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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN AZERBAIJAN

Gahramanov Aykhan Shahbaz oglu,

*Doctoral Student at the Department of International Relations,
Azerbaijan University of Tourism and Management (Baku, Azerbaijan)*

ORCID ID: 0009-0002-2605-4771

ayxanshahbazoglu@mail.ru

Abstract. Although domestic violence against children in Azerbaijan has recently attracted greater public attention, it remains a serious social problem that continues to persist covertly within the depths of society. The exposure of children to physical and psychological trauma limits their opportunities for healthy development and places their future well-being at risk. Such instances of violence pose a threat not only to individual families but also to the overall social stability of society and the formation of future generations.

In this context, the role of social work is extremely important. Social work aims not only to respond to cases of violence but also to combat them through preventive and rehabilitative approaches. This article explores the functions of social work in preventing violence and providing psychosocial and legal support to children who have been subjected to violence. It analyzes the activities of social workers in early detection, preventive measures, joint interventions with families, rehabilitation programs, and public awareness efforts.

At the same time, the article draws attention to key challenges in the implementation of social work in this field in Azerbaijan – such as the shortage of professional staff, the weakness of institutional cooperation mechanisms, limited financial resources, and public indifference. Furthermore, the lack of coordination between state institutions and non-governmental organizations, as well as the passive attitude of society toward this issue, are significant obstacles in combating violence.

The aim of the research is to identify the theoretical and practical foundations of social work in this area, to determine existing gaps, and to propose recommendations for the more effective implementation of social work. The article ultimately demonstrates that social work plays a decisive and strategic role in eliminating violence against children. Its systematic organization and implementation on a professional basis are essential for the development of long-term and sustainable solutions in this field.

Key words: social work, domestic violence, prevention, child rights.

Introduction. Relevance of the Problem. Violence against children is one of the most dangerous social problems faced by societies on both global and local scales in the 21st century. Violence not only severely harms the psychological, emotional, and physical development of children but also negatively affects their integration into society and future life prospects. Although family values are strong in Azerbaijan, cases of domestic violence – particularly against children are frequently observed and often remain hidden. The increase in such incidents and the lack of adequate intervention mechanisms further highlight the urgency of the problem. In this context, social work plays a special role in child-related strategies and intervention mechanisms.

Degree of Problem Development. Various international organizations – such as the UN, UNICEF, and WHO – have conducted extensive research on the issue of violence against children and have established legal frameworks in this field. In Azerbaijan, in recent years, certain projects and studies have been carried out by State Committees and some NGOs. However, the systematic study of the problem from the perspective of social work is still limited. The application of the theoretical foundations of social work in combating violence, its integration with institutional mechanisms, and the

ways in which existing gaps can be addressed have not yet been comprehensively studied.

Purpose and Objectives. The main purpose of the article is to examine the role of social work in combating violence against children in Azerbaijan from both theoretical and practical perspectives, to analyze the current situation in this field, and to offer recommendations for its improvement. In order to achieve this goal, the following objectives are set:

- To investigate the scale and causes of the problem of violence against children in Azerbaijan;
- To identify the theoretical and practical foundations of social work in this field;
- To analyze the preventive, intervention, and rehabilitation activities of social work against violence;
- To assess the existing social service models and institutional cooperation opportunities in Azerbaijan;
- To propose solutions aimed at addressing the problem.

Methods. The article is based mainly on qualitative and analytical methods. Through analytical methods, existing statistical data and legal documents have been examined; with the comparative method, parallels have been drawn between international and local practices. In addition, secondary sources – such as reports of government agencies, studies by international organizations, academic literature on social work, and the current legal framework – have been used as the main references.

Legal and Social Aspects of Violence against Children in Azerbaijan. Violence against children remains one of the most serious and complex social problems of the modern era. Violence negatively affects the physical, psychological, and social development of children both globally and locally. According to the principles defined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, every child has the right to live in a safe and violence-free environment. However, in practice, these rights are often violated, and children are exposed to risks even within the family. Particularly, cases of violence within the family often remain hidden, further deepening the scale and consequences of the problem (United Nations, 1989).

Although the family is regarded as a sacred institution in Azerbaijani society, there are still many cases of violence against children within this institution. Under the influence of social, cultural, and economic factors, domestic violence can sometimes be perceived as normal behavior, creating additional difficulties from both legal and social intervention perspectives. Low levels of parental awareness, the weakness of the social work infrastructure, and society's passive attitude toward the issue create grounds for the problem to grow (Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi, 2021).

Violence against children is any form of behavior or neglect that negatively affects a child's physical, psychological, and emotional well-being, development, and safety. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child has the right to be protected from abuse and violence. However, sometimes violence becomes so routine and systematic that both society and the family itself perceive such behaviors as "disciplinary methods." This illustrates how deep the social roots of the problem are (Azərbaycan Respublikası, 2006).

Statistically, based on 2022 data from the State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, more than 2,500 cases of violence or abuse involving children were recorded throughout the year. These figures reflect only detected and registered cases. According to experts, the actual numbers may be several times higher (Azərbaycan Respublikası Ailə, Qadın və Uşaq Problemləri üzrə Dövlət Komitəsi, 2022).

In a study conducted by UNICEF in Azerbaijan in 2019, 57% of participating parents stated that "physical punishment is necessary to discipline a child." This indicates that violence is still seen as a widely accepted and normalized behavior.

From a sociological perspective, violence is not just individual behavior; it is also a process that is stimulated or overlooked by social structures and culture. For example, beliefs like "beating a child is education" legitimize violence and weaken efforts to prevent it. The consequences of violence are not

only physical but can also lead to long-term emotional and social trauma (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013).

Therefore, the concept of violence must be studied not only in terms of individual behavior but also in connection with societal norms, social relationships, and legal mechanisms. Only then will it be possible to form an effective and comprehensive approach in social work practice.

In light of these realities, it becomes clear that combating violence is not solely a legal issue but also a complex process that requires social and cultural transformation. In this struggle, social work can play an essential role – both in preventing violence through awareness and in supporting its victims.

The Role of Social Work in Combating Violence Against Children. Social work is a practical and theoretical field aimed at promoting social change, solving problems, and advancing social justice to improve the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. The main objective of this field is to support people in need of social protection, defend their rights, and create opportunities for them to realize their potential. The foundations of social work are based on principles of humanism, empathy, equality, and participation (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).

In the context of combating violence against children, the theoretical foundations of social work become even more relevant. This is because violence is not only a form of individual behavior but also a problem that arises and is supported at social and structural levels. From this perspective, social work envisions intervention at individual, family, and institutional levels.

There are several key principles on which social work is based in combating violence (Payne, M, 2014: 34):

The principle of protecting human rights – The social worker considers defending the child's rights and protecting them from violence as one of their primary duties. In this case, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child serves as the main legal foundation.

Systems approach – The social worker analyzes not only the abused child but also their family environment, social surroundings, and living context as a whole system. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the root causes of the problem.

Intervention and support – In cases of violence, the social worker is not only a collector of information but also an intervener, supporter, and sometimes a participant in legal procedures. The social worker may work with the child and parents in both individual and group formats.

Awareness and prevention – To prevent violence, the social worker works with parents, teachers, and community leaders to increase society's knowledge and sensitivity on the topic. Awareness-raising is a key tool in preventing violence from being perceived as normal behavior.

Ethical responsibility and professional conduct – Social workers carry out their activities in accordance with ethical codes. When working with children, priority is given to their confidentiality, safety, and well-being.

Among the theories of social work, the ecological systems approach, psychosocial model, critical social work, and protective intervention model are particularly important in working with children. These theoretical frameworks allow social workers to approach violence from different perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, U, 1979).

Thus, the theoretical foundations of social work provide a comprehensive, multidisciplinary, and humane approach to combating violence. This plays an invaluable role in protecting children's safety and shaping future generations in a healthier way.

The role of social work in combating violence against children is not limited to theoretical approaches; on the contrary, the role of the social worker in this field is based on practical activities, continuous intervention, and systematic support. Ensuring the physical and psychological safety of children who face violence, supporting their social adaptation, and implementing measures to reduce the risk of violence are among the main functions of social work. These activities must be carried out at multiple levels and in a coordinated manner. They include:

1. Early detection of violence – One of the key functions of social workers is to detect cases of violence as early as possible. Social workers in schools, kindergartens, healthcare institutions, and community centers can identify potential cases of violence by observing physical marks, behavioral changes, fear, and withdrawal in children. For this purpose, it is essential that social workers master professional observation methods and risk assessment tools.

2. Intervention at the individual and family level – One of the main tasks of the social worker is to assess the situation of abused children and their families and to develop an intervention plan. This includes:

- Post-trauma support programs
- Psychosocial counseling to restore family relationships
- Educational work with parents on discipline
- Temporary removal of the child from the family when necessary to ensure safety

In this intervention process, the social worker collaborates with psychologists, lawyers, educators, and other professionals, applying a comprehensive approach.

3. Institutional cooperation and referral – For social work to be effective, it is essential that it operates in coordination with law enforcement agencies, educational institutions, the healthcare sector, and non-governmental organizations. In Azerbaijan, there are some structural cooperation mechanisms in place. For example:

- Child and Family Support Centers under the State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs
- Social services working with children and families under the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection
- Regional Social Rehabilitation Centers and their social workers
- Child protection officers under local executive authorities

These institutions work together with social workers to develop individualized protection plans for children and professionally assist child victims of violence.

4. Awareness-raising and working with the community – Social work aims not only to address the consequences of violence but also to combat its causes. Therefore, social workers should carry out extensive awareness activities at the family, school, and community levels. These activities include:

- Trainings for parents (positive discipline methods, child psychological needs, etc.)
- Meetings, trainings, and seminars with youth and adolescents
- Informing children about their rights
- Creating safe mechanisms to encourage reporting of violence

In Azerbaijan, several NGOs (e.g., Clean World Women's Aid Public Union, Azerbaijani Children's Public Union) carry out awareness-raising activities in cooperation with social workers. However, the scope of these activities is still limited and needs expansion.

5. Rehabilitation and reintegration – Child victims of violence need not only physical but also psychological and social rehabilitation. At this stage, the social worker creates opportunities for the child's emotional recovery, return to education, and reintegration into society. The rehabilitation process prioritizes removing the child from the abusive environment and connecting them with a safe social support network. Sometimes this involves referral to shelters or alternative family models.

Existing Problems and Prospective Approaches. Although the role of social work in combating violence against children is broad, there are several serious problems in this area in Azerbaijan. One of the main obstacles is the shortage and insufficient professionalism of social workers. Many social workers operate under difficult working conditions and lack financial and moral support. This negatively affects their motivation and professional performance.

Another problem is the weak institutional integration of social work. Cooperation with law enforcement, education, and healthcare sectors is not systematic or consistent. This reduces the effectiveness of the fight against violence and delays interventions.

Although a legal framework exists, there are gaps in its implementation. The connections between social workers and the legal system, the provision of legal assistance to victims of violence, and the organization of social services are weak. Furthermore, the absence of a unified system for collecting data and statistical analysis on cases of violence exacerbates the problems.

Awareness-raising efforts at the societal level are still insufficient. Violence is often perceived as normal or a method of discipline, which hinders preventive efforts. To increase public sensitivity on the issue, more extensive campaigns, trainings, and public dialogues must be organized.

At the same time, there are also development prospects in the fight against violence against children through social work. First and foremost, the preparation and continuous training of social work personnel is essential. As the number of professional and qualified social workers increases, the quality of interventions will improve.

Secondly, the development of multisector cooperation mechanisms is crucial. Effective synergy between law enforcement, education, healthcare, and the non-governmental sector can create a strong impact in combating violence.

Thirdly, the use of digital platforms can be an effective tool for identifying, registering, and coordinating interventions in cases of violence. The creation of databases and the implementation of analytical systems will help eliminate existing problems.

Finally, allocating more resources to preventive and awareness activities in social work, raising public awareness, and eliminating stereotypes related to violence will contribute to building a healthier society in the future.

Conclusion. The problem of violence against children remains one of the most serious and widespread social issues in Azerbaijani society. Research shows that violence severely harms not only a child's physical health but also their psychological and social development. Cases of domestic violence often remain hidden, creating significant challenges in protecting children's rights. In this context, the role of social work is irreplaceable.

Social work carries out multifaceted and complex interventions in combating violence against children. Early detection, individual and family support, institutional cooperation, awareness-raising, and rehabilitation are the core functions of social work. Although existing social services and legal mechanisms in Azerbaijan support this work to some extent, there is still a strong need for development and improvement.

The existing problems in the field of social work—staff shortages, weak cooperation mechanisms, financial limitations, and insufficient public awareness—undermine the effectiveness of the fight against violence. Therefore, steps must be taken to enhance the potential of social work in both education and institutional cooperation.

As a result, social work is not only necessary but also an effective means in combating violence against children. The continuous development and improvement of social work will play a significant role in ensuring children's rights, helping them grow up in a safe and secure environment, and contributing to the formation of a healthier future society.

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