction (Tolley et al., 2016).

Semi-structured interviews require thoughtful planning regarding who to interview, the number of interviews to be conducted, and the types of questions asked to each participant (Laforest, 2009). To ensure question uniformity and increase the efficiency of data analysis, an interview guide with open-ended questions was prepared to direct the interviews. Collaboration with other interviewers was also established to ensure question uniformity for different participants at various research sites. The time frame for this study was set to 4 weeks, with three participants interviewed each week. Each interview lasted 30 to 60 minutes.

3.4. Research Instrument

In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol developed in English and translated into Arabic before data collection. In-depth interviews with the child protection workers were conducted in quiet spaces – in the child protection workers' offices. The interviews lasted for 30 to 60 minutes. The open-ended questions yielded descriptive data and even stories about the phenomena.

The interview tool was created according to the rules of the study and the theoretical framework of role theory. The interview tool consists of the first section with the personal questions of knowing the background of the protection worker, such as asking about specialization, years of experience, age, and nationality. After that, the second section of two questions was introduced to learn about the role of the child protection

worker. The first question was: Describe your professional role(s) in this child protection center. The second question asked about expectations: What are some of the role expectations of a child protection worker in a child protection center? Then follows the third section, which is concerned with the main question of the study: challenges child protection workers face in their efforts to safeguard the maltreated children attending child protection centers. It included two questions to reveal the challenges facing the child protection worker and how to overcome them. The first question was: What challenges can you face while attempting to meet the role expectations of a child protection worker?

3.5. Data Analysis Technique

Phenomenology involves a unique technique called interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative thematic approach that focuses on the subjective lived experiences of individuals (Vetere et al., 2020, para. 1). This analysis technique is used to determine the views of similar-minded individuals toward a particular phenomenon. IPA comprises multiple stages. First, the data are organized; second, the data are uploaded to NVivo and coded; third, the data are sorted in the framework by each discussed topic; fourth, previously compiled topics are reviewed and refined until a clear idea and arrangement emerges; and finally, a second-order analysis is conducted (Nigatu, 2009).

4. Results

This paper reports the experiences of child protection workers who work with maltreated children. The results indicated that these workers had many requirements and multiple training and knowledge gaps (lack of practical capabilities). For instance, one participant noted that she expected her role as a child protection worker was important for children and that they were "supposed to be taught the mechanism for dealing with children at risk. We were also not taught the various tests that help the child overcome problems" (CPW1, 16 May 2023, 12 AM/Social Service Office).

She added that she had learned most of these skills alone and with the help of her colleagues in other specializations and departments. Similarly, CPW5 noted:

"I was expected to work on performing tests on children, but so far, I have not been trained and given a license to deal with children, such as an intelligence test, or training us on drawing tests, for example" (CPW5, 10 May 2023, 11 AM/Social service office).

Regarding parental involvement and family interference, some participants stated that they felt constrained by their inability to exert authority at work. For instance, a participant reported that an issue that she experiences is that parents must be present whenever they are assessing a child. According to her,

"This matter is not in the interest of the child,

because he will feel afraid and will not speak, so it affects the results... or, for example, there are children whose sessions must be many...up to three sessions in order to get to the bottom of the matter with them...some of them lie for fear from the family...or what they say is memorized by the family for fear of problems... Therefore, the parents must be removed during the sessions... but this is difficult to happen... Because we do not have a law to do so" (CPW4, 10 May 2023, 10 AM/Social service office).

Another participant had a similar view, stating that "There are many challenges, including that we cannot interfere with the family, nor do we have any authority... we work superficially because we do not have the power to order the parents to step aside at the time of the session... sometimes we encounter families who respond to us nervously... or in an offensive manner... and prevent us from completing the session... with this we can do nothing" (CPW6, 15 May 2023, 9 AM/Social service office).

In addition, among the findings of the study was the limited authority and implementation, which affects the activation of the performance of the duties of child protection workers, which leads to a decrease in job performance and thus affects the overall performance of the child protection process. For instance, CPW2 stated:

"One of the challenges we face is not activating our role because the Child Law exists and there is a group that knows who we are. But we do not have any ability to apply the law or hear our voice when there is a case that requires filing a case or complaining to the police that is not registered sometimes or taking the child from his parents when the environment is bad, inappropriate, and not implemented...." (CPW2, 16 May 2023, 12 AM/Social Service Office).

Likewise, CPW3 stated the following:

"It would have been better if our role had been the Child Protection Office. We cannot do anything, and the director of the office is not cooperating with us" (CPW3, 16 May 2023, 1 PM/Social service office).

Finally, unrealized expectations: Among the duties of child protection workers is early detection and response to incidents of violence, in addition to listening to children and providing a treatment plan...etc. However, the workers were disappointed because their roles did not meet their expectations. For instance, CPW1 said:

"I wanted our role to be important with children, especially with child protection... but I was disappointed... I thought I would work on children's cases continuously and continuously but cases after writing the report stands practical... and the child is sent to another side, for example, for psychological treatment, if needed" (CPW1, 16 May 2023, 12 AM/Social Service Office).

On her part, CPW6 noted,

"All that was studied was not applied, as I expected a bigger and more important role than now... I haven't studied cases... I'm just working on writing a report

after the doctor's report in the hospital" (CPW6, 15 May 2023, 9 AM/Social service office).

All of these responses depict the disappointment of child protection workers when they complete their educational program and finally get a job in the field. Disappointment kills dedication and perseverance and exacerbates job burnout. Child protection is a humanitarian development task. It works to restore the lives of children exposed to psychological, physical, and verbal violence. Therefore, a work environment that does not support the growth and development of its employees leads to job dissatisfaction. As a result, the process of dealing with children will be hindered.

5. Discussion

5.1. Comprehensive Training and Development Program for CPWS

Participants stated that they could not meet their role expectations because of a lack of comprehensive training and knowledge. This is a significant challenge for child protection workers as they perform their roles. To improve the knowledge and skills of child protection workers, it is critical to provide them with sufficient training and continuous opportunities to develop professionally (Tulane, 2021). Comprehensive training should encompass various areas, such as solutions for child protection cases, trauma-informed care, and risk assessment. Consequently, addressing this challenge requires child welfare organizations to make considerable investments in holistic training programs and develop collaboration.

One of the child protection training organizations in the UK is Keeping Children Safe Organizations. The organization looks at the steps that need to be taken before the training begins. First, the venue for the training should be suitable and provide an atmosphere in which the trainees feel comfortable. In addition, there should be qualified and experienced trainers. At least two: one who is knowledgeable about the organization's approach to protection work and one who has experience and knowledge of child-related topics. Attention should also be paid to appropriate presentation skills to clearly present information, and materials should be in the source language and relevant to the local context. Efforts should also be made to enable child protection staff to participate in training (Myers & Hanbury, 2011).

5.2. Professionalism-Based Authority

Most child protection workers stated that they need authority and strength in dealing with cases, as there is a close intertwining between giving authority and providing protection to the child in responding to the types of referrals that need protection. It is important that social workers are given the authority and ability to make decisions work properly in applying professional practices (Yelly, 2019). Child protection workers in the force must be given special space in decision-making and procedures, which is in the best interest of the child

first and foremost, by legislating special laws regarding those working directly in child protection, such as social workers, evaluating the case and the ability to make a direct and quick decision by the social worker, so that the child protection worker does not feel restricted, which leads to job burnout, and the child is psychologically stressed due to bureaucratic transactions.

Previous studies have proven that an important aspect of children's rights advocacy is understanding the professional practices of protecting workers and developing policies that are in the best interests of children (Falch-Eriksen, 2018). Since research by Poso (2018) proves that reducing the power of child protection centers goes against children's rights, endangers children's safety, and affects the quality of care, more child protection practices and policies need to be proposed. Research by Falch-Eriksen and Backe-Hansen (2018) also found that when child protection officers enforce the law and perform their work in an authorized manner, the exercise of discretion is a positive aspect of social workers' traditional authority in their field of work, as he advocated for the welfare and protection of children.

5.3. Promoting Proactive Parental Participation

Additionally, participants highlighted the challenges of exercising power in the workplace. In particular, they cited continued parental involvement and family disruption during contact with children as limiting their ability to adequately protect abused children. They found that this affected the results of their intervention. The issue of ongoing parent/carer intervention is complex and requires a delicate balance between ensuring child safety and protecting parental rights. While parents must be involved in the treatment process, this involvement should be limited, especially when there is a possibility that the parent/guardian is responsible for child abuse.

However, studies by Melinder et al. (2021), Korpinen and Pösö (2020), and Sudland (2019) showed that child protection workers often struggled to walk the fine line between protecting parental rights and acting in the best interests of the child. The search for balance. Therefore, several organizations and social centers help provide child care and education programs and free counseling through government organizations to solve the problem.

Crimes (2019) reported that the number of child abuse cases in Kuwait in 2019 was 150, mostly against parents, and most cases involved sexual abuse and emotional neglect. Therefore, parents are one of the most important groups who care for, protect, and provide safety, education, love, and harmony to their children. Home is the best place to take care of children. In addition, the upbringing and care of children from an early age is a family responsibility. Therefore, it is important that parents prioritize issues as they help child protection workers work in a child-protective manner and help families avoid problems faced by

children (Shehata, 2020).

5.4. Child Protection Management: Meeting Staff Expectations

Through the interviews, it became clear that employees working in child protection have unfulfilled expectations in social administration. These unmet expectations can stem from various sources, including systemic issues, resource limitations, and misunderstandings about the roles of child protection professionals.

Role theory helps establish a set of expectations for child protection professionals. With these expectations, everyone has their own tasks to complete. However, previous studies have proven that each person plays an interrelated role in a child protection center, and these roles include the many jobs of a trained safeguarding worker (Hisham, 2021). Furthermore, Welte (2016) suggests that role conflict prevents a social worker from participating in these areas, while a reduction in professional focus on general practice may lead to a social worker not enjoying his job.

6. Conclusion

Similar to their counterparts in many other countries, child protection professionals in Kuwait encounter various difficulties when trying to protect abused children. To understand the challenges faced by child protection professionals and the standardized methods and skills used by child protection centers to protect abused children, this article highlights key issues in the field of child protection.

Therefore, the results indicate that there are many demands on these workers and substantial training and knowledge gaps (lack of practical skills). Gaps in knowledge may impact their ability to identify, assess, and respond effectively to cases of abuse. Addressing this challenge requires investment in ongoing training programs to close gaps and ensure that child protection workers have the most up-to-date knowledge and skills.

Another pressing challenge revealed in the study is limited authority of workers and implementation power in terms of child protection. This limitation leads to delays in workers' efforts toward maltreatment cases. Regarding the improvement of the situation, it would be necessary to redefine the responsibilities of child protection workers within the larger system, providing them with the authority needed to act promptly while serving the children.

Parental involvement during the process of child protection worker interviews may lead to obstruction and influence the process of obtaining their results. Consequently, power is also important in this problem authority to child protection workers because of their ability to prevent parental interference during the interview process. Therefore, authority must be given to child protection workers.

Unrealized expectations emerged as another challenge in the current study, with disparities between

the expectations of child protection workers and the reality of their roles. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive communication and orientation process that aligns the expectations of such professionals with the actual responsibilities they will encounter in their work.

Although the role of the child protection worker is critical, there must be a lot of attention paid to workers and their professional needs. By implementing the recommendations, we can create a more robust and responsive system that prioritizes the safety and well-being of its most vulnerable children, ultimately fostering a brighter future.

7. Limitations and Further Study

Exploring areas for future research is an important part of the continued development and improvement of child protection practices in Kuwait. This study highlights several potential avenues for future research, each with the potential to improve our understanding and the effectiveness of child protection efforts.

A key focus for future research will be the long-term outcomes for maltreated children cared for in each center. Further investigation into the long-term impact of interventions on children's lives, particularly on their psychological, educational, and social well-being, will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of current practices, thereby aiding future improvements.

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Authors' Contributions

The first author proposed the scope of the study and collected the data, the second author explicitly supervised the study and helped guide and assist the first author, and the third author followed up and directed the study.

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