

*Original Article***Situation of children's rights in Isfahan city***Shohreh Ziaei **, *Heidar Ali Abedi ***,*Marzieh Arbaban ******Abstract**

BACKGROUND: Taking care of children makes them happy, lively and healthy, and it makes the society healthy. Children's rights have been discussed for years and the United Nation General Assembly has two conventions to prevent children abuse, the Minimum Age Convention of 1973 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child on 1989. However, in spite of these international agreements, the statistics show that the cases of children abuse increased from 749 cases in 1960 to one million cases in 1995 in the Western countries. Islamic republic of IRAN agreed this international agreement in 1993. This study investigated the nature, structure and process of children's right in the city of Isfahan.

METHODS: The study is qualitative, using Content Analysis. The purpose of the study is to discover children's right nature, and to describe the existing condition. Sampling method was purposive (or judgmental) and continued until data collection was completed. Sample consisted of 43 children, parents and teachers or trainers. Data were collected by observing schools and other public communities and also by interviews which were recorded, transcribed, reviewed and coded in three steps using qualitative research methods, Thematic Analysis, to extract the main conception.

RESULTS: The findings of observations and interviews classified in 260 codes and then joined together again to extract the main concepts and categories related to children's rights. This step lead to 12 categories and in the third step, four major categories including psychological and personality, physical, economic and cultural factors were extracted.

CONCLUSIONS: Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that parents, teachers and other significant figures in the children's life should receive education on the children's rights and needs in various fields to become capable of developing policies and plans in this regard.

KEY WORDS: Children, human rights, personality, culture.

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Children are the future of a society and their physical and psychological health should be seriously taken into consideration. Bringing up children is one of the most tedious responsibilities of human being, which is neglected in the life complications. Some parents are so wrapped up with emotional and psychological problems of life that not only ignore their children but use violence against them and even abuse them sexually.¹ In some cases, because of their carelessness, neglect or ignorance, parents postpone children's treatment so that a slight infection turns into serious

illness such as heart disease.² Child abuse is a violation of the children's right and has various forms including physical and emotional abuse or neglects such as failure to provide adequate food, clothing, or hygiene, inattention to hazards in the home, inadequate nurturing or affection, etc. Parents or others in charge of child care can be the sources of this abuse. Child abuse can lead to physical and emotional problems and put their health at risk. Freud, Watson and Pavlov believed that children's relationship with those who are responsible to take care of them are important bases of their emotional and

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cognitive growth.¹

Masan and colleagues believed that the behavior of the family, teachers, cultural or socio-economic communities affect children's growth. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights including civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. By agreeing to undertake the obligations of the Convention (by ratifying or acceding to it), national governments have committed themselves to protecting and ensuring children's rights and they have agreed to hold themselves accountable for this commitment before the international community. This international agreement is a great step toward a better situation for children in the world, a future where children will enjoy physical and emotional safety. Islamic Republic of Iran acceded this convention on 1993. However, to undertake the obligations of the Convention, it is necessary that all members of the society especially those related to children affairs, parents and guardians as well as children themselves know the content of the Convention. Being familiar with one's rights, especially children's rights is an effective step towards respecting others' rights and making a more human and law abiding society. This study is an effort to investigate the conditions and nature of children's rights in the city of Isfahan, and to determine the educational needs in this regards.

Methods

This is a qualitative study using Content Analysis method. The purpose of the study is to discover the nature of protecting children's right and to describe the existing condition, using the experiences of participants from schools in the city of Isfahan on 2005-06. The participants included children in the age of 12-18, teachers and trainers of the schools in the city of Isfahan and parents who were willing to participate in the study. Sampling method was purposive (or judgmental) and continued until no new theme was identified. The sample consisted of 43 people from all social classes including high-income, average and low income families in the

city of Isfahan. Data were collected by observation and open-ended non-structured interviews. The participants talked freely about their experiences of various areas related to children's rights in a 60-90 minutes session. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, reviewed and coded in three steps. To ensure the validity and reliability of the interviews, the questions were carefully worded and arranged to take each focus group interview through the same sequence. Questions were recorded alongside the answers and were immersed by several professors who were experienced in qualitative research to ensure consistency. In cases that something was unclear in the interviews, the participant was contacted to clarify. The interviewers received all necessary instructions about the project and the process, and then got the permission to start the work. At first, researchers observed the public places such as streets, parks, buses, taxis, etc for one to two months and noted their observations of the behaviors and interaction toward children as a complete observer. The focus of observation was the way children were treated as well as participants' observation of the activities, interactions and communications with children and adolescents. Then, interviewers went to guidance schools and high schools which were selected at least one of each in every ward of the city. Participants included all students, teachers, trainers, and parents who were willing to participate in the study. Participants were told about the purpose of the study and were assured that the information they give will be kept secret and will remain safe with the researchers. Data were analyzed with qualitative research methodology and based on the recommended method by Strauss and Korbin (1998) in three steps of open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Data analysis was based on coding, developing conceptions (summarizing all the information pertaining to one theme, or capturing the similarities or differences in people's responses within a category) and finding the main variable. First, every interview was coded separately, the entire transcript was read several times and significant terms and sentences related to the subject

were extracted from the interviews and observations. In the second step of coding, based on the similarities, patterns and connections codes were combined to categories. Then in the third step, the codes were revised and major conceptions were identified based on subjective data and not the objective data. Finally, the themes were identified and data were performed. The final step provided a conceptional frame. Straubert (1999) said that his purpose of basic theories is to discover the main variable and the researcher's job is to find the main effective factor in the theory which specifies the main theme in the data.

Results

Twenty eight out of the 43 participants in the research were male and female students and the rest were parents and teachers. The age range of students was 13-17 years old. The findings of interviews and observations were classified in 260 cods and 4 categories of 1. psychological factors, 2. physical factors, 3. economic factors, 4. cultural factors. The psychological abuse experiences by the participants included disrespecting their personalities, humiliation and being scolded, violence and emotional abuse, comparing them with others, distrusting, sexual

abuse, violating their privacy. Physical abuse experienced included: physical punishment and abuse, failure to provide adequate food, clothing, or hygiene, neglect. Economic abuse included poverty and failure to provide adequate facilities. Cultural abuse included identity crisis, inappropriate cultural beliefs, disrespecting adolescents, sex discrimination, failure to provide necessary education, insecure futures, violating their freedom and failure to provide good examples.

Discussion

One of the conceptions found in the study was the psychological factors related to the children's rights. According to the participants' experiences, children don't have the opportunity to live a healthy psychological life. Herman found that improving psychological health and preventing psychological disorders improve the quality of life and that psychological health is indeed a basic need which involves prevention and treatments as well.³ Parkinson also emphasized on children's psychological health and believed that various laws to protect children's rights proved the importance of the subject.⁴

Child & Adolescent Rights	Violation (contravention)	Them
Respect	Humiliation& Blame	Personality Factors
Kindness	Hostility- Mental abuse	Mental attentions
-Child care	Body Punishment-	Physical Factors
Patting (tranquility)	Physical abuse	
Physical Care-	Violation	Chastity(Purity)
Personal territory respect		
Suitable economic situation of the family	Poverty- Low facilities	economic
-Child and adolescent Identification	-Take the adolescents for granted	Cultural beliefs
- Child & adolescent beliefs	-Sex discrimination	
	- Lack of educational facilities for girls	
	- Marriage	
The emotional attention to the children & adolescents	Neglect & Carelessness	Caring factors
Trust in the child and adolescents	Lack of confidence	Personal territory
-Taking care of the child	Lack of security-	Child security rights
- Entertainment right	- to exploit the child	
No limitations	Obligation &	Freedom
	Harsh treatment	
Suitable Pattern	Unsuitable Pattern	Pattern making
-Physical, nourishing, athletic and hygienic considerations	Lack of attention to physical and hygienic needs	Health & Hygiene
- attention to child and adolescents needs		

Personality factors is one of sub-categories of psychological factors which includes a range of behaviors and situations. One side of this range is respect and other side is ignoring the rights of the child and neglect. Even though the experiences of the participants in most cases were related to protecting children's rights in parent-child relationship and teachers' care for children, the main challenge of the topic is violating children's rights and child abuse by parents or teachers. Children often are abused emotionally for different degrees such as being distrusted, emotionally neglected, behaved aggressively and imposed emotional and psychological pressure. Kelin and Elifson believed that child abuse causes a wide range of problems such as depression, anxiety disorders, learned helplessness, and hindering independency. Emotional abuse puts the child at risk of personality disorders such as antisocial personality disorder and dependent personality disorder.⁵

The findings of the study identified "respecting child's privacy" as one of the children's rights, in opposite to "sexual abuse and rape" which is an important challenge in the societies and violence of children's rights. This concept in the study is "chastity" to show a part of psychological elements related to children's rights. The findings show that some children become victims of a rape without having a chance to defend themselves and even after that they will not be supported. This is similar to the results of other studies.^{3,6} Respecting children's privacy protects them from early sexual maturity. To emphasize the importance of this issue, some studies insist on the necessity of protecting the information related to children's health in the family and society.⁷

The participant's experiences indicated that many cases of children psychological abuse is by family members or those responsible for child care. Child abuse often happens in tense situations, so it is recommended to educate families and parents in this regard. Herman introduced some preventing strategies. He says that in spite of the importance of education and interventions of the primary prevention services, today most efforts by supporting services is li-

mitted to the tertiary prevention services. The results of this study emphasize on the importance of identifying those at risk and especially those with low self-confidence and connecting them to help services. It is also recommended to plan and implement public health related projects to modify fundamental beliefs and attitudes which lead to abusive behavior.³

Another concept of the study is physical abuse related to failure to provide physical needs such as food, cloth and hygiene, health care. In spite of all activities to introduce children's needs related to health care in the society, there are many difficulties in the families and the society in this regard and many children suffer from inadequate care related to their growth and physical health. In addition, the results show that due to ignorance, some families never try to recognize children's needs regarding health problems, and in some cases their efforts were useless and wrong so that lead to even more damage to the child. Hill also introduced the same challenge in his study. He emphasized the importance of health assessment to find needs and neglected issues. He explained that considering children's various health needs, most of them experience "health neglect" in public health care systems.⁸

Another conception found in the study was "economic factors". To fulfill the children's right for education and amusements, it is necessary to allocate financial resources to provide educational, cultural learnings and amusement facilities in order to help their thorough growth. However, according to the participants present facilities cannot answer to those needs. Most families cannot afford to provide their children with their needs, some even obliged to deprive their children from education which can help developing their talents in all ways. This challenge has been discussed in several studies, and many researches emphasized on economic factors affecting other rights of the children. For example McKran in his study introduced poverty as an important factor in children's sexual abuse.⁷ phoster also introduced lack of financial sources, facilities and human resources as one of the big barriers to effective treatment of the

emotional and psychological disorders in developed and developing countries. Moreover, some studies showed that more than 200 million children under 5 years old cannot achieve their full talents in developing countries because of some risky cases such as iodine deficiency, iron deficiency and inadequate cognitive stimulation, which are all closely related to economic situation and available resources.⁹

The result of this study shows that failure to provide necessary and adequate resource for children's total growth is a public challenge which requires planning in different levels of the society. In some societies this holistic approach had proved to be effective. In England, for example, child care welfare services provide a wide range of needs in seven important fields including health, education, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation, emotional and behavioral development and self care skills.¹⁰

"Cultural factors" are another concept of the study. Cultural beliefs and individual and social norms shape a special attitude toward the rights of the children and even the way to discuss these rights. The findings show that cultural beliefs, also, create challenges for the children's right. For example, discrimination between boys and girls which shows itself in educational opportunities, learning facilities, and even the way they are behaved and related, or when child abuse happens in the name of disciplinary manners, or spoiling children in terms of their weakness and defenselessness, all are rooted in cultural beliefs. A study by Ibanez et al. showed that cultural difference is a fundamental and significant factor in ability to determine child physical abuse.¹¹ Moreover, the results of this study show that culture alongside education has an impact on the approaches toward children health care. Analyzing the participant's experiences related to cultural beliefs showed that every activity related to children's rights including determining needs, interventions for health improvement and planning for health care and treatments must be thorough cultural beliefs and attitudes of the family members. O'Hagan believes that today, law and policy making as well

as procedures highlight the necessity of considering cultural background of the child and the family in offering social services.¹²

The participants' experiences also suggest that neglecting children is rooted in culture and different understandings of the norms and cultural concepts make the situation even more complicated. In some cases, parents and others responsible for children care procrastinate their failures and neglects of children's right on the values, culture and social situations or simply ignore the problems and deficiencies. Children also learn to see the deficiencies and difficulties as normal and don't show any protest, which Karoline calls "selective neglect". He believes that cultural obstacles complicate the determination of child neglect. Neglect as a form of child abuse cannot be easily introduced in the society and it makes the case more complicated. O'Hagan's study showed that there are various negative attitudes related to culture which effects the rights of children, child and family care and children support.¹²

Safety and freedom are the two other concepts of the study, which are sub-concepts to the main concept of cultural factors. The participant's experiences suggest that some parents and teachers extremely control children, violate their privacy and search their possessions, believing that children are not able to be independent and decide for themselves without causing trouble. They believe that less options lead to better decision, therefore most often leave them just one option and no choice.

Bell also emphasized on the importance of improving the rights of the children thorough communication. He believes that the existing challenges related to the children's rights are due to attitudes toward children, and most families and even social assistants do not involve children in decision-makings.

The results of this study emphasized on the necessity of supporting children's autonomy in the society. Cemlyn and Briskman also supported this idea and claimed that children are autonomous actors and should be able to live as independent citizens in the society.¹⁴ Monro also writes that children have the right to partici-

pate in the decision-makings related to them and it is importance that guardian of children uphold this right. He found in his study that that major complain children had was lack of privacy regarding their secrets.¹⁵ This study suggest further research on children's ideas and experiences on the rights of autonomy and freedom of movement in order to be considered in judgments and decision-makings related to the children's rights. Khorri Kasabri and colleagues supported this suggestion and said that investigating children's ideas about their rights provides them the opportunity to express their views and interests and also provides the opportunity for authorities to plan a framework to protect children's dignity. Asking children about their rights will also send them the message that the society respects them and wants to listen to them and will teach them the democratic values.¹⁶

The findings of this study also suggest further investigation of the ideas of parents and those in charge of children about children's rights and needs as well as approaches and challenges related to them. Leventhal quoted from Feletti and colleagues that those parents neglected in childhood are more passive about the rights of the children.¹⁷ This study found that taking a passive approach is based on the intention to help and protect children and they even believe that this approach helped them to rescue their children from danger. Kerfoot believes that most of physical and emotional problems of the street children are rooted in family problems and neglect.¹⁸ The findings also showed that parents believe that it is their right to decide for their children. Hall writes that liberal democracy provides parents freedom to decide for the education and training of their children in the way they like and prefer. However, if the parents believe in child abuse as a mean of education and training, it will turn to a challenge to protect their children's right.¹⁹

Parenting style is a significant and effective factor in the children's rights. Authoritative parenting style includes accountability and high expectations and is the best example of a democratic family, in which youth are encouraged to

share their ideas and to participate in family decisions. These parents know their rights as well as their children's rights very well. The opposite is indulgent parents who are very radical, have little expectations from their children and prefer to make decision themselves instead of their children. Authoritarian parents always try to be in control and exert their control on the children. They tell children what to do and try to make them obey and they usually do not provide children with choices or options which prevents children from experiencing the meaning of autonomy and responsibility which are required for moral development and emancipation.²⁰ The results of this study showed that there are always a challenge to finding this balance and once in this challenge, adults including parents usually prefer to behave authoritarian to protect their children. Sometimes this approach is simply legitimized. As Cooper says when children's preferences put them at risk, they should not insist on their choice.²¹

Providing role models is another concept in cultural factors. This concept indicates the significant and effective role of the parents, teachers and adults in general as role models for children. The participants' experiences suggest that children follow the role model of the significant personalities in their lives. Adults (especially parents and teachers) also are interested to pass on their experiences to children and provide themselves as role models. The findings of this study show that this role modeling is not always positive and in the direction of protecting children's right. Mavor in his study found that children learn from observing significant people in their lives and gradually form a behavioral pattern.²² Considering the above mentioned, it seems that those who experience abuse in their childhood will have potential for child abuse as parents. In addition, children of addicted parents are more at risk of addiction to drugs and alcoholism and are considered as the highest risk group in this regard.²³

Youth has a lot of energy and it is necessary to provide them the right situation and opportunities to expend their energy in the right way. Sports are very significant in this regard

and the authorities of the educational system should take it more in consideration. The stress and anxiety created by the school examinations and grades are part of the problem that should be addressed by authorities, and especially using grades as a punishment tool should be stopped.

Misunderstanding physical abuse and punishment and not reporting the child physical abuse are other obstacle to the protection of children's rights. Studies showed that children who are exposed to violence in the family suppress their emotions to inhibit their fear and anxiety. This prevents them from communicating and making relationships with others.^{24,25} Therefore, this study recommends that parents, teachers, and everyone related to children's life

should receive necessary education about children's rights and needs to be capable of providing good role models for children. Further studies also are recommended on the various rights of children, adults' and children's understanding of these rights and approaches to protect children's rights.

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