



Child abuse and child protection policies in Kosovo

Arjeta Shaqiri Latifi^{1*}, Adile Shaqiri²

¹PhD. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture

²PhD. Organization and Management of Social Activities

Abstract

Child abuse is a global issue with severe societal impacts, and Kosovo is no exception. This study identifies gaps in child protection policies, key intervention areas, and contributing factors. It examines child abuse theories, risk factors, and societal effects while reviewing legal frameworks, international conventions, and preventive mechanisms. Ten semi-structured interviews with senior Ministry of Justice officials explored challenges in implementing child protection laws. A qualitative analysis of child abuse in Kosovo, using 2020–2022 statistics, revealed a rise in child victimization from 365 cases in 2020 to 912 in 2022, emphasizing the need for stronger protection measures. The study recommends legislative updates, enhanced standards, and institutional reforms to strengthen child protection. It proposes drafting a Strategic Document to establish national priorities and improve protective systems.

Keywords: Child abuse, Social policies, Child protection, Legal frameworks

Introduction

Literature review

Historical and contemporary evidence shows that child abuse, which includes all forms of violence, has persisted from ancient civilizations to modern times. Traditionally, paternal authority has often led to the abuse and neglect of children and women, including practices such as sale and slavery (Constitutional Rights Foundation 2001).

The Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child, first affirmed in 1924 and adopted by the United Nations in 1959, known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, states that children, by reason of their physical and intellectual immaturity, require special and legal protection, both before and after birth (Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child).

Article 19 of the Convention requires all States Parties to take legislative and administrative measures to protect children from all forms of violence, including physical, mental and sexual abuse, whether in parental care or in other care. This includes establishing effective procedures and effective programs for the prevention, identification, reporting, referral and follow-up of cases of child maltreatment.

Section 38 of the Child Protection Act prohibits corporal punishment and disciplinary measures that harm or degrade a child's dignity, including physical and mental violence, in any setting such as the home, school, care institutions, law enforcement, the justice system, workplaces and the community (the Child Protection Act).

In the 1960s, the United States Children's Bureau developed a model law on reporting child abuse, setting a precedent for other States to adopt similar legislation. Despite societal changes, the family continues to be a primary setting for child abuse and neglect (Newberger, et al., 1983).

In Kosovo, which is still in transition from a patriarchal system, physical violence as a means of disciplining children is a socially accepted norm among parents and society at large. It is evident that even children may see a degree of physical violence as justifiable discipline (KOMF).

According to KOMF (2018), violence in Kosovo is underreported due to the reluctance of children, families or peers to report incidents. Efforts are ongoing to develop legal frameworks and social policies to address this issue.

Kosovo, located in the Balkans, has a diverse population of 1,782,115 inhabitants from different

ethnicities and cultures (Kosovo Agency of Statistics).

Human rights and freedoms in Kosovo are supported by the constitution, international agreements and instruments, which prevail during conflicts. The Constitution also regulates social welfare policies, ensuring equal rights and protection for all children, regardless of the circumstances of their birth, against mistreatment, violence, abuse and exploitation (Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo).

Kosovo faces complex challenges in economic development, unemployment reduction, and poverty alleviation, necessitating long-term and sustainable strategies that include economic and educational reforms, development of legal infrastructure, and advancement of social policies. Additionally, effective child protection policies require a holistic and inclusive approach to create a safe environment. This research employs qualitative methodology, utilizing interviews with senior officials from the Ministry of Justice and statistical data from relevant institutions, to examine violence against children, raise awareness, and influence prevention efforts. It also aims to identify gaps in child protection policies, pinpoint critical intervention areas, and analyze the causes and factors contributing to child abuse.

Child abuse affects families across all socio-economic backgrounds, prompting the development of theories that analyze its origins and guide effective interventions. Research in social sciences highlights that abuse and neglect are complex, often hidden phenomena that impact all social groups, with particularly severe effects on disadvantaged families (Pelton, 1978).

Child abuse includes any harmful treatment causing physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual harm. Numerous theories attempt to explain the motivations behind abusive behavior, including the role of low self-awareness, impulsivity, and difficulties in emotional regulation. However, early studies struggled to differentiate abusive individuals from non-abusive ones (Bandura, 1977).

Social Learning Theory suggests that cycles of abuse can persist across generations as behaviors shaped by internal processes—such as beliefs, motivations, and ego-interact with environmental influences (Bandura, 1977).

Deviance Theory is widely applied in interpreting harmful behavior within society. It explains child abuse as a violation of social norms, shaped by discrepancies between expected behavior and actual behavior (Crossman, 2018). Family Interaction and Attachment Theories further illuminate how the quality of parent-child relationships influences emotional development and behavioral outcomes (Goldberg et al., 2000).

Low self-esteem, emotional distress, and behavioral difficulties in abused children often contribute to delinquent behavior. An influential perspective on understanding these models is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model, which views child development as shaped by interactions across multiple systems—family, community, and broader society—each of which can support or undermine children's well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

Socioeconomic status also significantly influences the relationship between child neglect and health outcomes. Neglect harms both mental and physical health, while the presence of trusted adults can mitigate long-term negative effects (Zhang et al., 2024; Jam et al., 2025).

Inequality further shapes how abuse is labeled and interpreted, as dominant groups may define marginalized populations as deviant (Pfohl, 1977). Despite contributions from multiple theoretical perspectives, no single theory can fully diagnose or predict abusive behavior, as child abuse is often related to the personality of the abuser and the broader social context (Green, 1976). Therefore, a multidimensional approach is essential.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze the manifestation of violence and neglect against children in Kosovo, including the historical development of the phenomenon, legal frameworks, social policies and institutional protection mechanisms. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior officials of the Ministry of Justice involved in the development and implementation of child protection policies. The interviews focused on challenges in implementing the Law on Child Protection, institutional

coordination and professional responsibilities. A comparative method was used to examine changes in child abuse from 2020 to 2022 and to compare Kosovo's situation with another regional country.

Participants were informed in advance about the standard questions and formal requests were submitted to the relevant institutions for access to the data. The sample was selected non-randomly, targeting officials responsible for child protection. The data were analyzed descriptively to identify trends over the three-year period.

Secondary data were obtained from the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Justice, the Kosovo Police and local shelters. These data, presented chronologically, provided an overview of the prevalence, forms and development of child abuse. The research also linked empirical findings with theoretical perspectives to identify key factors influencing violence and neglect, including unemployment, poverty and inadequate social policies

The main limitations included the lack of a comprehensive database on child abuse, insufficient information on the family background of the victims (education, social and health status), and the lack of accurate data on marginalized groups. Throughout the research process, ethical considerations and interview procedures guided by the best interests of the child, data collection, analysis and recommendations.

Manifestation of child abuse in Kosovo

Child abuse includes physical, sexual, emotional and psychological violence, as well as neglect. Kosovo's legal framework is in line with international conventions and mandates the protection of children in all settings. Article 22 of the Constitution gives priority to international human rights standards over conflicting domestic laws, while the 2019 Law on the Protection of Children establishes comprehensive protection against violence, exploitation and neglect (Official Gazette).

Zuravin (1989) distinguishes abuse-physical, psychological or sexual-as active harm, while neglect results from inaction. Historically, absolute paternal

authority contributed to widespread abuse and exploitation, including the sale and enslavement of children and women (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2001).

These patterns have influenced modern structures of violence, particularly within the family setting. The risks associated with returning a child to an unsafe family environment are well documented; abused children may develop antisocial or delinquent behaviors that extend into adulthood, perpetuating cycles of violence (Schmitt & Kempe, 1975).

Assessing risk remains challenging, domestic violence workers often have difficulty gathering accurate information due to victims' fear of repercussions or distrust of institutions. Mothers may withhold details to avoid interventions perceived as punitive (Olszowy et al., 2020).

In Kosovo, child abuse is shaped by both external and internal factors. External influences include low economic development, political instability, high unemployment, poverty, limited education, and inadequate social policies. These pressures strain families, increase stress, and reduce their ability to meet children's needs.

Poverty has increased significantly; the UNDP report for 2023 shows a 16% increase linked to inflation, stagnant wages, and slow economic growth. Unemployment, especially among young people - with 33.7% of those aged 15-24 not in employment or training - intensifies family stress. Women's employment remains particularly low (17.1% compared to 50.8% for men), one of the largest gender gaps in Europe (UNICEF).

Internal factors, such as mental health problems, substance abuse, divorce, single parenthood and low parental education, further contribute to the risk of child abuse. For Kosovo to create a safer environment for children, social policies need to address these factors in a comprehensive manner and adapt to the country's socio-cultural realities.

Forms of violence and consequences

Child maltreatment includes physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse (Ammerman &

Hersen, 1990). Starr (1988) identifies four components of the definition of abuse: intent, impact on the child, moral evaluation of the action, and cultural norms (Ammerman & Hersen, 1990). These variables explain the difficulty in arriving at a universally accepted definition.

Maltreated children often have difficulty with social integration due to impaired attachment, emotional regulation, autonomy, and social cognition; they may experience peer rejection and behavioral difficulties (Kamis et al., 2024).

Physical abuse causes both internal and external injuries, sometimes leading to chronic illness or disability (Official Journal). Physical neglect involves inadequate parental care, which increases as parental support decreases (Polansky & Williams, 1978).

Psychological abuse and neglect cause long-term emotional harm with more profound consequences than many physical injuries (Garbarino et al.). Sexual abuse involves the use of a child in sexual activities to which the child cannot understand or consent (WHO, 1999).me shtu

Abuse can result in lifelong health problems, including chronic illness, impaired cognitive development, and difficulties with executive functioning (National Library of Medicine).

Childhood maltreatment also increases the risk of aggression in adulthood due to reduced cognitive flexibility and impaired response inhibition (Curtis et al., 2024). Severe or prolonged violence can contribute to PTSD and high-risk behavior in adolescence.

For the year 2020

| Abandoned children | Children without parent care | Children victim, domestic violence | Children, victim of trafficking | Children, in severe forms of labor | Children, victims of sexual crimes |
|--------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 28 | 46 | 121 | 21 | 128 | 21 |
| Total | | | 365 victims | | |

Fig. Nr1. Social Welfare 2020: Source; ministry of finance, labor and transfers. department for social policy and family

In 2020, Kosovo identified 365 child abuse cases: 28 abandoned children, 46 without parental care, 121

Legal and institutional protection of children

Child protection is a national priority, although significant challenges remain. The Child Protection Law defines abuse as any act or omission that harms or endangers the physical, emotional, psychological or social well-being of a child. Responsibilities are divided between the central and local levels (Official Gazette).

Central Level-the government drafts policies, develops procedures and monitors services. The Ombudsman receives complaints, forms specialized teams and raises awareness of children's rights (Law No. 05/L-019).

Local Level-municipalities operate licensed Social Work Centers responsible for implementing child protection measures and maintaining databases of services. Education departments must discipline failures to report abuse, while health departments allocate emergency funds for children at risk.

Child protection measures include foster care, residential care, supervised independent living and adoption. Foster care provides temporary family placement; residential care shelters children without secure family environments; supervised independent living prepares older children for autonomy; and adoption provides permanent family care. These mechanisms aim to provide security, stability, and development for vulnerable children.

Data analysis on child violence in Kosovo 2020-2022

This research, based on interviews, document analysis, and public data from 2020-2022, presents a concerning overview of child abuse in Kosovo.

victims of domestic violence, 21 trafficked, 128 in hazardous labor, and 21 subjected to sexual crimes.

These cases highlight severe threats to children's safety and well-being.

For the year 2021

| Abandoned children | Children without parent care | Children victim, domestic violence | Children, victim of trafficking | Children, in severe forms of labor | Children, victims of sexual crimes |
|--------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 15 | 70 | 292 | 15 | 306 | 19 |
| | | | | | |
| Total | | | 717 victims | | |

Fig. Nr2. Social welfare 2020: source; ministry of finance, labor and transfers. department for social policy and family

Are recorded 717 child abuse cases: 15 abandoned, 70 without parental care, 292 domestic violence

victims, 15 trafficked, 306 in hazardous labor, and 19 sexually abused.

For the year 2022

| Abandoned children | Children without parent care | Children victim, domestic violence | Children, victim of trafficking | Children, in severe forms of labor | Children, victims of sexual crimes |
|--------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 12 | 66 | 471 | 25 | 306 | 32 |
| | | | | | |
| Total | | | 912 victims | | |

Fig. Nr3. Social welfare 2020: Source; ministry of finance, labor and transfers. department for social policy and family

In 2022, Kosovo reported 912 child abuse cases: 12 abandoned, 66 without parental care, 471 domestic violence victims, 25 trafficked, 306 in hazardous labor, and 32 sexually abused. These figures highlight the persistent challenges in addressing child abuse and neglect.

Significant trends in the number of victims

1. From the analysis of data for the period 2020-2022 on identified child victims in various forms of abuse, significant trends have been observed. There has been an increase in the number of victims:

2020: 291 cases

2021: 632 cases (increase 117.2%)

2022: 834 cases (increase 32%)

2. Main categories of abuse

Domestic Violence: from 121 cases in 2020 to 471 cases in 2022 (a continuous increase).

Child Labor: from 128 cases in 2020 to 306 cases in both 2021 and 2022 (a concerning situation).

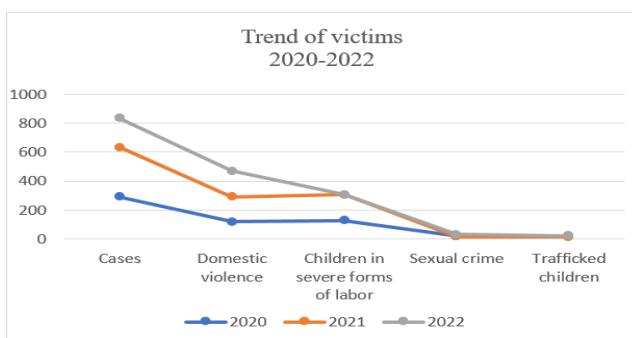


Fig.Nr4. Increase in victims from year to year 2020-2022, Source; Ministry of Finance, Labor and Transfers

Sexual Crimes: from 21 cases in 2020, to 32 cases in 2022 (an alarming increase).

Trafficking: from 21 cases in 2020, a decrease to 15 cases in 2021, but an increase to 25 cases in 2022.

The data from 2020-2022 present a worrying panorama for children in Kosovo, highlighting the urgent need to improve protective measures and strengthen mechanisms for identifying and handling abuse cases. The increase in the number of identified victims suggests a deterioration in conditions for children, but it may also reflect increased awareness and improvement in reporting mechanisms.

Empirical data show a troubling trend of increasing domestic violence and sexual crimes against children, while child labor remains a persistent and deepening

phenomenon. This situation calls for immediate intervention and reform of existing protective policies to create an effective and sustainable system for protecting vulnerable children from all forms of abuse and exploitation. These data emphasize the pronounced presence of abuse and violence within families, making the handling of these phenomena a priority in social protection policies.

Social policies and services for child protection in Kosovo, 2020-2022

The data provided below offer an overview of the interventions and measures taken within the framework of social policies and services for protecting children from abuse and various forms of violence.

Data overview for child protection services: years: 2020, 2021, 2022

| Years | Foster care | Family shelter | Residential shelter | Supervised independent living | Adoption |
|--------------|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 2020 | 689 | 521 | 345 | 11 | 18 |
| 2021 | 717 | 482 | 397 | 14 | 22 |
| 2022 | 616 | 488 | 550 | 17 | 16 |
| Total | 2022 | 1491 | 1292 | 42 | 56 |

Fig. Nr5. Child Protection 2020-2022: Source; ministry of finance, labor and transfers

Data from 2020-2022 show notable changes in child protection measures in Kosovo. Family care and residential care increased over the three years, while shelter cases decreased by around 10% (from 689 to 616). This pattern reflects changing social protection needs influenced by external factors and policy developments.

The increase in cases in 2021 is likely related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified socio-economic hardship and increased the demand for institutional support. The subsequent decline in 2022 may indicate improved social conditions, strengthened family support systems, or adjustments in social protection policies. Family care fluctuated slightly, but remained stable at approximately 480-520 cases per year, demonstrating continued reliance on this form of support.

Overall, these trends illustrate how global crises and

domestic policy changes are shaping child protection responses in Kosovo. The data suggest continued efforts to provide safer environments for vulnerable children through family-based and residential care. Shelter services showed a steady decline over the three-year period. This reduction may signal either improved preventive measures and family support or a reorganization of institutional services. Conversely, increases in 2021 highlight how crises such as COVID-19 disrupted family stability and increased children's need for protection.

Residential care (2020-2022)

Residential care increased significantly from 345 cases in 2020 to 550 in 2022 an increase of 59.4%.

Several factors contributed to this trend:

1. Greater demand for social support due to economic hardship.

2. Policy changes encouraging the use of residential care for specific groups.
3. Limited availability of alternative housing options, such as family or community-based care.
4. Broader socio-economic challenges, including the pandemic.

The continued increase suggests an increasing reliance on residential care, highlighting the need to evaluate policies and develop more sustainable community-based alternatives.

Supervised independent living

Supervised independent living cases increased gradually from 2020 to 2022. This increase reflects:

1. Increased efforts to promote autonomy for young people and people with disabilities.
2. Improved support services.
3. Policy orientations favoring sustainable and less institutional forms of care.

Although the numbers remain modest, the increasing trend signals progress towards independence-oriented models of support.

Adoption trends

Adoption temporarily increased in 2021, but declined in 2022. These fluctuations are likely due to:

1. Changes in legal and administrative procedures.
2. Socio-economic conditions that affect families' willingness to adopt.
3. Disruptions to institutional processes related to the pandemic.

Despite these changes, adoption rates remain low and require further analysis to identify barriers and improve access to this permanent form of care.

Social policies for child protection in Kosovo

Social policies aim to improve well-being by addressing the needs of citizens and building supportive infrastructure. In the field of child protection, these policies protect children from abuse

and neglect, ensuring their safety and development in accordance with international standards (Convention on the Rights of the Child).

The Law on Child Protection in Kosovo (No. 06/L-084) defines violence against children as any intentional act or omission that results in physical, mental or sexual harm, including abuse, neglect, maltreatment or exploitation. Violence includes any act of force or coercion that results in physical, psychological, economic or sexual harm, as well as threats or deprivation of liberty, both in public and private settings. It includes domestic violence, emotional and physical abuse, sexual violence, forced marriages and so-called "honor" crimes (National Strategy for Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence against Women 2022-2026).

Domestic violence against children is widespread and closely linked to violence against women, exposing children to severe trauma. The state is obliged to prevent and address such abuse and to protect human rights through due care (National Strategy for Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence against Women 2022-2026).

In practice, legal measures focus on prevention, protection and recovery. Social Work Centers and the police intervene when families fail to protect children from violence, abuse or neglect, and support services seek to keep the child within the family or, when necessary, provide alternative care, always guided by the best interests of the child (Law No. 06/L-084).

The Strategy for Children's Rights (2019-2023) highlights the multiple causes of abuse and neglect and emphasizes protective measures, positive parenting and the need for local specialized staff and quality services. Child protection in Kosovo relies on cooperation between government institutions, municipalities, and local and international organizations to support children without parental care. Care models include family-based care, community-based residential care, and supervised independent living.

Child protection houses, established by the Ministry of Justice, provide emergency shelter for up to three days, especially for child victims or witnesses of sexual crimes. They provide temporary shelter and

counseling when children cannot return home, in coordination with relevant institutions, and operate under a sub-legal act approved by the government (Law No. 06/L-084). The Strategy for Children's Rights and its Operational Action Plan promote children's rights in health, education, protection and social inclusion, emphasizing children's participation in decision-making, raising awareness and identifying priority interventions (Office of the Prime Minister).

Discussion

Improving child protection in Kosovo depends heavily on coherent social policies that address the systemic challenges identified in this research. The findings show that well-designed and effectively implemented policies both at the institutional and professional levels can significantly reduce cases of child abuse.

First, strengthening the professional and technical capacities of child protection staff is essential. Investing in ongoing training for social workers, psychologists, educators and law enforcement personnel can improve the quality of services and ensure faster and more appropriate responses to abuse and neglect. Integrating social work students into internships and subsequent employment within schools, hospitals, Social Work Centers and police structures would help fill existing gaps and improve the practical application of theoretical knowledge, thereby strengthening the child protection system.

Second, the discrepancies between international norms and local realities indicate the need for legislative and policy adaptation. Expanding support beyond the current three-day limit for emergency protection requires amendments to the Child Protection Law and the development of specialized shelters and long-term care programs. These measures should address not only immediate safety, but also the psychological and social consequences of abuse.

Third, the lack of an integrated information system undermines coordination and monitoring. The creation of a unified database linking central and local institutions such as ministries, Social Work Centers, shelters and NGOs would improve case management,

data collection and resource sharing. Such a system would enable more effective planning and evaluation of interventions.

Furthermore, limited cooperation between the education system, the media and civil society weakens prevention efforts and public awareness. Social policies that foster cross-sector partnerships and joint initiatives can strengthen outreach, ensure consistent messages and promote a culture that rejects violence and prioritizes children's rights.

Comparative evidence highlights that Kosovo's challenges are common across the region. In Albania, for example, 58% of children report having experienced abuse at least once, mainly by parents, and 70% report some form of violence in the family or school, with children from poor families disproportionately affected (Euro news; World Vision).

These findings reinforce the need for comprehensive and long-term strategies that address both the structural and cultural drivers of violence. Overall, strategic changes in social policies focusing on professional development, legislative adaptation, data integration and cross-sectoral cooperation are essential for building a child protection system that is proactive, effective and in line with international standards.

Recommendations

Amendments to the Child Protection Law are urgently needed, particularly the revision of Article 30 to extend the duration of protective custody beyond the current three-day limit. The law should also specify the criteria for the establishment of specialized shelters to meet the complex needs of abused children and close existing legislative gaps.

Comprehensive supportive policies should accompany legal reforms. These should include awareness-raising campaigns, rehabilitation and counselling programs, and protective measures that together create a strong safety net for children in all settings home, school, community and institutional care.

Strengthening protective systems requires increasing the capacities of frontline professional's social

workers, psychologists, teachers, health workers and law enforcement officers. Training should focus on the recognition of risk factors, reporting mechanisms and case management to foster a proactive and coordinated response.

Monitoring and data collection mechanisms need to be improved. A centralized and secure database that integrates information from governmental and non-governmental organizations would simplify access to information, strengthen case management, and improve the efficiency of reporting and oversight.

Educational institutions should be equipped with qualified social workers, psychologists or child protection officers to ensure early detection and referral of abuse and neglect. Strengthening this infrastructure is essential to make schools safe and supportive environments.

Increased budgets are needed to establish, maintain and professionalize child protection facilities and services. Sufficient funding is essential to ensure that children receive comprehensive physical, emotional and psychological support.

Media professionalism and public awareness should be promoted through collaboration with journalists trained in child-sensitive reporting. Media campaigns should raise awareness about children's rights, signs of abuse and available protection mechanisms.

Mobilizing NGOs and civil society organizations is vital to raise community awareness, advocate for policy improvements and support marginalized group.

Advocacy should focus on developing new policies and improving existing ones to ensure that they deliver tangible benefits to vulnerable children and families.

Finally, a comprehensive strategic document for child protection should be developed. This strategy should include a comprehensive analysis of the situation, clear objectives, detailed actions, time frames and measurable indicators, as well as robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Such a document would provide a coherent framework for coordinated national efforts to protect children from abuse and

neglect and to promote their rights and well-being.

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