

Exploring the state of Qatar's child protection system through the lens of frontline social workers

International Social Work

1–17

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DOI: 10.1177/00208728241245916

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Abstract

The child protection system in Qatar is newly developed and still fragmented and lacking a comprehensive legal framework. Qualitative interviews were conducted with a sample of social workers in civil society organizations within the Qatar Social Work Foundation to understand barriers encountered by social workers in child protection and strategies used to overcome these barriers. Findings suggest that policy makers should establish a national framework for child protection and a national referral system that supports social workers in case management. Policies for social worker safety are needed, as are permanent supervisors who are specialized in child protection.

Keywords

Child maltreatment, child protection system, policy, Qatar, social workers

Introduction

Child protection encompasses a range of measures designed to prevent, identify, and respond to risks and harms experienced by children, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, neglect, exploitation, and other adverse experiences that can have lasting detrimental effects on a child's well-being (Daro and Dodge, 2009). As professionals specializing in human services and social justice, social workers play a central role in child protection, utilizing their knowledge, skills, and

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Figure 1. Barriers and determinants of social workers' experience in child protection in Arab countries.

expertise to address complex and sensitive issues affecting children and families. Social workers in child protection fulfill diverse functions, including assessment, case management, intervention, advocacy, and support provision. They act as a bridge between vulnerable children, families, communities, and various stakeholders, facilitating access to necessary services, resources, and legal protections (Daro and Dodge, 2009; Lanchman, 2002). By employing a holistic approach, social workers address not only the immediate risks but also the underlying factors contributing to child maltreatment, striving to strengthen family functioning and promote child well-being.

Social workers in Arab countries face several barriers within child protection, owing to the diversity and unique context of these countries (see Figure 1). For instance, Arab societies often have strong traditional cultural norms that can impact child protection work. Furthermore, some practices, such as child marriage, corporal punishment, or the concept of 'honor' can conflict with child rights and protection principles (Sloan et al., 2017). Social workers may face resistance or cultural barriers when trying to intervene in such cases. Gender biases also may affect decision-making processes, access to resources, and the ability of social workers to advocate for the rights and protection of girls and women within families and communities (Livingstone et al., 2015; Mirkin, 2010).

Lack of awareness and understanding of child rights and child protection among the general public, families, and sometimes even professionals can pose a barrier. Social workers may need to engage in extensive community education and awareness campaigns to enhance understanding and collaboration. However, child protection is central to Islamic teachings, and social workers can draw on lessons from the Quran and Sunna when working with Muslim families (O'Leary et al., 2020). The Organization for Islamic Cooperation Covenant on the Right of a Child in Islam shares commonalities but also has some differences compared to the United Nations Convention on the

Rights of the Child (Ridho, 2015). Social workers can partner with religious communities to emphasize how Islamic jurisprudence protects children's rights and outlines safeguards for their welfare (Hutchinson et al., 2015).

Child protection and social work in Arab countries are relatively under-researched compared to those in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. Key barriers in child protection in some Arab countries are the lack of legal frameworks and lack of awareness of child rights (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 2023). Another barrier is the lack of social services infrastructures and limited workforces, which can make it difficult to provide adequate support to children who are at risk. Despite these barriers, there have been some positive developments in child protection in the Arab countries in recent years, especially in the Gulf countries. In 2012, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) passed the Wadeema's Law, which aims to protect children from all forms of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The UAE has also established a number of child protection services, including counseling, support, and referrals to other services for children who are at risk (Government of UAE, 2023). Other Arab countries are also working to improve their child protection systems. In 2017, Saudi Arabia launched the National Strategy for Child Protection, which aims to protect children from all forms of abuse and neglect and to promote their rights and well-being (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2023).

Barriers for social workers in child protection

Social workers in the Arab world play a key role in identifying and responding to cases of child abuse and neglect, but barriers exist (Al-Sharqawi and Al-Owaid, 2015). One barrier is a shortage of social workers in many Arab countries, and those who are available are often not adequately trained in child protection. International research has identified barriers to child protection practice, as well as barriers that social workers face while performing professional intervention services with abused children (Ahmed, 2018; Al-Sharqawi and Al-Owaid, 2015; Benson, 2018; Olszowy et al., 2020). The UNICEF (2018) has urged governments in the Middle East and North Africa region to accelerate actions to end violence against children and adolescents with a specific focus on strengthening child protection systems. One of UNICEF's (2018) imperatives includes considering social and cultural norms and practices that negatively influence the enforcement of policies and laws and parents' behaviors to eliminate violence against children.

Several studies have investigated social workers' experiences and barriers within child protection. Hence, as displayed in Figure 2, bibliographic mapping was conducted based on the co-occurrence of 'child protection' and 'social worker' keywords in the reported literature (762 articles, Web of Science and Scopus databases from 1992 to 2022). Very few studies focused on social workers' experiences working in child protection in Gulf countries. A study in Saudi Arabia found that social workers in child protection units faced various barriers in their professional practice (Al-Sharqawi and Al-Owaid, 2015). Social workers reported that a key barrier they faced was the difficulty in communicating with parents due to their cultural beliefs. Community cultural norms were also barriers and impeded social workers from gathering necessary information. On-the-job safety was a concern because the organization did not have protection measures in place for employees. The participants noted they did not have many continuing professional development opportunities and specifically noticed knowledge gaps in applying theories and therapeutic models (Al-Sharqawi and Al-Owaid, 2015).

Another qualitative study in Saudi Arabia explored child protection workers' and managers' roles in the implementation of child protection policies and procedures (Al Faryan et al., 2019). Five overall themes emerged. The first and foremost theme included 'cultural factors' such as lack of community respect and the unwillingness of fathers to interact with female child protection

some gaps in child protection have existed for children with particular vulnerabilities (Akhtar, 2022; Limbu, 2023), but Qatar has been taking a more inclusive approach in recent years of social policymaking (Aref, 2021). Complexities arise, in part, because of the rapidity of economic growth and transformation Qatar has experienced in the last 50 years.

Multisectoral efforts are underway to develop a comprehensive framework. Qatar is in the process of finalizing its child law to protect children from all types of violence across all settings. Other recommendations to strengthen Qatar's child protection system have included the need for clarifying roles and responsibilities for relevant stakeholders, establishing a national referral system to manage cases, developing the capacity of social work professionals, and most importantly, developing new 'constructive cultural norms' for the community that would promote positive care giving practices to prevent violence against children (Al-Mohannadi et al., 2020).

Another study that assessed Qatar's preparedness to implement a wide-ranging program focusing on preventing child maltreatment found a high awareness among stakeholders in Qatar about knowledge, laws, and legislation for child maltreatment prevention (Alansari et al., 2021). However, the State's readiness for prevention was low compared to five other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Several domains were cited as gaps that needed improvement, including the lack of technical human resources, organizational resources, and collaboration, along with inadequate measures for child maltreatment prevention. Recommendations for child maltreatment prevention also focused on building the capacity of the frontline child protection workforce, along with stakeholders and civil society. An evaluation of the effectiveness of incorporating child rights into various social service agencies in Qatar noted the advantages and barriers faced (Al-Kaabi, 2015). The study noted a need to further develop child welfare policies and to hire social workers and provide them additional training.

Despite the aforementioned studies, there is still a knowledge gap regarding social workers' experiences in child protection in Qatar. The purpose of this qualitative study was to address the following research questions: (1) What are the barriers social workers in child protection face related to the organization and the social workers themselves, including their competencies and interactions with beneficiaries? (2) How do social workers overcome these barriers?

Methodology

Ethics, participants, recruitment, and instrument

Ethics approval was obtained for the research protocol from the Institutional Review Board of the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (see Supplemental Materials). Permission was granted to collect data at two of the civil society centers under the auspices of the QSW: (1) Protection and Social Rehabilitation Center, which was established in 2013 with the aim of protecting and rehabilitating women and children who were victims of violence and family disintegration, and (2) The Family Consulting Center (Wifaq), which was established in 2002, with the mandate of providing family counseling and strengthening family ties. Wifaq intersects with child protection as it supervises implementation of judicial rulings and amicable agreements concerning custodial matters for children whose parents have divorced or are experiencing family disputes. Nonprobability purposive sampling was utilized; the first author recruited child protection social workers via email and in-person and obtained oral consent prior to each interview.

Social workers were eligible to participate in the study if they had a minimum of 1 year of experience in child protection. Table 1 displays demographic characteristics of the social workers, who were interviewed in February 2022, following an interview guide based on a review of the literature and the authors' professional experience. The interview guide consisted of demographic

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample of social workers in Qatar from two civil society centers under the auspices of the Qatar Social Work Foundation who were interviewed by the first author in February 2022.

Social worker characteristics	Number (n = 10)
Gender	
Female	8
Male	2
Nationality	
Qatari	6
Other Arab	4
Education degree	
Social work	5
Sociology	3
Childhood studies	1
Islamic studies	1
Years of experience	
<5 years	2
>10 years	8

questions and seven open-ended questions, which allowed participants to share their experiences, barriers they face at organizational and individual levels, and strategies that enable them to overcome these barriers (see Supplemental Materials). Interviews lasted on average between 35 and 45 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and audiotaped with the participants' permission.

Data analysis

Data were coded using Excel in several coding cycles. Structural analysis was utilized first to categorize the data (Saldaña, 2021). Then content analysis ensued and included the development of a coding scheme (Padgett, 2021), which was used to identify data with similar concepts and emergent codes, which then led to the identification of patterns and the classification of themes and subthemes. Throughout the process, the authors met to discuss coding findings and compare observations and classifications until they reached a full consensus to ensure consistency and credibility. Magnitude coding was used to prioritize the codes that appeared most frequently across the whole data set (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2016). Quotations from participants were selected for validation purposes.

Results

Social workers reflected upon their experience in child protection practice related to barriers that they encountered and strategies they used to overcome them. These themes were organized under three levels of barriers, including systemic, organizational, and individual levels, as shown in Table 2.

Systemic barriers

The absence of a national framework for child protection in Qatar. Although there were neither direct nor open-ended interview questions about systemic barriers, the theme emerged as one of the main

Table 2. Barriers in child protection practice reported by social workers in Qatar from two civil society centers under the auspices of the Qatar Social Work Foundation who were interviewed by the first author in February 2022.

Barrier type	Barrier	Subtheme	Level
Systemic barriers	Absence of a national framework for child protection	Urgent need to develop child protection legislation and policies	Delay in child law issuance Absence of legislation on domestic violence Development of juvenile law
		Lack of collaboration among stakeholders	Who is in charge of child protection? Lack of effective protocols between civil society and the public sector Absence of a clear national referral system Challenges with sharing information Cultural norms Limited authority/unclear role for social workers
Organizational barriers	Organizational and personnel changes impacting supervision and workload	Organizational restructuring	Lack of clear policies, procedures, and internal/external protocols (lack of risk assessment tools) Administrative changes (new CEOs and supervisors)
		High caseloads and need for specialized supervision	High workload Shortage of social workers Shortage of specialized supervisors
	Need to enhance social workers' protection and building their capacity	Lack of safety and protection for social workers	Clients' verbal and nonverbal reactions (tantrums, assaults, complaints, and threats) Lack of safety inspections for metal detectors and panic buttons at center Lack of panic buttons Lack of female security staff Lack of male social workers
Individual barriers	Barriers in developing professional relationships	Lack of specialized training and professional development	Need for core competencies and skills training Lack of career ladder Job insecurity Lack of appreciation
		Resistance to engaging with social workers	Lack of trust in civil society and social workers' role Inaccurate information Fathers' resistance to engage Clients' verbal and nonverbal communications
	Need for further development of practice competencies and skills	Cultural norms challenges—especially with fathers	Resistance to being told how to raise children Differing perspectives on the distinction between parenting and child maltreatment 'It's a family matter'
		Challenges in assessing and intervening with individuals and families	Challenges in assessing and intervening with complex cases; interparental conflict, family rift, divorce cases, and behavioral problems Challenges with assessing intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning (people with disabilities, mental health problems, use of alcohol or drugs) Lack of supervisors' technical support
		Challenges in practicing cultural competency	Challenges with language and accent Prejudice from clients Social worker ethical dilemmas

types of barriers social workers face in their professional practice with child protection cases in Qatar. The social workers discussed this barrier reflecting the following two main subthemes.

Urgent need to develop child protection legislation and policies. Nine of the 10 social workers expressed that laws related to child protection need to be developed further, given that currently there is no legislation in Qatar criminalizing violence against children. One social worker stated: *'I hope that there will be a new law that serves the child and the family, and that gives us as social workers and the Center the authority and power to play our role more effectively'*.

Other social workers discussed the importance of the development of juvenile law as it sets the maximum age for a child at 16 years, while the Qatari Family Law and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets it at 18 years (Holden, 1995). A gap in the law for 17- to 18-year-olds complicates interventions. Participants also said they hope that once the Child Law (currently under development) is finalized, it will comply with the Convention on the Rights of the Child to which Qatar has acceded.

Lack of collaboration between stakeholders. Social workers identified barriers while engaging with other professionals and stakeholders in child protection, including police officers, health professionals, other civil society professionals, and school officers, as well as parents, specifically fathers. Six social workers discussed that the lack of collaboration among stakeholders is a key barrier they face in dealing with the power dynamics of child protection cases. Participants expressed that too many organizations coordinate child protection matters, which creates confusion for social workers and clients regarding who is responsible for children's protection. Social workers also expressed that there is a shortage of effective mechanisms and clear protocols for interagency collaboration, including policies for sharing client information. Without a national system, social workers' and civil society's pursuit of the child's best interest is limited. One social worker stated: *'I hope that all social agencies and government institutions concerned with child protection work effectively and relate to each other in one system so that we can better manage cases'*.

Organizational barriers

Organizational and personnel changes impacting supervision and workload

Organizational restructuring. Participants explained that over the last 2 years, the umbrella organization and its related centers faced organizational restructuring changes at the strategic and leadership levels. One social worker explained that she had four different supervisors over the last 2 years. Social workers expressed their concerns about whether they will go through another organizational restructuring change. The uncertainty caused confusion in the center's atmosphere, which affected their motivation.

Eight social workers reported that these changes led to further concerns due to the lack of clear policies, procedures, and internal and external protocols for dealing with child protection cases. For example, one social worker expressed her frustration stating: *'I'm one of the oldest social workers here, but unfortunately, I'm still lost!'* Five social workers addressed that continuous organizational restructuring changes, administrative changes, and changes of supervisors and CEOs caused them to feel anxious and created disruption among the social workers, which affected their productivity in supporting children and their families.

High caseloads and need for specialized supervision. There was a clear concern among all the social workers interviewed about the high workload due to the increase in the number of cases while there was a shortage of social workers. Moreover, the social workers clarified that there had

been a continuous increase in case numbers in the last few years. One participant complained about the lack of staff, stating: *'Most of the social workers were not able to take their annual vacations due to work pressure'*. Social workers expressed that this void exists not just in the staff number but also in expert technical supervision, which affects the quality of services they provide. They also mentioned the need for a permanent supervisor and department head specialized in child protection. In some cases, the new department head came from different backgrounds, which made it difficult for them to make effective decisions to ensure child protection.

Need to enhance social workers' protection and capacity

Lack of safety and protection for social workers. Lack of safety and protection was discussed by five social workers. Social workers described how verbal assaults from parents or their outrageous reactions, threats, and complaints led to concerns about being exposed to clients' violence. The participants also reported that in different cases, some of their clients attempted suicide. Social workers highlighted that the center needed metal detectors and panic buttons. Other demands included increasing the number of male social workers to work with fathers, especially when female workers are uncomfortable or afraid. The gender issue was also raised in their suggestion to have female security officers for cases where they need intervention with aggressive female clients. One social worker reported her own experience, stating:

'I have faced a lot of assault from clients. Once I was exposed to physical assault by one of the mothers, but I didn't report it because I do not want to harm the clients, and I want to be professional. Also, there is no legal right for me to do that'.

Another social worker shared her experience, stating:

'Personal protection is not available, and the rooms are not comfortable and not safe. I am a woman, and I feel fear, and I know why and when . . . (silent) . . . we need a detector at the entrance to ensure that the clients do not carry some dangerous weapons'.

Lack of specialized training and professional development. All social workers addressed the lack of specialized training opportunities in child protection as the main barrier for them at the organizational level. Some participants highlighted the previous training opportunity they had, such as the continuous education program (CEP), which was internally developed by social workers and other employees and was offered weekly. Furthermore, participants referred to the CEP, although it was an internal effort, as a supporting tool to some extent in developing their skills. However, it was the only training program provided over the last few years and stopped at the beginning of the COVID pandemic in 2020. In addition, another professional development need, the participants indicated, was training courses to further improve their English language skills so they can better assist clients who do not speak Arabic.

Overall the social workers expressed the need for core competencies and skills training. They highlighted specific training needs, such as risk assessments, especially in cases of violence against children, and training in new therapeutic intervention techniques. One social worker demonstrated how the lack of specialized training affected workers' practice, stating:

'Training still needs to be adapted to the different changes in the nature and problems of children and their families . . . There are problems that have recently occurred in Qatari society, and as a social worker, if I did not have the appropriate opportunity to develop myself in this field, how can I serve these clients?'

Another social worker addressed this barrier by offering a recommendation to the main organization on providing more technical training for all its social workers to ensure the quality of training. Five social workers also stated that the organization needed to provide job security, appreciation to employees for their work, and a clear career ladder.

Individual barriers

Barriers to developing professional relationships

Resistance to engaging with social workers. Social workers depicted the barriers to building healthy professional relationships with clients and their families. Eight social workers described the resistance they faced when engaging clients, especially fathers, due to a lack of trust in civil society and the social worker's role. Participants specifically mentioned that the clients do not usually respond to the center's requests. For instance, social workers expressed how parents reject social workers' interview requests and calls for assessment, even for continuing rehabilitation sessions, or sometimes parents intentionally give inaccurate information just to avoid the assessment and involvement of the center with their family matters. Social workers also experienced opposition from fathers during comprehensive assessments of child abuse cases. For example, some fathers resisted when referred to rehabilitation sessions, mainly because those services were not legally mandated.

Cultural norms barriers—especially with fathers. Seven social workers expressed barriers related to cultural norms while trying to develop a professional relationship with children's parents, especially fathers. The social workers expressed that some parents resist engaging with social workers and the center because of confidentiality concerns. Furthermore, the fathers believe their problems, whether related to abuse, neglect, family disintegration, or parenting approach, are sensitive internal family matters, and not public matters. Social workers indicated that many parents, especially fathers, respond to social workers by saying things such as, '*Do not tell me how I should raise my children*' or '*It's a family matter*'. As one social worker stated:

'Parents have a kind of lack of acceptance of someone telling them how they should raise their children or the firm belief of many fathers that they were raised with corporal punishment—why is it forbidden to hit? Therefore, I believe many parents lack awareness about the difference between parenting and child mistreatment, this is one of the main resistances that we face.'

Need for further development of practice competencies and skills

Barriers in assessing and intervening with individuals and families. Social workers were asked about how they make decisions with child protection cases and to share their experiences in working with children being abused by a family member. Nine social workers expressed that the most common barriers they face are assessing, intervening, or making effective decisions with interparental conflict and divorce cases. For instance, one social worker reported: '*In most of the cases that come to us, the parents are in the process of separating, and this is where we find it difficult. Sometimes we do not reach a solution in these cases*'. Participants expressed that it is especially difficult to manage these types of cases when they are more complex and include increased psychological and behavioral problems linked to violence.

Four social workers mentioned they had past barriers with assessing violence against people with disabilities and in interacting with parents with disabilities or parents of children with disabilities whose children have been exposed to violence. External disability specialists were occasionally utilized to provide technical assistance. Participants expressed that scheduling and securing an

external specialist to meet the victim with a disability at the same time for every session is time-consuming. Social workers also expressed that even with experts' technical assistance, it is still challenging for them to support people with disabilities who have more complex problems, such as mental health issues. Participants explained that they needed more experience and training and specialized staff on-site to work with persons with disabilities.

Barriers in practicing cultural competency. Six social workers expressed concerns and barriers when working with cross-cultural and diverse clients and families. The language barrier was one of the most reported issues, given that clients were from a variety of countries, including but not limited to the Philippines, Somalia, Pakistan, Iran, and India. Also, other clients spoke English and their native language, but not Arabic. Most of the social workers only spoke Arabic, with two speaking beginning-level English. Social workers used external translators, but they expressed difficulty with coordination since it is time-consuming. Some participants noted concerns about the quality of the service to these clients because they had to use a translator. Moreover, both Qatari and other Arab social workers mentioned barriers with understanding people who spoke different Arabic dialects.

All four Arab social workers who were originally from countries other than Qatar expressed facing resistance from parents because of their nationality. One Arab social worker stated: '*We face contempt with some parents*'. Another Qatari social worker expressed her experiences with prejudice from clients, saying: '*A mother insulted my personality, my nationality, that I am not an Original Qatari, and even my work*'. Two social workers expressed their struggle with ethical dilemmas while engaging with diverse clients who are from different religions or cultures and have beliefs that differ from the Muslim social workers' personal and religious values.

Strategies to overcome barriers at organizational and individual levels

The strategies for overcoming barriers were grouped into two levels, as shown in Table 3. First, the organizational level encompassed overcoming barriers such as the environment, funding, and resources. Second, the individual level encompassed overcoming barriers related to the social workers themselves, their competencies, and interactions with clients.

Organizational coping strategies. Flexibility was among the most repeated strategies that social workers used to overcome the barriers they faced at the organizational level. Social workers explained that their own flexibility, as well as that of their colleagues, significantly helped them while working under pressure. Furthermore, social workers mentioned they attempted to creatively use the center's resources and services as much as possible to meet the clients' needs.

Individual coping strategies

Positive personal development strategies. Positive personal development strategies in practice were related to social workers' reports of remaining confident in drawing upon their practice experience instead of being discouraged by difficult situations. They noted they were secure in practicing receptivity and empathy with clients to build rapport. Raising the client's awareness about the social worker's role and the center's purpose helped social workers to remain on track. Seven social workers indicated that seeking and relying on colleagues' technical support, including advising about decision-making and managing cases, was one of the most helpful strategies. Several social workers sought to develop their social work competencies by taking external courses on their own personal time.

Table 3. Strategies to overcome barriers in child protection practice at organizational and individual levels described by social workers in Qatar from two civil society centers under the auspices of the Qatar Social Work Foundation who were interviewed by the first author in February 2022.

Strategy	Subtheme	Level
Organizational coping strategies	Flexibility	Supportive work environment (colleagues' support) Working under pressure Using available (internal/external) resources to support clients
Individual coping strategies	Positive personal development strategies	Using professional experience Receptivity and empathy Raising clients' awareness Seeking colleagues' technical support Self-training, external courses, English courses
	Religious motivation	'My work is a humanitarian act.' 'I will be rewarded for my work by Allah.'

Religious motivation. Because all social workers came from a Muslim background, personal religious motivation was a core strategy they utilized to overcome individual barriers. For example, social workers acknowledged that they use personal motivational mantras, such as '*My work is a humanitarian act*' and '*I will be rewarded for my work from Allah*'. Such inspirational statements and others helped social workers to remember their purpose and see the larger picture when dealing with clients' challenging communication and behaviors.

Discussion

To the authors' knowledge, this research is the only study to date focusing on social workers' experiences working in child protection in Qatar. The present qualitative study provided a vehicle for social workers to share their insights about the individual, organizational, and systemic barriers they face working in child protection, along with the strategies they used to overcome various barriers. These insights can be used proactively in transforming the child protection system in Qatar and applied in similar countries and other international contexts.

The findings at the individual level revealed significant cultural issues that participants had to deal with in the domains of cultural norms, fathers' resistance, and cross-cultural competency. Social workers explained that parents refused to engage because parents often did not want professional interference in private family matters. Such parental resistance is common across cultures (Lansford et al., 2015; Lidchi, 2003). Furthermore, participants articulated that parents, especially fathers, lack awareness about the difference between appropriate parenting and abuse. Such a finding was explicitly supported by other research studies based in Qatar that focused on gaps in parental knowledge of child development and/or child abuse and neglect (Al-Maadadi and Ikhlef, 2015; Hendaus et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2018). Fathers' resistance in custody cases has been a matter of discussion and attention in the national media. Legal and social work leaders have advocated for the timely implementation of the family law to better address and reconcile parental refusal in custody cases to achieve the best interest of the child (Fikri, 2019). Internationally, there has been increasing attention to engaging fathers in child protection (Lidchi, 2003; Russell, 2015). Social

workers in this study faced barriers in practicing cross-cultural competency, which was similar to the reported findings in other national and regional studies (Al-Mohannadi et al., 2020; Al-Sharqawi and Al-Owaid, 2015; Melendres, 2022).

Language, clients' prejudices, and ethical dilemmas were the main causes of the barriers that social workers experienced. Therefore, social workers expressed the need for more specialized training to develop their skills in practicing cultural competencies. In addition to addressing new cultural norms, they must advocate for child violence reporting and raise the families' awareness about differing perspectives on the distinction between parenting methods and child maltreatment. Regarding organizational barriers, social workers described high workloads, a shortage of specialized experts, and the lack of clear policies, procedures, and protocols for coordinating with external governmental and nongovernmental organizations (Al-Mohannadi et al., 2020; Al-Sharqawi and Al-Owaid, 2015; Olszowy et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2018). Organizational restructuring indicated a high amount of administrative and organizational changes. These findings were similar to those of international studies documenting social workers' perceptions of organizational structure and administrative changes, where they experienced the practice environment as constraining and often felt disillusioned (Antonopoulou et al., 2017; Gibson, 2017; Munro and Hubbard, 2011).

Lack of safety and protection for social workers was one of the most critical findings of this study, which also has been documented in international studies (Al-Sharqawi and Al-Owaid, 2015; Hunt et al., 2016; Lamothe et al., 2018; Littlechild, 2005; Tumwesigye, 2021). Female social workers pointed to their frequent stress, concerns, and fear with respect to clients' verbal and nonverbal violent reactions as a severe issue in their work environment, which not only affected their motivation and engagement with clients during their professional practice but also induced concern for their safety. Social workers demonstrated their need for more organizational response and support systems in managing the violence against them and protecting them from parental hostility, consistent with previous research (Al-Maadadi and Ikhlef, 2015; Hunt et al., 2016).

Social workers expressed their struggle in assessing and intervening with complex and diverse cases. They described their lack of knowledge and experience in assessing, intervening, or making effective decisions for a child's best interest with interparental conflict and divorced parents, behavioral problems, mental health problems, and with cases involving people with disabilities. They also expressed the lack of technical support they get from supervisors, who are constantly changing and not specialized in child protection. Therefore, social workers expressed the critical need for capacity development programs and specialized training to develop their competencies and skills in managing these complex and diverse problems. Child protection professional capacity building and training have been prioritized as a significant recommendation in both national and international research to strengthen child protection systems (Alansari et al., 2021; Al-Mohannadi et al., 2020; Al-Sharqawi and Al-Owaid, 2015; Hunt et al., 2016; Lamothe et al., 2018; McFadden, 2020; Melendres, 2022; Olszowy et al., 2020; Tumwesigye, 2021; UNICEF, 2018).

Among the systemic barriers identified, the absence of a child protection framework in Qatar was one of the most significant elements negatively impacting social workers' functioning in their roles. Social workers also described the need to enhance collaboration between civil society stakeholders and social workers to encourage the establishment of multidisciplinary and multisectoral approaches for child protection in Qatar (Al-Mohannadi et al., 2020). These systemic barriers highlight the necessary prerequisites for social workers to effectively prevent violence against children and apply protection interventions, as highlighted in previous research and in the Qatar National Strategy 2018–2022 report (Al-Mohannadi et al., 2020; Olszowy et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2018).

Limitations and future directions

This study is the first to explore social workers in child protection practices in Qatar, so it provides an opportunity for future research to further explore barriers and gaps in social work and social workers' roles in child protection. One limitation of this study is that the social workers interviewed for this study were from only two of the civil society centers in Qatar. The findings, therefore, cannot be applied to all child protection professionals in the social services sector in Qatar. A national study to map child welfare protection professionals' workforce in Qatar is needed. Moreover, the study could not distinguish how the experiences of specialized and certified social workers in child protection vary from those of other social workers.

Recommendations for child protection systems

The perspectives of social workers suggest several recommendations for policymakers and civil society organizational leaders to tackle barriers facing social workers through legislation, strategies, and mechanisms in Qatar, and these recommendations may extend to similar countries and other international contexts. Policy makers should be advised to establish a cohesive national framework for child protection in Qatar. Policy makers should establish a clear national referral system for child protection cases that supports social workers to manage cases better. Qatari legislation and laws regarding the regulation of social workers should be developed to clarify their roles and authority in both governmental and civil society agencies in dealing with child protection cases. Finally, policy makers should develop the necessary laws, regulations, and policies to protect children from violence.

Civil society organizations should develop clear cohesive policies for social worker safety in the workplace and within site visits. Permanent supervisors who are specialized in child protection, including a specialized department head, should be hired and retained to support and guide social workers. The capacities of social workers should be developed by providing opportunities for specialized technical training and continuing education to foster competencies in direct social work practice. Finally, social workers' perspectives should be included in the development of the child protection system, as they are key stakeholders on the ground with insights into real situations.

Conclusions

In Qatar, in other Arab countries, and in working with Muslim families around the world, social workers can partner with religious communities on child protection frameworks and actions. As the first study to focus on social workers' experiences working in child protection in Qatar, this study provides new knowledge regarding the importance of cohesive national frameworks for child protection, legal protections to prevent violence against children, the need to protect social workers' safety, and the crucial role of specialized training for social workers in child protection. These transformations in child protection systems are needed not only in Qatar but also in many countries around the world.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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