

Child Protection in Action: An Examination of the Role of the District Child Protection Unit in Rescuing Children from Abuse with Special Reference to Kozhikode District

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Abstract

In socially, culturally, and educationally advanced societies, child safety remains a paramount ethical priority. Despite development, children remain vulnerable to diverse forms of abuse, negligence, and marginalization. Grounded in the fundamental rights of the child, the government has established specialized agencies and legislative frameworks to ensure welfare and protection. These measures serve as critical tools for child liberation from abusive environments. Society cannot exist or progress without healthy future generations, and children represent the most valuable foundation of any society. This article examines the specific interventions of the District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) in Kozhikode regarding child rescue and rehabilitation. The research adopts a qualitative descriptive research design. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five officials working in the District Child Protection Unit, including the District Child Protection Officer, social workers, Child Helpline staff, and the ORC psychologist. Secondary data were obtained through a review of academic literature, government reports, and policy documents related to child protection. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify major patterns related to causes of child vulnerability, institutional responses, and community challenges. The findings reveal that lack of public awareness regarding child rights, dysfunctional family environments, and substance abuse within families are major factors contributing to child vulnerability. The study also highlights, the crucial role of DCPU in community education, rescue operations, rehabilitation processes, and psychological intervention. This research contributes to the broader discourse on institutional child protection and proactive community engagement.

Keywords: Child Protection, DCPU, Kozhikode, Child Abuse, Rehabilitation, Awareness Strategies, Fundamental Rights.

Introduction

According to the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, “a child is defined as a person who has not completed eighteen years of age”. Children are considered one of the most vulnerable sections of society. According to international and national legal standards, any person below the age of 18 years is recognized as a child. Several research studies have highlighted that children are highly susceptible to physical, emotional, social, and psychological risks due to their developmental stage and limited ability to protect themselves. Their dependency on adults and limited life experience further increases their exposure to abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Psychological studies provide important explanations for children’s vulnerability. According to Jean Piaget’s Cognitive Development Theory, children do not possess the same level of reasoning and logical thinking as adults. Their cognitive abilities develop gradually through different stages, which make them less capable of understanding complex situations, risks, and consequences. As a result, children may not always recognize harmful situations or make informed decisions, thereby increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Similarly, Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, particularly the findings of the Bobo Doll Experiment, demonstrate that children learn behaviours by observing and imitating others. Children tend to model the actions of parents, peers, media figures, and people in their surroundings. When children are exposed to violence, neglect, or

inappropriate behaviour, they may adopt similar patterns, which can negatively affect their emotional development and social behaviour. Such learning environments may further increase their susceptibility to risky situations and exploitation. Considering these developmental and psychological factors, it becomes essential for society to provide special care, protection, and support to children. Greater public awareness and community responsibility are necessary to ensure a safe environment for children's growth and well-being. At the same time, institutional and legal protection mechanisms play a crucial role in safeguarding children's rights. Government-supported child protection institutions are designed to prevent abuse, rescue vulnerable children, and provide rehabilitation services.

These institutions are staffed with trained professionals and experts who specialize in child welfare and protection. Social workers, counsellors, child protection officers, and legal authorities work together to address the complex needs of vulnerable children. Their professional interventions help in ensuring safety, emotional recovery, and social reintegration of affected children. Therefore, understanding the functioning and effectiveness of such child protection institutions is vital in strengthening child welfare systems and promoting the overall well-being of children.

Concept of Child Protection

According to UNICEF "Child protection refers to

preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse against children including commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking, child labour and harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage”. The concept of child protection emphasizes the responsibility of society and institutions to ensure that children grow up in a safe, secure, and supportive environment. UNICEF highlights that children become vulnerable due to various factors such as physical and emotional abuse, child labour, trafficking, early marriage, neglect, and exposure to harmful social conditions. These forms of vulnerability not only threaten the physical safety of children but also affect their emotional well-being, education, and overall development. By defining different forms of risks and exploitation, UNICEF clearly demonstrates the importance of child protection as a comprehensive approach that focuses on safeguarding children’s rights, preventing harm, and promoting their healthy development.

Society cannot exist or progress without healthy future generations, and children represent the most valuable foundation of any society. The development of a healthy generation is possible only through systematic, protective, and collaborative efforts by individuals, communities, institutions, and the nation as a whole. A healthy generation does not merely refer to physical well-being, but also includes social, psychological, and emotional balance, which are essential for responsible citizenship and sustainable social development. When children grow in a safe and supportive

environment, they are more likely to become confident, productive, and socially responsible adults. Therefore, the protection of children is not only a matter of individual welfare but also a broader responsibility linked to the protection of society, the nation, and the global community. Ensuring child safety and well-being ultimately contributes to social stability, national development, and a better future for the world

Review of Literature

Kathryn L Hildyard et al. (June 2002), Child neglect is one of the major factors contributing to developmental problems in children. This article discusses the various forms of child neglect, its impact on children's overall well-being, and the major types of maltreatment. Neglect is linked to chronic poverty, major caregiving inadequacies, parental psychopathology, substance misuse, homelessness, family dissolution, and inadequate prenatal and postnatal care (Pelton, 1994). The findings reveal that child neglect leads to severe difficulties in children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, which can have long-term negative consequences on their growth and functioning.

Bhuyan (2021), as reported in *Precious Kashmir* (2025), highlights that child rights awareness in India remains a crucial determinant of children's overall well-being, protection, and development, as inadequate public understanding continues to limit the effective implementation of existing legal and policy

frameworks (Bhuyan, 2021). Although the Indian Constitution guarantees special protections for children and the country is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which emphasizes non-discrimination, survival, development, participation, and the best interests of the child, several studies indicate that awareness of these rights among families and communities remains insufficient (Government of India, 2015; UNICEF, 2019). Research highlights that socio-economic disparities, poverty, illiteracy, and deeply rooted cultural norms contribute significantly to the persistence of child labour, early marriage, trafficking, and abuse, particularly in rural and marginalized populations (Bhuyan, 2021; UNICEF, 2019). The lack of knowledge regarding child protection mechanisms further reduces reporting of violations and reinforces the social acceptance of exploitative practices, thereby increasing children's vulnerability (Bhuyan, 2021). Scholars emphasize that without targeted awareness programs, community participation, and grassroots-level interventions, the legal safeguards provided under acts such as the Right to Education Act, POCSO Act, and Juvenile Justice Act cannot achieve their intended impact, underscoring the need for comprehensive and sustained child rights awareness initiatives across India (Government of India, 2015; UNICEF, 2019).

Mphaphuli (2023) emphasizes that a healthy and nurturing family environment plays a crucial role in promoting children's mental health and overall psychological development. The author

highlights that families characterized by open communication, emotional warmth, strong parent–child relationships, and harmonious interactions provide a secure foundation for children to develop positive coping skills, emotional stability, and healthy behavioural patterns. Such supportive family environments act as protective factors against psychological distress and contribute to children’s resilience. The literature also underscores the family’s role as a primary socialization agent where children learn norms, values, moral conduct, and socially acceptable behaviour. Mphaphuli (2023) argues that children internalize behaviors and emotional responses observed within the family, which directly influence their personality development and psychological well-being.

Kirsimarja Raitasalo et al. (2017) conducted a large-scale population-based cohort study to examine the relationship between parental substance abuse and the physical and psychological health of children aged 0–6 years. The study used Finnish national health care and social welfare register data covering children born in 1997 and 2002, with a total sample of over 113,000 children and their biological parents. The retrospective design and use of official administrative data strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings. The results demonstrated that children exposed to parental substance abuse had significantly higher rates of hospitalization due to injuries, somatic illnesses, and psychiatric disorders. Maternal substance abuse was strongly associated with

increased risks of both physical illness (OR = 1.34) and mental health disorders (OR = 1.33), while paternal substance abuse was particularly linked to psychiatric hospitalizations (OR = 1.18). The study further showed that children living with two substance-abusing parents faced the highest health risks, indicating a cumulative negative effect.

Srinivasan et al.(2023): Children involved in the Juvenile Justice System (JJS) represent a highly vulnerable population due to exposure to adverse family and social environments. Previous studies have established that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction, are strongly associated with increased stress, behavioural problems, and poor mental health outcomes (Felitti et al., 1998; Hughes et al., 2017). Institutionalized children are further exposed to peer victimization, which exacerbates emotional distress and psychological difficulties (Arseneault, 2018). In the Indian context, Srinivasan et al. (2023) reported that 86.7% of children in Child Care Institutions experienced at least one ACE and 71.7% reported bullying, with both factors showing significant negative associations with well-being and positive associations with stress and psychopathology. The study also highlighted that maintaining information about family of origin was linked to lower psychological distress, underscoring the protective role of family attachment. Additionally, research indicates that children from disrupted family environments are more likely to engage in risky or

delinquent behaviours, increasing their likelihood of entering the juvenile justice system (Farrington, 2016). These findings emphasize the need for trauma-informed mental health interventions within the JJS to address the cumulative impact of adversity and institutional stressors (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research approach to examine the operations and practical actions of the District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) in Kozhikode district. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focuses on understanding institutional practices, professional experiences, and contextual factors influencing child protection interventions.

Study Area

The study was carried out in the Kozhikode district of Kerala, where the District Child Protection Unit operates under the Department of Women and Child Development as a component of the Mission Vatsalya child protection framework.

Sampling Technique

The study employed convenience sampling, a non-

probability sampling technique, to select respondents who possess direct professional experience in child protection services. Through this method, five officials working within the District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) were selected for the study. These respondents were chosen because of their direct involvement in child protection services and their availability to participate in the research. Their professional experience provided valuable insights into the functioning of the District Child Protection Unit and the processes involved in rescuing and rehabilitating children from abusive situations.

Data Collection Methods

Primary Data

Primary data was gathered through semi-structured individual interviews. These interviews, averaging 30 to 45 minutes in duration, allowed for an in-depth exploration of case-specific challenges and systemic hurdles.

Secondary Data

Secondary data were collected from:

- Academic journals
- Government reports
- Books
- Policy documents

- Child protection laws and guidelines

Ethical Considerations

Formal ethics approval and administrative permission were obtained from the DCPU authorities. Sensitive information related to child cases was not disclosed. The researcher also assured the respondents that the collected data will be used for academic purposes only.

Transcription and Analysis

All interviews were manually recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Similar patterns and ideas were grouped into themes related to:

- Child rights awareness
- Family Environment and Child Vulnerability
- Impact of Parental Substance Abuse and Neglect
- Psychological Impact of Abuse and Need for Mental Health Support
- Importance of Community Participation and Outreach Programs

District Child Protection Unit (DCPU)

The District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) is responsible for identifying and monitoring child protection services at the village level. District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) is a

fundamental unit for the implementation of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act and erstwhile Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) presently Mission Vatsalya in the district. It is responsible for recommending and monitoring the implementation of child protection services at the village level. A District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) is a specialized government agency or department responsible for safeguarding the rights and welfare of children within a specific geographic district or region.

Major Activities

1. Responsibilities under Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children)

- Conduct a review of the child placed in the place of safety every year and forward the report to the Children's Court.
- Submit monthly reports to the State Child Protection Society (SCPS).
- Notify the State Government about a vacancy in JJB, CWC six months before such a vacancy arises.
- Review reports submitted by inspection committees and resolve the conflicts.

2. Coordination and Liaising

- Ensure inter-departmental coordination and liaise with the relevant departments of the State Government and State Child Protection Society (SCPS) and other DCPUs in the state.

3. Child Help Line

- Child helpline is the emergency helpline for children. It is available 24 hours of time. It is under a project coordinator social counsellor, Supervisor, and Caseworkers.

4. Counselling for children

- Foster Care
- Adoption
- Sponsorship program
- District resource centre
- Parenting clinic

5. ORC

- A program aimed at developing life skills in children with a special focus on parenting, mentoring, and counselling has begun in the district as part of the state-wide.

6. SHARANABALYAM (2018)

A project to ensure that the state is free from child labor, child begging trafficking and street children. Such children are also vulnerable to other forms of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. To redress this issue, through the Women and Child Development Department.

Results

Lack of Awareness on Child Rights and Child Protection Laws

The results of the present study clearly show that one of the biggest obstacles to child protection initiatives is still a lack of knowledge about child rights and protection laws. According to the District Child Protection Officer, Kozhikode district records approximately 250–300 child-related cases per month, which reflects the growing seriousness of child protection issues. This increasing number of cases persists despite the existence of robust legal frameworks such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, indicating that legal provisions alone are not sufficient to prevent violations. The DCPO further noted that even educated individuals often lack adequate knowledge about the importance of reporting child abuse.

Similarly, the social worker's field experiences regarding child marriage and child labour demonstrate the widespread ignorance among families and communities regarding the illegality of such practices. In the child marriage case, the parents were unaware that forcing their minor daughter into marriage was a violation of law. Likewise, in the child labour case, neither the hotel management nor the surrounding community reported the violation until the child escaped and was rescued.

These findings are consistent with the observations of

Bhuyan (2021), as cited in Precious Kashmir (2025), who states that insufficient public awareness about child rights continues to limit the effective implementation of child protection laws in India. Studies further indicate that socio-economic inequalities, cultural norms, and lack of knowledge about legal mechanisms often contribute to practices such as child labour, early marriage, and abuse. The literature also emphasizes that without community awareness and grassroots-level participation, legal provisions such as the Right to Education Act, POCSO Act, and the Juvenile Justice Act cannot achieve their intended objectives.

Family Environment and Child Vulnerability

Another major theme emerging from the results is the significant influence of family environment on children's well-being and vulnerability. The DCPO and Child Helpline (CHL) Coordinator reported that many child protection cases arise from dysfunctional family environments, parental conflicts, and domestic instability. In several cases, parents use children as tools in marital disputes, forcing them to provide false statements or involving them in conflicts that negatively affect their emotional well-being.

Similarly, the Child Helpline case worker described a case in which a mother reported that her husband's substance abuse and violent behaviour created an unsafe environment for their children. The two sons living with the father experienced continuous physical and emotional abuse, demonstrating how family dysfunction can

directly threaten children's safety and mental health.

These findings correspond with the work of Mphaphuli (2023), who emphasizes that a nurturing and supportive family environment plays a crucial role in children's psychological development. According to the author, positive parent-child relationships, emotional warmth, and open communication act as protective factors that promote children's emotional stability and resilience. Conversely, when families are characterized by conflict, neglect, or lack of emotional support, children are more likely to experience psychological distress and behavioural problems. The current findings therefore highlight that strengthening family support systems is a key component of effective child protection.

Impact of Parental Substance Abuse and Neglect

Parental substance abuse emerged as another critical factor contributing to children's vulnerability. The DCPO and Child Helpline case worker both reported that many child protection cases are associated with substance abuse within families, which often results in domestic violence, neglect, and unsafe living conditions for children. The case reported by the CHL case worker clearly demonstrates how a father's drug addiction led to physical and emotional abuse of his children and created an environment of constant fear.

This finding aligns with the research of Kirsimarja Raitasalo et al. (2017), which revealed that children exposed to parental

substance abuse face significantly higher risks of both physical illness and mental health disorders. The study found that paternal substance abuse is particularly associated with psychiatric problems among children, while children living with two substance-abusing parents face the highest health risks.

Additionally, Kathryn L. Hildyard et al. (2002) highlight that neglect often occurs in contexts of parental substance abuse, poverty, and caregiving inadequacies. Such conditions can severely affect children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. The present findings support these arguments by demonstrating that substance abuse within families frequently leads to neglect, violence, and instability, ultimately increasing children's vulnerability to harm.

Psychological Impact of Abuse and Need for Mental Health Support

The ORC psychologist emphasized that many child victims, particularly those abused by family members, experience severe psychological trauma. Although psychological interventions are available through projects such as ORC and school-based programs like "Smart 40," maintaining continuous psychological follow-up remains a major challenge because families often show limited interest in long-term mental health support.

These findings correspond with the study by Srinivasan et al. (2023), which highlights that children exposed to adverse

childhood experiences such as abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction often experience increased stress, emotional distress, and psychological disorders. The study further reports that institutionalized children frequently experience bullying and other stressors that negatively affect their well-being. The literature also emphasizes the importance of trauma-informed mental health services and supportive environments to help children recover from such experiences.

Thus, the present findings highlight the critical need for sustained psychological support, family counselling, and trauma-informed interventions to ensure the long-term well-being of vulnerable children.

Importance of Community Participation and Outreach Programs

The results also emphasize the importance of community-level awareness and outreach initiatives in strengthening child protection mechanisms. The DCPO explained that Child Protection Committees have been formed in every panchayat in Kozhikode district to improve grassroots-level awareness and reporting of child-related issues. Similarly, the ORC psychologist conducts school-based awareness programs and life skills training to empower children with knowledge about their rights and protection mechanisms.

These initiatives reflect the recommendations of previous literature,

which stress the importance of community participation and preventive interventions in child protection. As highlighted by Bhuyan (2021) and UNICEF (2019), awareness programs and community engagement are essential for improving reporting mechanisms and reducing the social acceptance of exploitative practices such as child labour and early marriage.

Suggestions

- Focus on community awareness about child rights and the importance of protecting these rights by recognizing children as an important part of the community.
- The government should strengthen public participation through diverse strategies while planning and implementing child-centred programs and initiatives.
- Adults should develop a clear understanding of children's vulnerability and, accordingly, adopt responsible attitudes and practices to ensure their protection and to create a safe and supportive environment for their overall development.
- Parents should take primary responsibility for their children's overall development and consistently maintain a supportive and nurturing family environment that promotes the well-being and healthy growth of the child.
- The public should demonstrate active engagement and cooperation with government-initiated child-centred programs and participate in community-based activities

aimed at enhancing child protection, development, and well-being.

Conclusion

Children are the most valuable and vulnerable members of society, and their holistic development depends on consistent care, protection, guidance, and emotional support from families, communities, and institutions. The government has initiated several strategies and welfare programs to enhance the overall well-being of children. However, the effectiveness of these protective measures largely depends on active community participation and local-level involvement. Interdepartmental collaboration plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of child-centred services. Coordinated efforts among various departments strengthen service delivery mechanisms and ensure comprehensive support for children in need of care and protection. This study highlights real-life experiences shared by officials from the District Child Protection Unit, which provide practical insights into the functioning of child protection services and the challenges faced during implementation. The interview-based findings also help in understanding the roles, responsibilities, and service delivery processes of officials in a more realistic and application-oriented manner. Despite the availability of policies and institutional frameworks, the study identifies public awareness and parental attitudes as key areas requiring improvement. Enhancing community awareness about child rights and promoting positive

parenting practices are essential for creating a safe, supportive, and child-friendly environment. Strengthening these aspects will contribute significantly to improving the effectiveness of child protection systems and ensuring sustainable outcomes for children's overall development.

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