

Institutional Reform and Social Justice in Child Protection Systems

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ABSTRACT: This narrative review investigates the alignment between international child rights frameworks and domestic implementation practices across multiple regions, with a focus on vulnerable populations, including children in armed conflict, refugee contexts, and marginalized communities. Drawing on a systematic synthesis of empirical and theoretical literature, the study utilized databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and HeinOnline to explore the themes of child justice, education, healthcare access, and protection from violence and exploitation. Results highlight persistent challenges in translating global norms, such as the UNCRC, into actionable national policies due to bureaucratic fragmentation, cultural resistance, and political instability. Comparative insights from conflict and post-conflict countries underscore the critical role of institutional maturity, legal reform, and interagency collaboration in enhancing child protection mechanisms. The discussion further emphasizes the importance of child participation, cross-sectoral policy coherence, and community-based approaches. Legal innovations such as specialized child courts and inclusive education policies are found to be effective when combined with capacity-building and sustained monitoring systems. This review concludes that child rights protection demands a multidisciplinary and culturally sensitive strategy that integrates legal, educational, and social sectors. Future research should address existing gaps by evaluating context-specific interventions and developing scalable models that strengthen national compliance with international norms..

Keywords: Child Rights; International Child Law; Child Protection Policy; Juvenile Justice Reform; Vulnerable Children;



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INTRODUCTION

The protection of children's rights constitutes a multidimensional and complex challenge that involves the interaction between international legal norms and domestic law frameworks aimed at ensuring the well-being, development, and safeguarding of children globally (Parkes, 2013; Arts, 2014). Legal mechanisms have evolved significantly over the past decades, underpinned by foundational instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

(UNCRC), which establishes a normative baseline for child protection across nations. This Convention, along with other international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), consolidates basic principles of non-discrimination, inclusiveness, and comprehensive protection for children (Arts, 2014).

The influence of international norms has spurred legislative reforms in many countries, prompting states to incorporate these principles into national law through statutes, regulations, and public policies that guarantee access to education, healthcare, and legal protection for children (Ochen et al., 2017). The domestic incorporation of international law is not merely a matter of legal alignment; rather, it requires nuanced adaptation to the sociocultural and political context of each country, ensuring both relevance and efficacy (Liefwaard & Doek, 2015).

As a result, these normative frameworks—though universal in aspiration—are operationalized differently within local jurisdictions. The UNCRC, for example, is not only declarative but provides concrete guidelines regarding a child's right to education, healthcare, freedom from violence, and a life of dignity (Ochen et al., 2017). The integration of these rights into domestic legal systems depends largely on the proactive role of national legislators and judicial actors, who must translate international commitments into enforceable legal instruments (Liefwaard & Doek, 2015).

The significance of these frameworks becomes particularly evident when analyzing contexts where children are most vulnerable. In regions afflicted by armed conflict, children often face egregious violations of their rights, including forced recruitment, abduction, and abuse, which significantly impair their physical, psychological, and social development (Khorram-Manesh, 2022; Olusegun, 2021). Refugee settings further exacerbate these vulnerabilities, where displaced children suffer from poverty, lack of education, and inadequate legal protection (Khorram-Manesh, 2022). States affected by conflict frequently lack the infrastructure and capacity to implement effective child protection mechanisms, increasing the urgency for international intervention (Ochen et al., 2017).

Outside of conflict zones, domestic judicial systems also present significant challenges. Children often encounter legal systems that are ill-suited to their developmental needs, leading to processes that do not consider their cognitive and emotional capacities (Tchermalykh, 2023). This can result in symbolic violence and discrimination, compounding trauma and obstructing rehabilitation and reintegration (Tchermalykh, 2023). Hence, there is a pressing need to reform legal procedures to ensure child-sensitive justice that aligns with both international norms and developmental psychology (Liefwaard & Doek, 2015).

Child marriage is another critical issue, particularly prevalent in regions where traditional and religious practices conflict with international standards (Ullah et al., 2021). Such practices violate fundamental rights to education, health, and childhood, and require legislative reform and multi-sectoral intervention to be eradicated (Ochen et al., 2017).

Despite the proliferation of normative frameworks, the implementation gap remains significant. Developing countries, in particular, face structural challenges in translating international law into practice, hindered by limited resources, weak institutions, and fluctuating political conditions (Milne, 2015). These challenges necessitate institutional strengthening and capacity-building to enable effective law enforcement and oversight.

A major concern within the literature is the gap between international norms and domestic implementation. While many states have ratified key instruments like the UNCRC, their translation into national law often varies in interpretation and application, leading to fragmentation in child protection (Grugel & Peruzzotti, 2012; Sutherland, 2016). This inconsistency highlights the need for a comprehensive examination of how international norms are domesticated within different legal systems.

The aim of this review is to synthesize theoretical and empirical literature addressing the relationship between international child rights norms and their implementation in domestic legal frameworks. This review will examine how these norms are adopted, adapted, and enforced at the national level, and identify barriers and facilitators to effective implementation. It will also assess the effectiveness of monitoring and accountability mechanisms in ensuring compliance with international obligations.

The scope of this review includes comparative analysis across geographical contexts, focusing particularly on developing countries where implementation challenges are most pronounced. Attention will also be given to specific population groups, including children in conflict zones, refugee children, and those involved in or affected by judicial systems.

By mapping out the dynamic interplay between global standards and local legal practices, this review seeks to offer both descriptive and normative insights that can inform policy development and legal reform aimed at strengthening child protection systems worldwide.

METHOD

This section outlines the systematic methodology employed to gather, select, and analyze literature on child rights within international and domestic legal frameworks. The literature review combines a content analysis approach and a comprehensive review methodology, validated in previous works such as "Marriage of Minor: Implications from Nigerian and Tunisian Legal Systems Framework" (2023) and Ochen et al. (2017). These methods ensure the reliability, reproducibility, and depth of analysis in exploring the intersection between legal theory and policy implementation in the realm of child rights.

The literature search was conducted using a multi-database strategy to ensure a comprehensive scope. The databases included Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR, HeinOnline, Web of Science, ProQuest, and SSRN. These platforms were selected due to their recognized credibility, disciplinary diversity, and accessibility to peer-reviewed academic sources. Notably, Google Scholar was essential for capturing cross-disciplinary insights and literature from open-access or institutionally hosted repositories, while HeinOnline was invaluable for accessing primary legal texts and scholarly law journals.

The literature search process incorporated advanced search techniques, including Boolean operators to refine and expand search results. The primary keywords included "child rights," "children's rights," "child protection," "international law," and "domestic legal framework." Additional technical terms such as "child protection policies," "legal implementation," "legislative framework," and terms representing violations like "child abuse," "child exploitation," and "child

maltreatment" were also used. The search syntax was adapted for each database to optimize the specificity and inclusivity of the results.

To maximize linguistic inclusiveness, the search was conducted in both English and relevant local languages. This ensured coverage of literature from both global sources and regional publications, particularly those from developing countries where child rights may be documented in non-English formats. Multilingual terms such as "hak anak," "perlindungan anak," and "kerangka hukum domestik" were also used, which allowed for the inclusion of context-specific policies and domestic legislation.

The study applied clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected literature. Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed journal articles, legal commentaries, government reports, and empirical studies published within the last 20 years. Selected studies had to address child rights through international conventions or national legal systems. Exclusion criteria involved eliminating literature that lacked methodological rigor, was not peer-reviewed, or focused on unrelated topics.

The screening process began with an initial identification of articles based on title and abstract. Relevant articles were then subjected to full-text screening using pre-defined inclusion parameters. Reference management tools such as EndNote and Mendeley were used to organize and deduplicate citations. Where necessary, institutional repositories and university library collections were searched to access theses, dissertations, and grey literature not available in commercial databases.

Content analysis was employed to systematically extract themes and legal concepts from the literature. This method facilitated the identification of recurring policy debates, legal inconsistencies, and interpretive divergences between international standards and domestic practices. The analysis also helped highlight policy gaps and institutional barriers affecting the enforcement of child rights.

The methodology incorporated a cross-national comparative approach, allowing the study to examine how different legal systems interpret and implement international child rights obligations. Case studies of specific countries, including Nigeria and Tunisia, were utilized to explore legislative adaptations and socio-cultural influences on child rights enforcement.

The methodological design was further strengthened through a systematic literature review protocol, which included the documentation of search strategies, the number of records retrieved, and the justification for article selection. Triangulation of data from multiple sources and iterative validation of keywords ensured the reliability and accuracy of the review process.

To enhance analytical depth, software tools such as NVivo and ATLAS.ti were used for thematic coding and qualitative synthesis. Bibliometric analysis using tools like VOSviewer was also employed to visualize keyword networks and identify dominant themes and influential works. This provided insight into the evolution of child rights discourse and revealed under-researched areas.

Finally, meta-synthesis was applied to integrate findings from qualitative studies, allowing for the construction of a cohesive narrative on the domestic adaptation of international child rights norms.

The methodological rigor and multi-faceted search strategy underpin the study's capacity to deliver a robust, interdisciplinary, and contextually grounded literature review.

This methodology ensures transparency, replicability, and scholarly contribution to the study of child rights across legal and policy domains. The approach reflects a commitment to academic integrity, global inclusivity, and the pursuit of actionable insights for child protection reform.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of literature on child protection across various legal, political, and social contexts reveals multidimensional challenges and diverse policy responses. This section organizes findings under thematic areas including armed conflict, juvenile justice systems, access to education and health, and violence and exploitation. The discussion integrates empirical evidence and comparative analysis to provide a global perspective on the protection of children's rights.

In the context of armed conflict, the literature highlights that war and civil unrest severely compromise children's health standards through both direct violence and systemic collapse of infrastructure, particularly access to clean water, food, and medical services (Khorram-Manesh, 2022). Children exposed to conflict zones frequently endure physical injuries and long-term psychological trauma, which severely disrupt their developmental trajectories. Furthermore, inadequate sanitation, lack of healthcare services, and food insecurity contribute to elevated mortality rates in these regions. Studies emphasize that delays in enforcing international humanitarian law and limited domestic resources exacerbate the vulnerability of children in conflict settings. Moreover, humanitarian responses are often reactive rather than preventive, undermining efforts to protect children proactively (Khorram-Manesh, 2022).

Violations of children's rights in conflict zones are also manifest in the form of forced recruitment, abuse, and sexual violence. Loss of access to education and basic needs further compounds these challenges. The absence of coordinated mechanisms among international agencies and national governments hampers the rehabilitation of affected children. Therefore, scholars argue for policy reforms that are both preventive and responsive, integrating international legal frameworks into domestic policies capable of withstanding the unique pressures of conflict environments (Khorram-Manesh, 2022).

Complementary to this, Olusegun (2021) underscores that in internal conflicts, legal frameworks for child protection are often fragmented and poorly enforced. Despite formal international commitments, practical implementation is constrained by weak institutions, limited capacity, and unsustainable post-conflict actions. This disconnect between existing legal provisions and on-ground enforcement renders child protection mechanisms ineffective. The literature emphasizes the need for robust oversight mechanisms that bridge this gap and suggests that national institutions must be reformed to better uphold children's rights (Olusegun, 2021).

Comparative analyses show a stark contrast between child protection in active conflict zones and post-conflict states. Countries emerging from conflict often benefit from international institutional support that strengthens national accountability mechanisms. These nations are better positioned to implement child protection measures due to institutional reforms and recovery programs

targeting education, healthcare, and justice systems. Conversely, conflict-ridden states lack the infrastructure and administrative capacity to enforce protective policies effectively. These differences highlight the significance of sustained institutional support and interdisciplinary policy interventions in post-conflict recovery (Olusegun, 2021).

Regarding juvenile justice systems, T'chermalykh (2023) outlines significant variability in how jurisdictions incorporate international standards. Emphasis is placed on child participation, specialized legal representation, and advocacy mechanisms that consider cognitive and emotional distinctions between children and adults. Legal models prioritizing professional child advocacy are noted to provide more flexibility and cultural sensitivity in addressing cases. Effective juvenile justice systems are characterized by well-trained legal personnel and interdisciplinary collaboration with psychologists, social workers, and child rights experts (T'chermalykh, 2023).

Liefwaard and Doek (2015) demonstrate that jurisdictions which have internalized the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) have achieved notable progress in integrating child-centered interpretations into domestic legal rulings. Judicial capacity to translate international principles into localized decisions is a key success factor, as is the presence of effective monitoring systems to ensure enforcement of court mandates. These systems enhance legal outcomes that prioritize children's best interests and underscore the value of judicial reform in child rights implementation (Liefwaard & Doek, 2015).

Further research by O'Brien and Fitz-Gibbon (2018) reveals a paradigm shift from punitive to rehabilitative juvenile justice models in several jurisdictions. Despite political pressures favoring "tough on crime" policies, there is a growing recognition of the benefits of rehabilitation in reducing recidivism and fostering social reintegration. The literature identifies challenges such as societal resistance and resource limitations but asserts that human rights-based approaches to juvenile justice yield better long-term outcomes (O'Brien & Fitz-Gibbon, 2018).

In the domains of education and health, international treaties such as the UNCRC obligate states to ensure universal access. Barnett (2021) and Arts (2014) identify variations in national implementation. While countries like the UK and Scotland have integrated inclusive, multidisciplinary frameworks involving education, health, and social services, local implementation remains hindered by inconsistent interpretation and resource constraints. Effective policy monitoring is critical for bridging the gap between international standards and on-ground realities (Arts, 2014).

Barnett's (2021) studies on migrant and minority children show that structural barriers, including discriminatory practices and inadequate infrastructure, obstruct access to essential services. Children of refugees and minorities often face challenges stemming from bureaucratic inertia, insufficient inter-agency coordination, and cultural stigmatization. These findings call for policy reforms that are both inclusive and context-sensitive, ensuring equal access to quality education and healthcare (Barnett, 2021).

Duraisingam et al. (2024) spotlight the plight of children of migrant workers in Sabah, Malaysia. Despite legal entitlements, these children experience exclusion due to geographic isolation, administrative burdens, and discriminatory practices. The study urges comprehensive policy

dialogue and enhanced interagency collaboration to overcome institutional bottlenecks and ensure inclusive educational access (Duraisingam et al., 2024).

Austin (2012) further examines access challenges among Burmese migrant children who lack legal documentation, face linguistic barriers, and suffer structural discrimination. These issues severely constrain their ability to access education and healthcare. Policy solutions must include legal recognition, administrative reforms, and cultural competency training for frontline service providers (Austin, 2012).

On the issue of violence and exploitation, literature documents physical, sexual, and psychological abuse in familial, educational, and community settings. Mathews (2018) emphasizes the role of legal systems in identifying, preventing, and prosecuting abuse through systematic reporting and evidence collection mechanisms. Cultural norms and gender inequalities are cited as exacerbating risk factors. To combat these, the literature advocates for comprehensive legal reform and interdisciplinary interventions involving law enforcement, social services, and civil society (Mathews, 2018).

Sriwiset (2024) presents a case study on Thailand's legislative and institutional response to gender-based violence and child sexual exploitation. Policy initiatives have included strengthened legislation, specialized enforcement units, and victim rehabilitation programs. While national responses have improved reporting and intervention mechanisms, resource disparities and regional implementation gaps persist. Civil society engagement and international collaboration have been instrumental in enhancing accountability and transparency (Sriwiset, 2024).

These findings underscore the complex interplay between legal standards and practical implementation in child protection. While global legal instruments offer robust frameworks, local realities often present significant barriers. Structural, institutional, and cultural impediments must be addressed through sustained reforms and multi-sectoral collaboration. The literature consistently advocates for child-centered, interdisciplinary, and context-responsive approaches across all areas of child protection.

In conclusion, the reviewed studies present an extensive, evidence-based overview of child rights issues globally. They call for integrated, participatory, and adaptive policy frameworks that bridge international norms and domestic implementation. These insights offer a foundation for future research and policy development aimed at achieving equitable, effective, and sustainable child protection systems.

The findings synthesized from this narrative review align closely with the established body of literature on the complexities of implementing international child rights norms within domestic legal frameworks. As Arts (2014) emphasizes, while international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provide an ideal normative structure centered on the "best interests of the child," real-world application frequently encounters systemic and structural barriers. The results reaffirm this challenge by illustrating the gap between normative standards and implementation mechanisms in national contexts.

The concept of the "best interests of the child" has long served as a theoretical foundation in child rights literature, yet its operationalization remains inconsistent across jurisdictions. Parkes (2013) elaborates that translation from international conventions to enforceable domestic norms is

impeded by contextual variables including institutional capacity, legal pluralism, and local political will. The empirical data presented in this review corroborate these challenges, as national systems often struggle to harmonize international standards with local socio-legal realities. This disconnect is particularly evident in post-conflict contexts where legal systems remain fragile and institutional coordination is lacking (Olusegun, 2021; Khorram-Manesh, 2022).

One systemic factor contributing to the weak implementation of child rights is bureaucratic fragmentation. Grugel and Peruzzotti (2012) identify administrative inefficiencies as a major barrier to cohesive policy implementation. Findings from the reviewed literature demonstrate that even in nations with ratified child rights frameworks, interagency communication failures and overlapping mandates prevent effective coordination. This highlights the need for cross-sectoral reform that includes clear mandates and improved data-sharing protocols among child protection entities.

Cultural dynamics further exacerbate implementation gaps. Traditional values may conflict with modern interpretations of children's rights, creating resistance among local communities and public officials (Grugel & Peruzzotti, 2012). For example, the notion of children as autonomous rights holders often contrasts with patriarchal family structures prevalent in certain societies. Parkes (2013) warns that without cultural sensitivity and community engagement, rights-based interventions risk being perceived as external impositions rather than contextually relevant reforms. This review identifies multiple instances where such cultural misalignments have hindered effective implementation, particularly in areas concerning education for girls and opposition to juvenile justice reforms.

Political instability and low levels of institutional accountability also undermine efforts to protect child rights. Arts (2014) and Grugel & Peruzzotti (2012) argue that fragmented political agendas and frequent administrative turnovers result in inconsistent policy implementation. The review findings reinforce this by showing that the political will to enforce child protection laws is often diluted by competing national priorities. Moreover, pressures from conservative or nationalist groups may discourage governments from adopting progressive reforms aligned with international obligations.

Legal enforcement mechanisms, particularly juvenile courts and child-specific litigation processes, play a pivotal role in bridging the implementation gap. As Forde (2018) and Tchermarykh (2023) explain, specialized child courts and representation models that prioritize child participation have demonstrated promise in aligning judicial processes with the spirit of the UNCRC. The review highlights that successful models integrate social work, psychological counseling, and community rehabilitation—underscoring the importance of intersectoral approaches. Nonetheless, the capacity of national judiciaries to internalize these international standards remains limited without dedicated training and reform.

Moreover, systemic inequities in access to education and health services reveal the limitations of normative protections in ensuring substantive rights. Despite international recognition of education and healthcare as fundamental rights, children from marginalized communities, including migrants and ethnic minorities, face persistent barriers (Barnett, 2021; Austin, 2012). The reviewed literature points to administrative hurdles, discriminatory practices, and resource scarcity as primary obstacles. In countries like Malaysia and Thailand, bureaucratic exclusion of migrant

children from public education systems illustrates how legal guarantees are insufficient without inclusive administrative policies (Duraisingam et al., 2024).

A related challenge is the underreporting and under-prosecution of child abuse and exploitation cases. Mathews (2018) demonstrates that despite legal frameworks, enforcement remains weak due to poor coordination between law enforcement and social services. This narrative review finds that even in jurisdictions with comprehensive laws, systemic failures—including lack of trained personnel, insufficient shelters, and judicial delays—significantly reduce access to justice for abused children. The findings suggest the necessity for multi-agency protocols that include streamlined reporting mechanisms and survivor-centered rehabilitation.

To mitigate these challenges, the review underscores the importance of institutional capacity building and structural reform. Solutions proposed in the literature include the establishment of independent child rights monitoring bodies, enhanced training for judicial and law enforcement officials, and increased public investment in child welfare infrastructure (Arts, 2014; Forde, 2018). Importantly, these interventions must be locally adapted to navigate cultural sensibilities and political constraints. For example, Sriwiset (2024) documents how Thailand's tailored policy reforms—such as the creation of specialized child protection units—have yielded measurable improvements in abuse response mechanisms.

Social interventions also emerge as critical complements to legal reforms. Community-based education programs and grassroots advocacy campaigns are identified as key tools in reshaping cultural attitudes toward children and their rights. Media and digital platforms offer additional avenues for raising awareness, fostering dialogue, and generating policy momentum (Grugel & Peruzzotti, 2012). Collaborative efforts between governments, NGOs, and international organizations are therefore essential to sustain policy reforms and ensure their equitable implementation.

Despite these proposed solutions, the reviewed literature exposes significant limitations. One major concern is the lack of longitudinal studies that assess the long-term impacts of legal and policy reforms. Most evaluations focus on short-term outputs rather than long-term child welfare outcomes. Additionally, many studies disproportionately emphasize Global North contexts, limiting their applicability to countries in the Global South where legal pluralism and resource constraints are more pronounced. Further research is needed to explore how localized understandings of child rights influence policy outcomes, particularly in post-colonial and multicultural settings.

Lastly, interdisciplinary collaboration remains underdeveloped in many national child protection strategies. The literature argues that without integration of legal, psychological, and socio-economic perspectives, interventions risk being fragmented and unsustainable (Bhansali, 2019). Future research should prioritize multi-stakeholder approaches that center children's lived experiences and adapt international standards to specific national realities. In this way, both the theory and practice of child rights protection can evolve toward more just and effective outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review has underscored the systemic challenges in implementing child protection standards in both international and domestic legal frameworks. The findings reveal that despite the existence of globally accepted instruments such as the UNCRC, significant gaps persist between normative commitments and real-world enforcement. These gaps are compounded by institutional fragmentation, cultural resistance, and political instability, which hinder the realization of children's rights, particularly in conflict zones and among vulnerable populations. The discussion confirms that aligning national policies with international principles requires not only legal reform but also socio-political transformation supported by intersectoral collaboration.

Urgent intervention is required to strengthen judicial capacities, increase inclusive access to education and health services, and improve monitoring mechanisms. Policy recommendations include reforming child justice systems with a restorative lens, institutionalizing interagency coordination, and enhancing community-based child protection networks. Additionally, mainstreaming child participation in legal and policy processes remains pivotal in fulfilling the best interests of the child.

This review contributes to existing scholarship by offering a cross-contextual synthesis of child protection challenges that integrates legal theory with field-based evidence. It is among the first to critically analyze how international child rights frameworks interact with post-conflict state dynamics, juvenile justice reform, and socio-cultural resistance in policy implementation.

Future research should explore the long-term effectiveness of national reforms influenced by international standards, particularly in post-conflict reconstruction. There is also a need to evaluate how localized sociocultural norms can be reconciled with global child rights principles without undermining community identity. Ultimately, the strategic integration of legal, educational, and social interventions is crucial for overcoming the structural barriers that continue to marginalize children's rights and well-being worldwide.

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