

November 2024

Programmes for the Protection of Children of Determination from Abuse and Neglect in the United Arab Emirates

Fakir Al Gharaibeh
University of Sharjah, UAE and The University of Jordan, Jordan

Bakhita Alketbi
University of Sharjah, UAE

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Al Gharaibeh, Fakir and Alketbi, Bakhita (2024) "Programmes for the Protection of Children of Determination from Abuse and Neglect in the United Arab Emirates," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 26: Iss. 6, Article 11.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol26/iss6/11>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

Programmes for the Protection of Children of Determination from Abuse and Neglect in the United Arab Emirates

By Fakir Al Gharaibeh¹ and Bakhita Alketbi²

Abstract

This paper examines the initiatives and policies implemented in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to protect Children of Determination (COD) from abuse and neglect. Despite global efforts to address child abuse, children with disabilities, referred to here as children of determination, remain particularly vulnerable. This paper explores the social framework, legal protections, prevention strategies, challenges, and necessary measures to ensure that such children are safe and empowered to protect themselves from abuse. The paper also explores approaches to enhancing the efficacy of the caregivers engaged with these children so that they can predict, prevent, and deal with incidents of abuse. Drawing upon qualitative research and data analysis, the study assesses the effectiveness of existing programmes and proposes a model for a child advocacy centre that promotes and implements best practices. The study adopts a qualitative approach to collect the views of ten social workers and parents of children of determination through in-depth interviews, and to analyse data, legislation, and initiatives related to the target population in the UAE. In particular, this study highlights the critical importance of protecting girl children from abuse, given that international research indicates that girls are more vulnerable to abuse than boys.

Keywords: Disability, Abuse, Prevention, Empowerment, Rehabilitation, Social Policy, Children of Determination, UAE, Child rights, Girls' rights

Introduction

International Views on the Abuse and Protection of Girls and Boys with Disabilities

People around the world often refer to individuals with disabilities as “differently abled,” highlighting their unique abilities and contributions to society (Chhabra, 2016; Muster, 2017). Similarly, children with disabilities have various positive impacts, and the United Arab Emirates recognized them as “children of determination” (Nandkeolyar, 2024, para. 2). Determination in general means “the ability to continue trying to do something, although it is very difficult” (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2024). The term ‘Children of determination shifts the focus from their limitations to their abilities, resilience, and determination. It offers a positive and inclusive perspective, emphasising their strengths as they navigate physical, intellectual, or developmental challenges.

However, these children are at a considerable risk of violence, neglect, abuse, and exploitation. The current study adopted UN global and regional statistics that indicate that nearly 240 million children have some form of disability, and that these children are twice as likely to face neglect and/or sexual, physical, or mental abuse compared to children without disabilities. Indeed, children and adolescents of determination are 3 to 4 times more likely to experience physical and sexual violence and neglect than other children: up to 68% of girls and 30% of boys with intellectual or developmental disabilities will be sexually abused before reaching their 18th

¹Research Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sharjah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates and Department of Social Work, College of Arts, The University of Jordan, Jordan.
Email: falgharaibeh@sharjah.ac.ae

²University of Sharjah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.

birthday (OSRSG/VAC, 2024).

The current study focuses on programs that aim to protect children of determination from abuse, whether in homes or care centers, at a time when current statistics on the number or type of cases of abuse are not available. This lack of up-to-date data on incidents of abuse makes it difficult to determine whether girls are more subjected to abuse than boys. This scarcity of data may be attributed to the inability of People of Determination to report their exposure to abuse or to the sometimes-vague definition of abuse that may arise due to the misunderstanding of the concept of abuse because of cultural and social practices and norms that consider some forms of unintended abuse as part of education, socialization, and discipline.

The Key Achievements 2023 report of (OSRSG/VAC, 2024) indicates that children with disabilities, out of fear or as a result of lack of information, may feel pressed to conceal their suffering. Afraid of stigmatization, harassment, or reprisals, these children might not be able to report the incidents of violence they experience and may even believe they could lose the support of their caregivers and the attention and love of the individuals they depend on.

The abuse of children of determination is a significant issue that requires the concerted efforts of the international community. According to the World Health Organization, there are approximately 1.3 billion people with disabilities worldwide, or 16% of the world's total population (WHO, 2023). This number exceeds the organization's previous estimate (published in the 1970s) which was roughly 10%. This suggests that the number of people with disabilities is increasing (WHO & World Bank, 2011). Sadly, the abuse of children—including those with disabilities—occurs frequently. Child abuse, in all its various forms, has a negative impact on the mental health of the victims and their relationships with others on physical and emotional levels.

Arab cultural and social norms inadvertently tend to support child mistreatment because physical punishment is viewed as an appropriate form of socialisation. For example, so-called light beating, scolding, or shouting are acceptable as methods of socialization. Arab parents adhere to certain perspectives on raising children; parents raise their children based on religious and social dictates that require obedience. However, there is a misunderstanding of some Quran text on this point (Al Gharibeh & Gibson, 2019).

The suffering of children with disabilities due to neglect and other forms of abuse is a global phenomenon, yet it may have a more pronounced impact among girls with disabilities. In the UAE, girls' and women's enrollment in government disability centres constitutes over 33% of all cases, a figure that could potentially increase if societal attitudes shift towards encouraging the care of girls with disabilities through specialized centres. The Emirati society tends to prefer to care for this demographic in households rather than in institutions, drawing on societal and religious values of protecting and nurturing girls, in addition to the widespread social fear of stigma. Such practices are feasible within Arab culture for vulnerable individuals. For example, Al Gharibeh (2008) revealed that, in Jordan, prison inmates' daughters were more affected by stigma than their sons.

UAE government agencies provide People of Determination with substantial support and care. The Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Community Development, and Social Service authorities are among the different local agencies that are actively engaged in the fight against child abuse. Offering professional intervention and follow-up services based on the main principles of protection, prevention, and awareness-raising, they distinguish themselves as being committed to supporting the victims of child abuse, their families, and schools. Additionally, they work with regional and global partners to increase public awareness of the harmful impacts of child abuse and the appropriate preventative actions. However, obtaining accurate data on child protection

issues is still difficult. Formal recognition of the issue is frequently helpful in establishing thorough data collection methods. Furthermore, there are few reliable ways for evaluating preventative interventions, which emphasizes the need for better research approaches to determine their efficacy (Al Gharaibeh & Gibson, 2019).

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

It is impossible to entirely understand the importance of protection and education programmes for children of determination without considering the larger socio-political framework and the complex interrelationships that exist among stakeholders in the legal, cultural, economic, and family contexts. The ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1994) outlines the following interdependent subsystems of a child's environment: the macrosystem, chronosystem, exosystem, microsystem, and mesosystem. The ecological systems theory was utilized in our research to understand the interdependent dynamics that exist between children with disabilities, their families, multidisciplinary services, policy and legislation, caretakers, and social workers (Al Gharaibeh & Gibson, 2019).

Designing a Protection Programme for Children of Determination: Understanding the Global Landscape

Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 defines violence and abuse as “all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse” (OUCHR, 1989). In addition, by ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which acknowledges freedom from violence as a fundamental human right, and adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), nations are obligated to safeguard children from violence. SDG 16 calls for increased efforts to achieve every child's right to live without fear, abuse, exploitation, or neglect. It also specifically aims to abolish all forms of violence against children. Children who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” are necessary for the achievement of SDG 16 and other international commitments to end child violence” (OHCHR, 2006, para 5).

Children with disabilities are four times more likely than peers without disabilities to experience violence (Jones, et al., 2012) as social exclusion, prejudice, stigma, and economic difficulties put them at a higher risk of violence (Lightfoot, 2014). However, there is a concerning knowledge gap regarding existing responses to violence against children with disabilities, despite the international consensus that these children are a high-risk group in need of protection (Meinck et al., 2015; UNICEF, 2014). The lack of research conducted and the methodological design flaws in many of the studies that have been done up to this point have limited the available evidence (Leeb et al., 2012) while particularly little evidence comes from low to middle income countries.

Challenges and strategies for implementation:

To create successful prevention and intervention programmes that will shield children with disabilities from violence, it is essential to understand how violence is currently responded to (Njelesani, 2019). Laws and policies, governance, child protection services, and community support are some of the components of response.

Limited global research indicates that children of determination often do not access protection services since service providers may lack awareness of their heightened risks and unique requirements. Multiple publications stress the significance of improving the prevention of violence

against individuals with disabilities (Mikton et al., 2014). Many of the publications discussing this issue do not primarily examine the effectiveness of interventions, with only a few being systematic reviews. For example, Mahoney and Polling (2011) explore the occurrence of sexual abuse among individuals with severe developmental disabilities and discuss prevention tactics for this group. Nevertheless, their review lacks systematic analysis and does not specifically assess the efficacy of these prevention strategies. Additionally, there are no comprehensive studies that cover all types of interventions aimed at preventing all forms of violence against individuals with various disabilities.

Moreover, feedback from these children indicates increased empowerment and confidence in advocating for their rights upon receiving the Child Rights Act in a format accessible to them (Plan International, 2013). Njelesani (2019) conducted a study that included four west African countries. She suggested that establishing collaborations with civil societies, research institutions, NGOs, and DPOs is crucial for enhancing advocacy efforts and influencing research, policies, and programmes effectively. Njelesani also argued that the absence of national studies on the prevalence of violence against children with disabilities in the four countries underscores the necessity of supporting scholars from these regions to conduct such research. Additionally, it is recommended to build connections with representatives from all ministry departments, especially those responsible for education, disability, health, and protection. Disability-specific programmes are vital in places where it is believed that no one would harm a child with a disability as well as in areas with higher incidences of violence against people with disabilities like areas of extreme poverty and societies that have recently experienced conflict.

Through in-depth interviews with 10 participants (five social workers and five parents of children of determination) and a review of Dubai Foundation for Women and Children (DFWAC) records, Al Gharaibeh & Gibson, (2019) used a qualitative approach to examine the creative services offered to child abuse victims by the Foundation. The authors present the relationships between the resources used, the processes and activities, the outputs, and the outcomes in a logic model that makes the DFWAC programme more accessible to their readers. The study examined how the Child Advocacy Centre model is related to and different from the DFWAC. The ecological theory is utilized to interpret the results, which indicate that DFWAC has policies and processes that are appropriate for helping child victims of abuse. The DFWAC is a creative example of how a civil society can handle child abuse, even though more effort is required to accurately document its success.

The study conducted by Islam et al. (2023) aimed to investigate the social behaviour patterns among Bangladeshi low-income urban households in ensuring the protection and welfare of children. Three-hundred and seventy-eight low-income households participated in the interviews. Islam et al. found that there were very few child-protection services available (in many cases, none, except for children whose births have been registered). Of the children studied, a sizable portion (55%) were married between the ages of 15 and 19. The study discovered a low level of access to social behaviour components, with between 50% and 60% of caregivers stating that there were four benefits of important behaviours: hand washing was necessary before and after meals and after defecation; girls and boys should marry at a young age; and, they were aware of the effects and consequences of child marriage.

Necessary Measures to Protect Children with Disabilities from Abuse

There are several measures related to the child's environment that can be taken to protect children with disabilities from abuse including:

- Assessing the extent of the problem of abuse of children, particularly girls, with disabilities and its prevalence rate to develop practical solutions
- Recognizing that children with disabilities are more vulnerable to abuse and neglect than non-disabled children
- Providing necessary guidance to the families of children with disabilities to educate them on how to interact with their children and protect them from abuse and neglect
- Implementing strict laws to deal with offenders to ensure that such offences are not repeated
- Creating a safe environment for People of Determination to enable them to speak up about the abuse and neglect they experience
- Establishing national mechanisms within various educational institutions to protect People of Determination from abuse they may face from their families or caregivers

Busair & Mehaibl (2019) claim that to protect children with disabilities from any form of abuse or neglect they may face, it is important to educate caregivers and workers in rehabilitation centres on how to help children with disabilities and the dangers of abuse whether physical, psychological, emotional, or sexual. They should also be informed about methods of protecting children from abandonment and neglect, as well as the appropriate approaches to interacting with these children

In a report published by QADER Institution for Community Development in Palestine, Hakim and Bukhori (2020) proposed several measures to protecting children with disabilities from abuse, including enhancing the monitoring of vulnerable children to prevent the occurrence of abuse, ensuring early detection, taking appropriate action in response to it, and addressing the negative psychological and physical effects of abuse.

Supporting Comprehensive and Effective Systems to Prevent and Address Violations of Child Protection

The UNICEF Child Protection Strategy (2021-2030) defines child protection as “the prevention of, and response to, exploitation, abuse, neglect, harmful practices and violence against children” (UNICEF, 2021). This wide view of the scope of protection from abuse is expressed in other declarations and treaties. International agreements on children’s rights have addressed the importance of care, protection, and proper treatment of children and have warned against the dangers of abuse and violence against them, especially those with disabilities. The Convention on the Rights of the Child 1959 stipulated in its sixth principle that:

The child, for the full and harmonious development of his personality, needs love and understanding. He [*sic*] shall, wherever possible, grow up in the care and under the responsibility of his parents, and, in any case, in an atmosphere of affection and of moral and material security; a child of tender years shall not, save in exceptional circumstances, be separated from his mother.

The ninth principle also emphasises the protection of the child from any form of cruelty, neglect, or exploitation (Hacini, 2021).

Human rights embody fundamental conditions and principles that are crucial for any person

to live with dignity. They form the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace. Protecting these rights promotes opportunities for both individual and communal growth enabling people to reach their fullest potential, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children and individuals of determination (Al Gharaibeh, 2011). Heeding the main tenets of human rights, in 2014, UNICEF developed strategies to prevent and respond to violence against children. These strategies are used as a model of best practice interventions. The six strategies have been drawn from UNICEF's decades of experience informed by key partners, notably, the World Health Organization and the United Nations Secretary-General's study on violence against children. The strategies address societal factors and norms that perpetuate violence as well as promote positive social change. This study highlights how the services for children with disabilities at UAE are aligned to the UNICEF (2014) Strategies. These strategies are:

- Strategy 1: Supporting parents, caregivers, and families
- Strategy 2: Helping children and adolescents manage risks and challenges
- Strategy 3: Changing attitudes and social norms that encourage violence and discrimination
- Strategy 4: Promoting and providing support services for children
- Strategy 5: Implementing laws and policies that protect children
- Strategy 6: Carrying out data collection and research

UNICEF Strategy for the Protection of Persons with Disabilities

UNICEF has shown special concern for children with disabilities who are at significant risk of violence based on its belief that it is every child's right to live safely and free from exploitation, violence, abuse, or neglect. To achieve this, UNICEF has prioritized partnerships and agreements with over 150 countries to prevent violence against children and provide these children with support services, psychological counseling, and social guidance (UNICEF, 2021).

In addition, UNICEF has developed a specific approach to protect children with disabilities from all forms of abuse, transitioning from project-based programmes to a more organised approach involving legislative reform policies and procedures. Through these policies, UNICEF aims to empower children with disabilities to reduce discrimination and promote the principles of the Child's Convention. Additionally, UNICEF aims to strengthen the reform of the childcare systems dedicated to children with disabilities, with particular attention to the educational aspect. It has worked on frameworks for inclusive education and improving school infrastructure to serve children with disabilities and facilitate their access to and receipt of educational services (OCHCR., 2009).

UNICEF's vision focuses on protecting children from all forms of violence, abuse, harmful practices, and exploitation. To achieve this, it has established three main objectives: comprehensive prevention by providing a protective environment for all children, addressing the needs of children living in extremely unsafe conditions, and responding actively to prevent recurrence through the provision of quality services. UNICEF has developed three key strategies: addressing the social, behavioural, economic, and cultural determinants of child rights violations at scale, supporting comprehensive and inclusive protection systems, and safeguarding children's rights in humanitarian situations (UNICEF, 2021).

The UAE's Efforts to Protect People of Determination from Abuse

Early in 2024, the UAE Cabinet approved the People of Determination Protection from

Abuse Policy with a view to empowering and protecting this segment of the society by allowing them to participate effectively within a safe society that offers them enhanced opportunities and guarantees their right to a dignified life. This policy aligns with the UNICEF 2014 strategies to prevent and respond to violence against children. (The UAE's Government Portal, 2024)

Enhancing Quality of Care and Inclusion

The UAE government strives to ensure the welfare of People of Determination by offering a range of dedicated services. These services include medical support, rehabilitation, social aid, employment opportunities, and online accessibility measures. The government employs various strategies to enhance accessibility, including simplified language, adjustable text sizes and colours, text-to-speech software, and ALT text. Moreover, they have developed an Emirati sign language dictionary, aligning with the country's broader visions of social cohesion and inclusivity.

Legal Protection and Policy Framework

Legal provisions such as Federal Law No. (29) of 2006, amended by Federal Law No. (14) of 2009, safeguard the rights of People of Determination, ensuring their dignity and prohibiting discrimination. The National Policy for Empowering People of Determination delineates six key pillars covering health, education, vocational rehabilitation, outreach, social protection, family empowerment, and public life. This comprehensive framework aims to address various aspects of their well-being and integration into society.

Prevention of Abuse and Support Systems

The UAE Cabinet has endorsed a protection from abuse policy for People of Determination, emphasizing prevention and empowerment. This policy underscores the condemnation of all forms of abuse and neglect, thus striving to uphold their rights to care, rehabilitation, and community integration. In addition, efforts to enhance accessibility extend to transportation systems and infrastructure, ensuring safe, affordable, and sustainable options for People of Determination. From accessible transport facilities to designated parking spaces, the UAE prioritizes inclusive design to facilitate their mobility and participation in society.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach. The researchers conducted ten in-depth interviews with social workers (n=5) and parents (n=5). The interviews were manually analysed. Additionally, available data, legislations and policies related to persons with disabilities in the United Arab Emirates were analysed. The researchers followed the ethical research protocol of the University of Sharjah's informed consent procedures and research instruments. Written, informed consent was acquired from all participants. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point during the study.

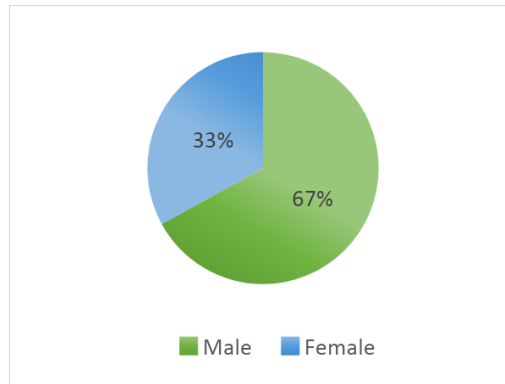
Findings

The researchers reviewed the website of the UAE Ministry of Community Development, which provides all data related to community development including statistics, annual reports, and databases. The review yielded important data and several significant insights into the services available to the target population.

Students in People of Determination's Welfare & Rehabilitation Centres by Gender and Emirate (2022-2023)

Data obtained from the records of the UAE Ministry of Community Development reveals that 67% of the students with disabilities in the welfare and rehabilitation centres in the country are men, while 33% are women.

Figure 1: Number of Students in People of Determination Welfare & Rehabilitation Centres in the U.A.E By Gender and Emirate 2022-2023



Source: Ministry of Community Development (UAE) 2024

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the number of care and rehabilitation centres for People of Determination in the UAE for the academic year 2021/2022 by sector and emirate. The data distinguishes between the government sector (comprising federal, local, and semi-government centres) and the private sector (integrated services and individual sessions centres). It can be noted that Abu Dhabi has the highest number of centres with 34, followed by Sharjah with 25, and Dubai with 14. The data shows that a total of 92 centres were operational during this academic year.

Table 1: Number of Determination Care and Rehabilitation Centres for People by Sector and Emirate for the Academic Year 2021/2022

| Emirate | Total | Individual Sessions | Integrated Services | Semi-Gov. | Local Gov. | Federal Gov. |
|----------------|-------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| Abu Dhabi | 34 | 6 | 13 | 1 | 14 | 0 |
| Dubai | 14 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 0 | 2 |
| Sharjah | 25 | 10 | 5 | 0 | 10 | 0 |
| Ajman | 6 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Umm Al Quwain | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Ras Al Khaimah | 6 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Fujairah | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Total | 92 | 25 | 26 | 7 | 24 | 10 |

Source: Authors' findings

Table 2 presents the number of students in People of Determination care and rehabilitation centres in the UAE for the academic year 2021/2022, categorized by nationality and sector. The highest number of students in People of Determination care and rehabilitation centres for the academic year 2021/2022 was in the local government sector with a total of 2,979 students, of which 2,132 were UAE citizens. This sector accounted for 52% of the total student population. The lowest number of students was in the semi-government sector with a total of 908 students, of which 416 were citizens, accounting for 16% of the total.

Table 2: Number of Students in people of determination Care and Rehabilitation Centres by Nationality and Sector for the Academic Year 2021/2022

| Sector | % | Total | Non-Emirati | Emirati |
|--------------------|------|-------|-------------|---------|
| Federal Government | 15% | 889 | 37 | 852 |
| Local Government | 52% | 2,979 | 847 | 2,132 |
| Semi-Government | 16% | 908 | 492 | 416 |
| Private Sector | 17% | 977 | 758 | 219 |
| Total | 100% | 5,753 | 2,134 | 3,619 |

Source: Authors' findings

Perspectives of the Participants

The interviews yielded several significant results that reflect the key components of the UAE's policy to protect individuals with disabilities from abuse. These components are prevention, empowerment, and early detection. The policy aims to protect People of Determination from being exposed to abuse, empower these individuals, their guardians, and professionals working with them to handle cases of abuse, and enable them to defend themselves in instances of abuse. Additionally, the policy focuses on the early detection of potential forms of abuse that People of Determination might face.

The policy also seeks to increase the number of qualified national professionals specialized in identifying and managing abuse, enhancing their competencies in rehabilitating People of Determination who have been exposed to abuse. Furthermore, it aims to provide appropriate rehabilitation opportunities and programmes for individuals with disabilities who have experienced abuse and to eliminate its effects. The key components of the policy, as reflected in participants' responses, are as follows.

Empowering People of Determination, Their Families, and Caregivers to Address Cases of Abuse

We asked one of the participants, "what are the boundaries of your role in dealing with cases of abuse or violence against children with disabilities?" The response emphasized an extensive commitment to protection:

In my personal opinion, there are no boundaries to my role in protecting these children. These children are not only my responsibility and that of my colleagues within the service centre but also outside of it. We bear the burden of protecting these children even in their interactions with the community outside the centre, which we strive to achieve by raising societal awareness about the characteristics of children of determination and how to interact with them. Additionally, we provide all means of protection within the centre to ensure a safe life for them. (Interview 2)

Role of Caregivers in Family Engagement

Regarding the role of the caregiver in service centres toward the family of a child of determination, one of the participants elaborated:

The caregiver's interaction with the family of a child with a disability is a crucial part of their work with the child. The caregiver works to alter the parents' negative feelings towards the disability and sometimes towards the child themselves, replacing them with feelings of acceptance and love. The caregiver can achieve this by educating the family about the causes of the disability, its impact on the child, and the child's needs at different developmental stages according to the type and degree of disability. Furthermore, the caregiver teaches the parents proper care methods, avoiding both exaggeration and neglect. The caregiver encourages the family to develop a dialogue with the child, focus on their abilities and skills, and work on enhancing them from a young age. (Interview 3)

The participant further noted:

The caregiver also provides psychological support to the family of the child with a disability, giving them the opportunity to express their feelings, which helps them cope with the challenges of raising the child. Additionally, the caregiver guides them to various institutions that can provide the services they need.

Services and Resources for Individuals with Disabilities

Addressing the services and resources available within the institution to support individuals with disabilities, another participant mentioned:

The centre aims to empower, inform, support, and protect People of Determination and assist them with accessing services, making informed choices, and participating actively in decision-making processes concerning all issues that affect them, with the ultimate goal of creating equal opportunities. (Interview 8)

Assisting a Child with a Disability in Cases of Domestic Abuse

When asked how to assist a child with a disability if they are abused by their family, interviewee 3 explained that:

When a child with a disability is abused by their family, the situation is more sensitive than if the abuser were someone outside the family. This requires me to act with caution to verify the accuracy of the information I receive. Initially, I aim to build trust between myself and the child so that they feel secure speaking with me. Once I am convinced of the child's account of abuse through clear evidence, I report the matter to the appropriate authorities to hold the responsible party accountable. Additionally, I work on educating and raising awareness among families about the proper methods for caring for these children to prevent such situations in the future. (Interview 3)

Role of the Caregiver in Assisting a Child with a Disability

We asked the participants how a caregiver can play a role in assisting a child with a disability. Interviewee 4 responded that:

For a caregiver to effectively assist a child with a disability, they must first establish a professional relationship with the child characterized by positivity and understanding so that the child accepts the services and advice offered. The specialist strives to create a conducive environment within service centres to help the child benefit from the provided services and interact positively with the specialists. The caregiver's role in supporting a child with a disability begins with building a good relationship that helps the child adjust their negative attitudes towards their disability, themselves, their community, and their family, enabling them to regain self-confidence and pursue their treatment. (Interview 4)

Assistance Provided to a Child with a Disability in Cases of Abuse

Q: What assistance can you provide to a child with a disability if you learn they are being abused?

I have received extensive training to help me identify signs of abuse in children with disabilities. When I notice any signs or learn of abuse from the child, I act immediately. I verify the information confidentially to ensure its accuracy and collaborate with my colleagues to assist the child and escalate the matter to my superiors if necessary. There is a large team of healthcare and social workers, along with legal experts, who coordinate to protect these children from any forms of abuse or neglect. (Interview 4)

Services and Resources Available in the Institution Supporting Individuals with Disabilities

Q: What are the services and resources available in the institution that support individuals with disabilities?

The institution is dedicated to advocacy, inclusion, and empowerment of individuals with disabilities in the United Arab Emirates and the Arab world. It strives to reduce the causes of various disabilities through early intervention and community outreach. It aims to integrate and empower individuals with disabilities through education, rehabilitation, and employment, fostering independent and self-reliant individuals within the community. (Interview 7)

We have several departments, including: Al Amal School for the Deaf, a boarding school; a speech therapy department; Al Wafa School for Developmental Training and its branch in Al Ramla, which is a day and night school dedicated to [children with] severe and multiple disabilities. We also have a physical and occupational therapy department, a vocational training and rehabilitation department, an early intervention centre, Sharjah City for Humanitarian Services hearing centre, SCHS Khorfakkan branch, Dhaid branch, Kalba branch, Sharjah Autism Centre, Emirates Special Arts Group, and Sharjah Social Empowerment Foundation Tamkeen. (Interview 7)

Early Detection of Potential Abuse (Through Communication Channels and Hotlines)

We asked the participants about their early detection of potential abuse. Interviewee 10 responded that:

Protecting individuals with disabilities from abuse requires a comprehensive systemic approach that places these individuals at the centre. Caregivers, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, can significantly contribute to protecting the people supported by the state. Understanding the types and indicators of abuse will aid in developing strategies to prevent it. By adopting a positive approach to protection, institutions can cultivate a supportive culture that ensures the best outcomes for the individuals they support. This guideline offers some strategies to protect individuals with disabilities. (Interview 10)

Increasing the Number of the Local Staff Specialized in Detecting and Addressing Abuse

Caregivers play a crucial role in supporting children with disabilities in service centers. When asked about the role they can play in supporting this group, one respondent shared:

The caregiver is the primary person responsible for providing psychological and social support to children with disabilities and their families. From the moment a child enters the service centre, I work on welcoming them and offering psychological assistance to help them accept the centre and alleviate the psychological distress they may feel. I also encourage them to express their negative emotions to accept their reality and cope with it, thus enabling them to take responsibility in the treatment plan. (Interview 10)

Additionally, I play a significant role in conducting social research on the child with a disability to assist in determining the treatment steps. I provide the professional team with information about the social and environmental conditions surrounding the child to develop a treatment plan that suits them. (Interview 1)

The Caregiver's Role in Support outside the Centre

When asked whether caregivers have a role in supporting children with disabilities outside the service centre, the respondent emphasized:

Of course, caregivers play an essential role outside the centre in providing support to children with disabilities. A caregiver can significantly impact raising community awareness about how to interact with individuals with disabilities. These children interact not only within the centre but also with society. Therefore, society needs to have a positive perception of them to interact appropriately. The specialist is key in shaping this perception by educating the community about the characteristics and needs of individuals with disabilities and supporting the community's interactions with them. Moreover, the specialist can help facilitate access for children with disabilities to various services outside the centre by coordinating with the responsible government or private entities. (Interview 1)

Training and Skill Development for Caregivers

When asked about receiving training to enhance skills in dealing with individuals with disabilities, another respondent shared:

Indeed, I have attended several training courses at the Abu Dhabi Centre for Disabilities and Special Needs. These courses covered various topics, including effective communication strategies with individuals with disabilities, overcoming challenges in working with them, early intervention, behaviour management, and understanding legal resources available for individuals with disabilities. Additionally, I attended a training course on protecting children from abuse and neglect. (Interview 5)

Another respondent highlighted the importance of continuous training:

Yes, the centre ensures we receive ongoing training to acquire the best practices for dealing with individuals with disabilities. We attend various training programmes offered by organizations such as the Zayed Higher Organization, aiming to qualify us as professional caregivers. The Abu Dhabi Learning and Training Centre also provides continuous training to equip us with the necessary skills and competencies to support this group of children. (Interview 1)

Training Caregivers to Prevent Abuse

Ensuring that caregivers in institutions are adequately trained to prevent abuse is crucial. According to one respondent:

Organisations working in the care and education sectors must ensure that their staff are appropriately trained to protect vulnerable individuals under their care. Raising public awareness allows communities and professionals to play their part in preventing, identifying, and addressing abuse and neglect. Providing accessible information and support helps individuals understand the different types of abuse, how to stay safe and healthy, and what actions to take if they have concerns about their safety or well-being. (Interview 7)

Another respondent emphasised the importance of qualifications and ongoing training:

It is essential to ensure that individuals chosen for caregiving roles are qualified. The state and centres must provide proper training through accredited health and safety institutes. Annual training for caregivers and their staff on recognizing signs of abuse and neglect among individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities is mandatory. Training should cover how to interact appropriately with individuals with autism and those with learning difficulties to tailor to the specific roles of the caregivers. (Interview 8)

Lastly, one of the participants responded to our question regarding the best ways to enhance the caregivers' awareness and education is critical for abuse prevention by suggesting that:

Officials must educate caregivers about the signs of abuse, strategies for identifying abusive situations, and appropriate actions to take. Focusing on preventing and addressing situations where someone may be subjected to physical or verbal abuse is crucial. Developing and testing model methods to enhance the quality and effectiveness of care for individuals with disabilities is essential. Raising awareness and education among caregivers establishes a culture of transparency and encourages victims of abuse to seek help. Increasing risk awareness, taking steps to prevent harm, and promptly reporting incidents are vital. (Interview 9)

*Rehabilitation Programs for Persons of Determination who have Experienced Abuse
Challenges Faced by Caregivers in Dealing with Children of Determination in the Centre*

Q: What difficulties do you face as a caregiver when dealing with children with disabilities within the centre?

Unfortunately, there are many challenges I face within the centre, including a lack of funding and necessary resources, which makes it difficult for us to provide some of the services needed by the child and their family. Additionally, there are certain constraints related to the nature of the UAE society as an open society with individuals from various nationalities. Sometimes I encounter difficulties in communicating with the child's family due to language barriers, which hinders my ability to provide them with the necessary support. (Interview 5)

Services and Resources Available in the Institution Supporting People of Determination

Q: What services and resources are available in the institution that support People of Determination?

Sharjah City for Humanitarian Services (SCHS) is an independent entity in the Emirate of Sharjah aimed at serving people of determination in the United Arab Emirates. It aspires to pave the way for a bright future for children with mental and physical disabilities, giving them confidence and an opportunity to live in a society characterised by equal opportunities. We strive to reduce the causes of various disabilities through early intervention and community outreach. We also aim to integrate and empower persons of determination through education, rehabilitation, and employment to form independent individuals who rely on themselves in society. Our flexible and comprehensive plan and strict strategy include the following services:

- Early intervention to prevent and reduce disabilities
- Education, training, and rehabilitation for children and adults with disabilities
- Family consultations
- Public awareness and education on disability issues. (Interview 6)

Training Caregivers to Prevent Abuse

Q: How can caregivers be trained in institutions to prevent abuse?

It is essential to support People of Determination in managing risks in their lives in the way that best suits them thus granting them the dignity of risk, which is the opportunity to take risks and experience both success and failure. The Al Ain Centre for Care and Rehabilitation for People of Determination offers a range of high-level activities alongside the latest global rehabilitation methods. It houses the largest residential centre in the Arab world. In addition to sports activities like swimming and horse riding, the centre provides speech therapy, occupational therapy, vocational rehabilitation, and various events. The centre specialises in providing education and healthcare services, as well as comprehensive residential care for individuals with intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorders. It

operates according to international standards and implements a distinctive and advanced system for education, rehabilitation, and care services for people with disabilities. (Interview 9)

Before answering the above-mentioned question, the following participant described the EDSA:

The Emirates Down Syndrome Association (EDSA) is a humanitarian association approved by the Ministry of Community Development to serve individuals with Down syndrome in the UAE, from birth and for all ages and nationalities. Our mission is to integrate and empower individuals with Down syndrome by realising their full potential and maximising their skills for effective and productive participation in society. We focus on:

- Comprehensive assessment of children in all developmental areas (cognitive, gross and fine motor skills, communication and language, social skills, and self-care) to determine the child's needs
- Developing an appropriate individualised education programme (IEP) for each child according to their needs
- Early intervention services following the IEP in collaboration with the family
- Family training, guidance, and support
- Empowering families with knowledge and strategies to follow with their DS child at home
- Organizing workshops, seminars, and conferences for parents, professionals, teachers, and caregivers that address specialised topics and critical issues for people with Down syndrome.

Regarding the question, the same participant stated:

Planning to conduct training workshops for caregivers in institutions to protect disabled individuals from abuse is crucial. Awareness can be increased through advertising campaigns and paper advertisements to enhance awareness about preventing abuse of people of determination. Additionally, training courses can be conducted to handle abusive situations and enhance quick intervention methods to protect disabled individuals swiftly. (Interview 10)

Discussion and Social Policy

This paper proposes a model for a child advocacy centre that can be established and replicated across the UAE. The model considers the local needs and context of the UAE and the children of determination there. The model was developed based on the findings of qualitative study that focused on gathering the views of a sample of social workers and parents of children of determination, and on analysing data obtained from the official entities in the UAE that serve the target population. The result is a model that promotes six broad principles for the empowerment and protection of the potential victims of abuse, as well as the prevention of and response to incidents of abuse. The model enables the target children, their families, and professional caregivers to play more empowered, informed, and effective roles in combating abuse.

Children of determination are a particularly vulnerable group, and, despite global efforts, the abuse of these children remains a prevalent issue, negatively impacting their mental health and

overall well-being. In the UAE, government agencies, such as the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Community Development, are actively engaged in combating child abuse, offering professional intervention and follow-up services. The UAE has implemented various initiatives to enhance the welfare and inclusion of People of Determination backed by legal protections and a comprehensive policy framework. Efforts include ensuring accessibility in various aspects of life from healthcare to education and transportation. However, challenges persist in accurately obtaining statistics on protection issues specific to girls and evaluating preventative interventions, underscoring the need for improved research approaches.

To address the prevention of abuse against children with disabilities, strategies such as awareness-raising, legal enforcement, and providing safe environments are crucial. Collaboration with civil society, research institutions, NGOs, and disabled persons' organisations (DPOs) is essential for effective advocacy, research, and programme implementation. Additionally, tailoring interventions to specific contexts and establishing disability-specific programmes are vital steps towards safeguarding the rights and well-being of children with disabilities, both in the UAE and globally.

Theoretical frameworks, such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, provide insights into the complex dynamics surrounding children with disabilities by emphasising the interconnectedness of various stakeholders and systems. Bronfenbrenner (1994), as highlighted in Al Gharaibeh and Gibson's study (2019), first discussed ecological systems theory as an explanation for child development based on spheres of influence, and nested, interdependent systems, which all contribute to viewing the person in his or her environment. Microsystems include children of determination, peers, parents, caregivers, and relationships at centres. Mesosystems include social, legal, psychological, and medical services the UAE Cabinet's policy to protect People of Determination from abuse, and UNICEF's (2014) strategies to prevent and respond to violence against children. Exosystems include all the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organisations, and any other support by volunteering or donations. The macrosystem includes culture, religion, beliefs about child development, customs, and attitudes about disability and abuse as a concept and behaviour. The chronosystem includes the interactions between responses at micro, meso, and macro system levels, such as legal services, and welfare services, to create a programme based on a system of policies and services that reflect the children with disability's needs (Al Gharaibeh & O'Sullivan, 2021).

Empowering Girls of Determination: A Comprehensive Model for Child Advocacy, Protection, and Inclusion in the UAE

Girls of determination are often at the centre of efforts to tackle the crucial confluence of gender and disability in child advocacy. This section presents a carefully devised strategy intended to protect and empower girls and women with disabilities in the United Arab Emirates (for similar work on Saudi Arabia, see Nasser & Al Gharaibeh, 2023).. The strategy, which is based on global frameworks and local findings, prioritises preventative actions, self-determination, and inclusive assistance. This project prioritises overcoming the unique obstacles faced by girls and women of determination to create a supportive environment free from discrimination and the threat/risk of abuse, allowing every person to reach her full potential.

Developing the Child Advocacy Centre Model

Informed by the findings of this study and guided by the principal ideas of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, UNICEF child protection strategies, and previous

experiences outlined in the literature, the authors propose a model for a special child advocacy centre that would be dedicated to the empowerment and education of children of determination, adopting a critical gender lens that seeks to identify and implement gender specific programmes and approaches based on gender disaggregated data. The centre would also serve as a training institution for professionals, especially from among UAE citizens, who are involved in the care and rehabilitation of victims of abuse from among children of determination. The centre shall strive to implement the following six strategies:

1. Protection: Ensuring the safety and security of girls of determination from all forms of abuse
2. Empowerment: Equipping girls of determination, their families, and their support networks with the tools and resources to address cases of abuse effectively
3. Self-defence: Enabling girls of determination to defend themselves when faced with abusive situations
4. Early detection: Implementing measures for the early detection of potential maltreatment of girls of determination
5. Capacity building: Increasing the expertise of national cadres specialised in identifying and responding to abuse among girls of determination, while enhancing their efficiency in rehabilitating affected individuals
6. Intervention and Rehabilitation: Providing tailored rehabilitation programmes and support services for girls of determination who have been exposed to any forms of abuse, aimed at mitigating the impact of such abuse.

Recommendations For Future Research

To strengthen the existing framework for protecting children of determination, this paper acknowledges that while the current study chose not to collect gender-disaggregated data to maintain an inclusive focus on the specific needs of children irrespective of gender or sex, it strongly recommends that future research consider including gender disaggregated data to better understand and address the unique challenges faced by both boys and girls of determination. In particular, the inclusion of feminist disability studies as part of the theoretical framework would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gender and disability intersect in contributing to the vulnerability of children to abuse and neglect. Such an approach would align with existing feminist literature that emphasizes the importance of recognizing how systemic inequalities impact the lives of girls and women with disabilities, thus highlighting the necessity of tailored interventions to meet their specific needs.

Acknowledgements

This paper complies with the AI policy outlined by the journal. No AI tools were utilised in the analysis, discussion, conclusions, or recommendations sections. For readability enhancement, Grammarly was used to improve the grammar and clarity of the manuscript in English.

References

- Al Gharaibeh, F. (2008). The effects upon children in Jordan of the imprisonment of their fathers: A social work perspective. *International Social Work, 51*(2).

- Al Gharaibeh, F. (2011). Human security, terrorism and human rights in the Middle East: Implications for social work practice. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 20(2), 228-239.
- Al Gharaibeh, F., & Gibson, L. (2019). Care and rehabilitation services to child victims of abuse in the United Arab Emirates: Examples of innovation. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 101(C), 87-98.
- Al Gharaibeh, F., & O'Sullivan, J. (2021). The impact of war followed by forced displacement on women and children: How Syrian mothers perceive their experiences. *International Journal Of Sociology And Social Policy*, 41(11), 1290-1305.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. *International Encyclopedia of Education*, 3(2).
- Busair, S., & Mehaibl, F. (2019). The scope of abuse of intellectually disabled children from the perspective of the caregivers. [Unpublished bachelor's thesis], Mohamed Alsidq Ben Yahia University. <http://dspace.univ-jijel.dz:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/5092>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (2024). Definition of determination. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/determination>
- Chhabra, S. (2016). Differently abled people and their life. *Global Journal of Medical and Clinical Case Reports*, 3(1), 001-004.
- Federal Law No. (29). (2006). *Concerning the Rights of Persons with Special Needs*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/annual-report/ohchr-report-2009>
- Hacini, O. (2021). Violence against children with disabilities in the Algerian family. Democratic Arabic Center. <https://d-nb.info/124455720X/34>
- Hakim, A. M., & Bukhori, A. (2020). Family education; Strength amid the danger of intolerance. *International Journal of Islamic Education, Research and Multiculturalism*, 2(2), 152-166. <https://doi.org/10.47006/ijierm.v2i2.40>
- Islam, M. R., Gharaibeh, F. A., Azman, A., & Hashim, I. H. (2023). Social behavior practices for child protection and well-being among low-income urban households in Bangladesh. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review*, 17(6), 39-51.
- Jones, L., Bellis, M. A., Wood, S., Hughes, K., McCoy, E., Eckley, L., Bates, G., Mikton, C., Shakespeare, T., & Officer, A. (2012). Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *Lancet (London, England)*, 380(9845), 899–907. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(12\)60692-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(12)60692-8)
- Leeb, R. T., Bitsko, R., Merrick, M. T., & Armour, B. S. (2012). Does childhood disability increase risk for child abuse and neglect? *Journal of Mental Health Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 5(1), 4-31.
- Lightfoot, E. (2014). Children and youth with disabilities in the child welfare system: An overview. *Child Welfare*, 93(2), 23-45.
- Mahoney, A., & Polling, A. (2011). Sexual abuse prevention for people with severe developmental disabilities. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 23(4), 369–376.
- Meinck, F., Cluver, L. D., Boyes, M. E., & Mhlongo, E. L. (2015). Risk and protective factors for physical and sexual abuse of children and adolescents in Africa: A review and implications for practice. *Trauma Violence Abuse*, 16(1), 81-107.

- Mikton, C., Maguire, H., & Shakespeare, T. (2014). A systematic review of the effectiveness of interventions to prevent and respond to violence against persons with disabilities. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 29(17), 3207-26.
- Muster, C. (2017). There is no “dis” in our abilities: Acknowledging the experience of the differently-abled community. Inclusion, disability and culture: An ethnographic perspective traversing abilities and challenges. In S. Halder & L. Czop Assaf (Eds.), *Inclusion, Disability and Culture* (vol.3)(pp. 107-132), Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55224-8_9
- Nandkeolyar, K. (2024). UAE: This unique initiative is enabling skill-sharing for children of determination. *Khaleej Times*.
- Nasser, A. O., & Al Gharaibeh, F. (2023). Empowering Saudi Women with disabilities according to Saudi Vision 2030: An analytical study. *Information Sciences Letters*, 12(7).
- Njelesani, J. (2019). “A child who is hidden has no rights”: Responses to violence against children with disabilities. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 89, 58-69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.12.024>
- Office of the UN Commissioner for Human Rights (OUCHR). (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2009). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>
- Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (OSRSG/VAC). (2024, January). *Key achievements 2023 and the way forward*. <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/document/s/publications/key-achievement-2023-new.pdf>
- Plan International. (2013, September 23). *Outside the circle: A research initiative by Plan International into the rights of children with disabilities to education and protection in West Africa*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/outside-circle-research-initiative-plan-international-rights-children-disabilities>
- The UAE’s Government Portal. (2024). *Protection, support and assistance of people of determination. UAE*. <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/people-of-determination/protection-support-and-assistance-of-people-of-determination>
- UNICEF. (2014, September 4). *Hidden in plain sight: A statistical analysis of violence against children*. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/hidden-in-plain-sight-a-statistical-analysis-of-violence-against-children/>
- UNICEF. (2022). Children with disabilities in the Middle East and North Africa: A statistical overview of their well-being. <https://knowledge.unicef.org/data/resource/children-disabilities-middle-east-and-north-africa-statistical-overview-their-well-being>
- UNICEF. (2021). *Child Protection Strategy 2021-2030*. <https://www.unicef.org/documents/child-protection-strategy>

WHO. (2023). *Disability fact sheet*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>

WHO & World Bank. (2011). *World report on disability 2011*. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/44575>