

# The Role of Social Work in Protecting Children from Electronic Manipulation

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## **Abstract:**

**Background:** Electronic exploitation is a relatively novel type of risk to child safety, ever growing with the proliferation of networked technologies. Nonetheless, little focus is often given to this increasing risk.

**Aim:** The current study aimed to assess the role of social work in protecting children from electronic manipulation through three dimensions: practice, research, and family counselling.

**Methodology:** The research surveyed 130 social workers, male and female, using a validated questionnaire, measuring responses on a three-point Likert scale.

**Results:** The results indicated that the field had a limited role to play in the protection of children from electronic exploitation through all dimensions it was assessed, practice, research, and family counselling.

**Keywords:** Social Work, Child Protection, Child Welfare, Electronic Exploitation, Cyber Exploitation

## **THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM ELECTRONIC MANIPULATION**

Contemporary times have seen the mass proliferation of digital technologies and social media usage that has resultantly expanded the exposure of children to online spaces. In these spaces, vulnerable children are increasingly facing the risk of electronic exploitation, in the form of grooming, abuse, exposure to harmful content, or, in extreme cases, trafficking (Meena et al., 2021; Sutarya et al., 2025). Unlike traditional exploitation, which is more apparent, electronic exploitation occurs unnoticed. Therefore, the nature of

electronic exploitation complicates the capacity for detection and intervention. These shortcomings in detection and intervention are further heightened by traditional child protection methods being better designed to prevent exploitation in physical environments rather than digital spaces (Sutarya et al., 2025). Existing child protection initiatives, therefore, struggle with this more recent form of child exploitation.

Children's electronic exploitation is a form of human exploitation that is digitized, using technologies such as social media to abuse, manipulate, and profit from children. It is a widespread issue that has the potential to impact virtually any child who has a digital footprint and is active in digital spaces, but there is severely limited awareness of the issue, legislative gaps, and weak institutional capacity to mitigate it, increasing its risk (Rai, 2024; Wahyu, 2025). Research by the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) shows that parents feel unprepared globally to address the novel types of risks that their children face in the digital space, and few have an understanding of how to protect their children from potential electronic exploitation (Wahyu, 2025). Therefore, the profession, as a practice grounded in the protection of the vulnerable and promotion of human wellbeing, needs to be more involved in shielding children from electronic exploitation.

The mission of the field of social work aligns perfectly with the prevention of electronic exploitation among children. Professionals in the field are strategically positioned to undertake research on electronic exploitation of children, educate families on the risk of electronic exploitation, counsel victims, and influence policies related to the issue (Gerassi & Nichols, 2021). Nevertheless, the field is unable to make notable contributions to the prevention of online exploitation of children, despite having enough potential to have an impact on the electronic exploitation of children. The discipline's practice does not consider the issue, research does not give adequate attention to electronic exploitation, and family counseling approaches do not present the issue as one worth considering.

The current study will examine the role that the profession of social work plays in safeguarding children from electronic exploitation. It will evaluate the role of the profession from three dimensions, namely practice, research, and family counselling with the three dimensions allowing for a more comprehensive

view of the contributions of the discipline in contributing to child protection from electronic exploitation. The study anticipates generating insights that are useful to policy formulation, training of professionals, and designing of interventions for child protection. Nonetheless, its overall objective remains to gauge how much the field contributes to preventing the electronic exploitation of children in Saudi Arabia.

## **THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN PROTECTING CHILDREN**

The field of social work is integral to child protection. One of the key functions of the discipline in facilitating the protection of children is resource mobilization (Newman et al., 2025). The field avails mechanisms to support the integration of multiple child protection resources. Through the field, it is possible to mobilize financial and material resources that support child protection (Newman et al., 2025). It is also possible to organize human resources that can facilitate child protection including but not limited to volunteers, social work professionals, healthcare personnel and law enforcement (Huang et al., 2022). The capacity to mobilize resources brought by the field ensures that child protection initiatives robust, with the capacity to provide adequate and sustainable protection.

The social work profession also contributes to the protection of children through supporting the identification of children facing abuse or those at risk of abuse. Identification of children facing abuse or at risk of abuse is presented as a core responsibility of the discipline by Ejrnæs & Moesby-Jensen (2021). It involves the recognition of various signs of abuse, neglect, exploitation, isolation, or emotional distress in children along with assessments of their living environments (Huang et al., 2022). Identification of children experiencing abuse or at risk of abuse is significantly important. It facilitates the development of relevant interventions based on the identified needs of the children and their families (Goulet et al., 2018). Interventions can be tailor made to fit the specific needs of the children undergoing abuse or at risk of abuse.

Besides mobilization of resources and identifying children experiencing or at risk of abuse the profession also plays a role in protecting children through supporting education provision to avert child abuse and maltreatment. Education provision is done by professionals in the field seeking avenues to teach children, families, and communities about child welfare and safety (Marek, 2018). For

children, these avenues manifest in the form of school-based initiatives (Huang et al., 2022). For the parents and communities, these avenues come in the form of parenting or community based initiatives (Marek, 2018). Education initiatives facilitated by professionals in the field benefit the mitigation of child abuse and maltreatment before its incidence. They stimulate an overall shift in social perspectives that makes the incidence of child abuse less likely, hence protecting the children.

The profession of social work also contributes to the protection of children by facilitating the overall implementation of child protection laws. In many jurisdictions, professionals in the field are authorized and legally mandated to take direct actions in safeguarding children that are stipulated in the law (Boonzaaier et al., 2021). The actions may include, but are not limited to, extracting children from unsafe environments, placing them in safe care institutions, and supporting investigations on offenders. They support the implementation of the law from the moment of its inception to its application in punishing offenders (Avarvand et al., 2023). Subsequently, this ensures that the spirit of child protection laws effectively translates to real-world practice to advance the protection of children.

## **SAUDI ARABIA'S ROLE IN PROTECTING CHILDREN**

Saudi Arabia has for long been involved in child protection, albeit its involvement is not without notable gaps and limitations. In the early days, child protection in Saudi was mostly a function of the criminal justice system (Faryan et al., 2017). This did address child abuse issues but solely relying on the criminal justice system meant that there were no dedicated frameworks for mitigating the problems, resulting in legislative gaps. In 1994, the first Child Protection Center (CPC) was established, subsequently marking the start of dedicated institutions leading child protection (Faryan et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the CPC had a limited scope and focused mostly on resolving the health implications of abuse while leaving out prevention efforts. Later efforts by the kingdom to advance the protection of children came through the ratification of related international agreements. Some of these agreements included the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (OPSC), and the Covenant on the Rights of the Child in Islam (Faryan et al., 2017). The efficacy

of these agreements was nonetheless, always limited by the dominance of Islamic law, which frequently took precedence in instances when international agreements conflicted with local conventions based on Islam. Greater involvement of the Kingdom in protecting children nonetheless came after 2005 with the launching of the National Family Safety Program (NFSP). The NFSP introduced developments such as hospital based child protection teams, compelled reporting of child maltreatment cases for health practitioners, guidelines for identifying and reporting abuse, and multidisciplinary cooperation in child welfare cases (Alkhattabi et al., 2024). Several other landmark legislations followed the introduction of the NFSP including the Child Protection Law, the Juvenile Law, the Anti-Trafficking Law, and the Law for Protection from Abuse (Alkhattabi et al., 2024). Nevertheless, even with these developments over time Almuneef et al. (2019) and Owaidah et al. (2022) point out that the role of Saudi Arabia in protecting children is still limited, mostly by factors such as the kingdom's culture, inadequate training of social work personnel, and inconsistent law enforcement.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant since it expands the scope of social work to look beyond the traditional child protection approach that only factors in physical threats. The study presents the concept of electronic exploitation, a more modern form of threat to child safety. Research and practice in the field often overlooks the construct of electronic exploitation. Therefore, examining the threat of electronic exploitation will bring more attention to the issue within the field to trigger the development of potential approaches to mitigate it. The significance of the study also comes through its contributions to efforts in the kingdom geared towards child protection. As highlighted, the Saudi Kingdom has for long worked towards the protection of children but its efforts have consistently encountered significant barriers. This study highlights some of these barriers, particularly with respect to the safeguarding of children in digital spaces, with a focus on practice, research, and family counseling. It showcases the gaps related to these three dimensions which could be filled to enhance the role of the discipline in child safeguarding in the kingdom. Lastly, the study also looks into the potential for using family centered approaches in resolving the issue of electronic exploitation among children. The study examines the role of social work in contributing to child protection from online exploitation through

family counseling. It therefore, encourages the integration of the family unit into the discipline's programs and reinforces the need for family systems to be considered to enhance outcomes of problems impacting the household level.

## STUDY OBJECTIVES

The overarching objective of the current study is measuring social work's role in protecting children from electronic exploitation. The primary objective is broken down to three secondary objectives.

- To establish the efficacy of social work practice in protecting children from electronic exploitation.
- To gauge how much social work research and studies contribute to protecting children from electronic exploitation. And,
- To measure how effective family counseling through social work is in protecting children from electronic exploitation.

Fulfilling the secondary objectives will provide a more comprehensive view of the role that the discipline plays in the protection of children from electronic manipulation.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

The questions guiding the current study are based on the study objectives. The primary research question guiding the current study will be, "What is the role of social work in protecting children from electronic manipulation?" Like the objectives, the primary research question is also broken down into three secondary research queries. These secondary research questions include;

- How effective is the practice of social work in protecting children from electronic manipulation?
- How much do social work research and studies contribute to protecting children from electronic exploitation?
- How effective is family counseling undertaken through social work in protecting children from electronic exploitation?

## STUDY CONCEPTS

### Social Work

The concept of social work refers to the academic discipline and applied field that combines theoretical knowledge and practice to advance human development, social changes, and cohesion. This field is grounded on the

fundamental principles of collective responsibility, social justice, respect for diversity, and human rights, principles that support the field's efforts towards advancing individual welfare and challenging structural inequalities (Ornellas et al., 2018). Definitions of the discipline currently emphasize that it borrows from humanities, social sciences, and importantly, indigenous knowledge, a shift from the early western oriented definitions. This evolution in definitions is largely an outcome of modern debates on the field, which often seek to weigh between local and global priorities, individual and collective approaches, and theory and practice. Modern day social work gives significant recognition to environmental influences on individuals (Ornellas et al., 2018). It targets attaining personal and structural challenges through engaging with systems and institutions.

### **Child Protection**

Child protection focuses on preventing and responding to cases of harm, neglect, abuse, or violence that threatened the wellbeing of a child. These cases may include commercial exploitation of children, child trafficking, and child labor, as well as traditional harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (Mahuntse, 2021). The concept is hinged on the UNCRC principle that considers children autonomous rights' holders (Wu, 2020). Often, it comprises a multi-tier system that combines laws, social policies, and welfare services, all designed to prevent, identify, or respond to threats to child safety (Mahuntse, 2021; Wu, 2020). Preventive interventions also include initiatives such as education, awareness, and community support, while response interventions constitute initiatives such as case investigation, rehabilitation, and the extraction of victims from risky environments (Mahuntse, 2021). Effective child protection also recognizes the differences in the psychological, physical and social development of children, and tailors interventions based on the children's needs.

### **Electronic Exploitation**

The concept of electronic exploitation has not received significant attention in literature, especially when using similar wording. A similar concept that research focuses on is that of cyber exploitation, the terminology most frequently used in research (Farr, 2020). Electronic and cyber exploitation refer to the use of digital technologies such as the internet and social media to manipulate and abuse individuals, children in the current case (Gagnier, 2018). They may involve behaviors such as the sharing of intimate photos or videos,

sexual coercion and online grooming. These acts exploit the trust of a victim, their vulnerability, or immaturity, usually for personal, sexual, or financial gain (Gagnier, 2018). Therefore, similar to traditional exploitation, electronic exploitation also reflects power imbalance in relations, where perpetrators take advantage of the emotional, cognitive, or socioeconomic vulnerability (Fargkou, 2018). Victims often come from disadvantaged backgrounds or have a history of experiencing abuse, making them more susceptible.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The current study sought to collect data on the role of social work in protecting children from electronic exploitation. It used an electronic questionnaire to gather data on the role of the field from three dimensions; practice, research, and family counseling. The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data and was emailed to respondents as a link. Respondents in the current study constituted a random sample of professionals in the field. The use of the electronic questionnaire allowed for faster data collection and a wider reach of the survey, besides bringing some cost savings. A quantitative approach was settled on to support more straightforward data processing and analysis. The selection of personnel in the discipline, specifically, was also deliberate. These personnel were the specific population selected for the study, as they would be the most familiar with the field's systems and procedures as they pertain to child protection from electronic exploitation, and hence, more fitting to answer the questions posed.

### Target Population

The target population for this study was social workers, both male and female. Individuals in the profession were considered the preferred target population because they were most suitable to answer the questions posed in the study. The study aimed to measure how effective the field was in protecting children from electronic exploitation. Personnel in the discipline would have the best insights into the role their profession has in child protection with respect to electronic manipulation. From the target population, a convenience sample of 130 professions was selected. The study required all selected participants to hold a degree in the discipline.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection in the current study relied on an electronic questionnaire that aligned with study objectives. The questionnaire was validated using input from the professors of the researcher, who together with the researcher, assessed expert opinions on the subject matter. Its internal consistency and reliability were established by computing Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a value of 0.91, indicating high internal consistency and reliability. The questionnaire relied on a three point Likert scale to gather input from respondents, who indicated their level of agreement or disagreement with various questionnaire items. Before administration to the 130 respondents in the study, improvements were made to the terminologies used in the questionnaire, the style, content, and format. These improvements followed a simple pilot study which provided further insights on refining the data collection tool.

### **Data Analysis**

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to analyze the quantitative data. Analysis of data involved the computation of descriptive statistics and distribution of responses. The computation of descriptive statistics summarized the demographic characteristics of the participants and the overall trend in responses. For scoring of the responses, responses "Scarcely, Disagree, and Low" were assigned the value 1, while responses "Sometimes, To Some Extents, and Medium" were assigned the value of 2. Responses "Always, Agree, and High" were assigned the value of 3. Percentages for the proportion of respondents for each response under the different items.

### **Piloting the Questionnaires**

The questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 17 participants as part of piloting. The pilot used in-person sessions with paper-based questionnaires and was mainly focused on clarifying the objectives and scope of the research. The researcher collaborated with a team of research assistants to explain the nature of the study to the pilot study participants during a two-hour session. The research assistants then distributed the questionnaires, supervised the respondents, and collected them once the respondents had completed. The number and type of questions posed, as well as the procedures followed, were

subsequently modified based on the insights gathered from the pilot study to enhance the data collection process.

## RESULTS

### 1. Social Work Practice

Table 1 presents result on the contributions of social work practice in shielding children from electronic exploitation. 53.1% (n=69) of the respondents reported that there was scarcely any clarity in the concept of child rights in the field, while only 22.3% (n=29) reported that there was always clarity in the concept of child rights in the discipline. 46.9% (n=61) reported that they scarcely studied everything related to child protection in the discipline, while 21.9% (n=28) reported that they always studied everything related to child protection. With regards to training on child safeguarding in the field, 47.7% (n=62) reported that it was sometimes provided, while only 18.1% (n=24) reported that education on protecting children was always provided. Workshops aimed at children the safekeeping of children in practice were deemed scarce by 40.4% (n=52) of the respondents, while only 25.0% (n=33) always perceived the workshops. On the other hand, 43.8% (n=57) of the respondents reported that the field's contributions to resolving children's problems were scarce, with only 18.1% (n=23) reporting that they were always there.

Regarding school visits to raise awareness about child exploitation, 45.0% (n=58) of respondents reported that there were few or no school visits, while only 14% (n=19) reported that the visits to the schools always occurred. 44.2% (n=57) of the respondents highlighted that protecting children from exploitation is scarcely one of the pillars of the discipline, while 20.8% (n=27) reported that keeping children safe from exploitation was always was a pillar. 49.2% (n=64) of the respondents also indicated that the field scarcely contributed to raising media awareness about the dangers of child exploitation online, while only 18.5% (n=24) reported that it always contributed to raising awareness. Overall, the practice was not deemed as having a substantially significant role to play in protecting children from electronic exploitation (mean=2.28, SD=1.09).

N	Items	Response	Frequency	%	Mean	SD	Rank
1	The Clarity of the Concept of Child Rights in Social Work	Always	29	22.3	1.72	1.292	8
		Sometimes	32	24.6			
		Scarcely	69	53.1			

2	Studying Everything Related to Child Protection in Social Work	Always	28	21.9	2.25	1.128	5
		Sometimes	41	31.2			
		Scarcely	61	46.9			
3	Training on Child Protection in Social Work	Always	24	18.1	2.30	1.081	3
		Sometimes	62	47.7			
		Scarcely	44	34.2			
4	Workshops Aiming to Protect Children in Social Work	Always	33	25.0	1.90	1.022	7
		Sometimes	45	34.6			
		Scarcely	52	40.4			
5	Social Work's Contributions to Resolving Children's Problems	Always	23	18.1	2.26	1.029	4
		Sometimes	50	38.1			
		Scarcely	57	43.8			
6	Visiting Schools to Raise Awareness Against Child Exploitation	Always	19	14.6	2.30	0.993	2
		Sometimes	53	40.4			
		Scarcely	58	45.0			
7	Protecting Children from Exploitation is One of the Pillars of Social Work	Always	27	20.8	2.23	1.075	6
		Sometimes	46	35.0			
		Scarcely	57	44.2			
8	Social Work Contributes to Rising Media Awareness About the Dangers of Child Exploitation Online	Always	24	18.5	2.31	1.108	1
		Sometimes	42	32.3			
		Scarcely	64	49.2			
The overall mean of the social work practice in protecting children from electronic exploitation					2.28	1.09	

*Table 1: Social work practice*

## 2. Social Work Research and Studies

Table 2 presents the findings on the contributions of social work research and studies in keeping children safe from electronic exploitation. 52.7% (n=69) of the respondents agreed that social work contributes to research on child rights, while only 14.2% (n=18) disagreed that the profession contributes to studies on child rights. 47.7% (n=62) disagreed that one of the roles of social work is to protect children from electronic exploitation, while 16.2% (n=21) agreed with the sentiment that keeping children safe from such exploitation was one of social work's roles. On whether social workers have the capacity to manage child protection research, 45.4% (n=59) perceived that social workers do have the capacity to some extent, while 12.7% (n=16) disagreed that social workers had any capacity.

Additionally, 38.1% (n=50) disagreed that research and studies on child protection from electronic exploitation are limited, while only 26.5% (n=34) agreed that the research and studies were limited. On the other hand, 45.4% (n=59) agreed that social work programs support research on child protection from electronic exploitation, while 16.2% (n=21) disagreed with the sentiment that programs in the field support research on shielding children from electronic exploitation. On whether social work research contributed to solving children's problems related to electronic exploitation, 47.3% (n=61) disagreed that social work research did contribute to solving such issues, while 13.1% (n=17) agreed. 48.1% (n=62) of the respondents also disagreed with the sentiment that social work programs prioritized research on child protection from electronic exploitation, 23.1% (n=30) agreed that the programs did prioritize such research. 41.5% (n=54) agreed that social work research and studies contributed to raising community awareness on protecting children from electronic exploitation, while 26.9% (n=35) disagreed. Overall, there were relatively low levels of agreement that social work research had a role in protecting children from electronic exploitation (mean=2.24, SD=1.061).

N	Items	Response	Frequency	%	Mean	SD	Rank
1		Agree	69	52.7	2.38	1.092	1

	Social work contributes to child rights research and studies.	To some extent	43	33.1			
		Disagree	18	14.2			
2	One of the roles of social work is to protect children from electronic exploitation.	Agree	21	16.2	2.32	1.053	2
		To some extent	47	36.2			
		Disagree	62	47.7			
3	Social workers have the capacity to manage child protection research.	Agree	55	41.9	2.29	0.923	3
		To some extent	59	45.4			
		Disagree	16	12.7			
4	Research and studies on child protection from electronic exploitation are limited.	Agree	34	26.5	1.97	1.214	8
		To some extent	46	35.4			
		Disagree	50	38.1			
5	Social work programs support research on child protection from electronic exploitation.	Agree	59	45.4	2.29	1.022	4
		To some extent	50	38.5			
		Disagree	21	16.2			
6	Social work research contributes to solving children's problems from exploitation.	Agree	17	13.1	2.27	0.898	5
		To some extent	52	39.6			
		Disagree	61	47.3			
7	Social work programs prioritize research on child protection from exploitation.	Agree	30	23.1	2.25	1.161	6
		To some extent	38	28.8			
		Disagree	62	48.1			
8	Social work research and studies contribute to raising community awareness on protecting children from exploitation.	Agree	54	41.5	2.15	1.130	7
		To some extent	41	31.5			
		Disagree	35	26.9			
The overall mean of the social work research and studies in protecting children from electronic exploitation					2.24	1.061	

Table 2: Social Work Research and Studies

### 3. Family Counseling Through Social Work

Table 3 presents the findings on the role of family counseling through social work in protecting children from electronic exploitation. 48.8% (n=63) had a low

perception of family counseling as one of the pillars of the field, while 20.0% (n=26) had a high perception of family counseling as a pillar of the discipline of social work. 51.5% (n=67) of the respondents also had a low perception that professionals in the field were trained in family counseling, while only 12.3% (n=16) highly perceived personnel in the field to be well trained in family counseling initiatives. 48.1% (n=62) of the respondents also had a low perception that family counseling focuses on protecting children from electronic exploitation, while 19.6% (n=26) highly perceived that it did focus on the protection of children.

With regards to social work highlighting the dangers of online child exploitation, 46.2% of the respondents had a low perception that social work exposed the danger of child online exploitation, while 18.8% (n=24) had high perceptions that the field exposed the dangers of online exploitation of children. 48.1% (n=24) had a high perception of the effectiveness of social work through family counseling, while 16.2% (n=21) had low perceptions. 47.3% (n=61) had a high perception that social work used modern methods to raise awareness among families, while only 13.1% (n=17) had a low perception of this. With respect to social work's contributions to solving online-related problems affecting children, 48.5% (n=63) of respondents had a high perception of social work's contributions, while 11.5% (n=15) had low perceptions. 45.4% (n=59) of the respondents had a low perception that there were shortcomings in the roles of social workers in family counseling, while 19.2% (n=25) had high perceptions. Overall, perceptions that family counseling through social work shielded children from electronic exploitation were moderate at best (mean=2.30, SD=1.076).

N	Items	Response	Frequency	%	Mean	SD	Rank
1	Family counseling is one of the pillars of social work.	High	26	20.0	2.29	1.126	5
		Medium	41	31.2			
		Low	63	48.8			
2	Social workers are trained in family counseling.	High	16	12.3	2.39	1.047	1
		Medium	47	36.2			

		Low	67	51.5			
3	Family counseling focuses on protecting children from exploitation.	High	26	19.6	2.28	1.110	6
		Medium	42	32.3			
		Low	62	48.1			
4	Social work highlights the dangers of online child exploitation.	High	24	18.8	2.27	1.072	7
		Medium	46	35.0			
		Low	60	46.2			
5	The effectiveness of social work through family counseling.	High	63	48.1	2.32	1.058	4
		Medium	46	35.8			
		Low	21	16.2			
6	Social work uses modern methods to raise awareness among families.	High	61	47.3	2.34	1.002	3
		Medium	52	39.6			
		Low	17	13.1			
7	Social work's contributions to solving children's online problems.	High	63	48.5	2.37	0.994	2
		Medium	52	40.0			
		Low	15	11.5			
8	There are shortcomings in the roles of social workers in family counseling.	High	25	19.2	2.26	1.067	8
		Medium	46	35.4			
		Low	59	45.4			
The overall mean of the family counseling through social work in protecting children from electronic exploitation					2.30	1.076	

Table 3: Family Counseling through Social Work

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

On the role of social work practice in protecting children from electronic exploitation, the findings of the study revealed that practice played a limited and inconsistent role owing to gaps in conceptual understanding and capacity. More than half of the respondents in the current study reported that their clarity of the concept of child rights was limited in the field's practice, sentiments that aligned with those of professionals in Taiwan, as advanced in the study by Chen and Tang (2022). The lack of clarity of the concept of child rights as reported by professionals in Saudi Arabia indicated that they were not well equipped with the fundamental principles that form the foundation of child safeguarding, which likely explained their limited capacity to play a role in protecting children in the kingdom from electronic exploitation. Majority of the respondents also reported that they did not receive consistent child safeguarding training. There was therefore, an absence of structured education programs on child protection for professionals in the field, a problem that has also been highlighted in other

territories including the UK, Ukraine and the US (Bartosh et al., 2023). This absence substantially limits the role that professionals in the field can play in advancing child protection. Still on practice and its role, the findings also demonstrated that the field was largely not proactive in its child protection endeavors. School visits, presented as important for supporting child protection by Buhori (2025) and Hollis et al. (2018), were also relatively infrequent in Saudi. Similarly, media awareness, presented as a valuable tool in advancing the shielding of children by Thornton-Rice and Moran (2022), was scarce, as per the respondents. Therefore, the field's efforts in advancing the protection of children against electronic exploitation were predominantly reactive, in instances where they existed, limiting the overall role of the discipline's practice.

With regard to social work research and studies, the research in the field appeared to moderately engage with the concept of child rights, but the inquiries never particularly translated into effective interventions for electronic exploitation. A majority of respondents agreed that the field contributes to research on the rights of children, sentiments that were in line with insights from Brittle and Desmet (2020) as well as Rijal and Wamafma (2024). However, at the same time, the respondents predominantly disagreed that one of the roles of the profession was to shield children from electronic exploitation. Literature on the role of the profession in safeguarding children from electronic exploitation is scant, and therefore, this area presents a potential subject of inquiry for future studies. Still on research in the field, respondents in the current study also predominantly felt that research in the discipline fails to contribute to solving the real-world problems facing children with regard to electronic exploitation. Studies do not speak to the contributions of research to solving real-world child electronic exploitation problems. However, Kaushik and Walsh (2019) highlight that contemporary research in the discipline acknowledges the significance and value of adopting a pragmatic lens that presents alternatives applicable in the real world. Research on resolving the electronic manipulation of children could thus adopt a pragmatic lens to gain greater efficacy in solving real-world issues.

On the other hand, with respect to family counseling through social work, responses presented the dimension of family counseling as a promising avenue for the field to contribute to child protection from electronic exploitation. A

majority of the respondents viewed that family counseling in the field was effective. These perspectives do not deviate from what current studies report, with literature also presenting family counseling as effective in enhancing life outcomes for children (Buka, 2025; Kelchner et al., 2020). The majority of the respondents also highly regarded the contributions of the field in resolving online problems among children. Nonetheless, while respondents did acknowledge the potential in family counselling, they also recognized that it was limited by professional capacity. Most of the respondents viewed personnel in the discipline as inadequately trained in family counseling. However, the issue of insufficient training, particularly with respect to family counseling, appears to be a common theme in the literature (Cureton et al., 2021; Wattanapisit et al., 2018). There, therefore, exists an underlying need to enhance the professional competencies related to family counseling among field professionals, to potentially improve their capacity to play a greater role in safeguarding children from electronic exploitation.

Across the three dimensions, the results of the current study suggest a pertinent need for structural reforms and capacity building to support the field's capacity to play a role in safeguarding children from electronic exploitation. Social work practice, research, and family counseling appear to be unprepared to handle technology-related exploitation of children. Nonetheless, this does not appear to be a problem uniquely confined to the Kingdom. Literature on the role of the field in shielding children from cyber exploitation is substantially scarce, as per the search conducted by the current study, and therefore, this does not seem to be an area that the field is currently prioritizing. Nonetheless, studies do recognize the need for social work to give more attention to this area of inquiry (Ali et al., 2021; Frakou, 2018). Greater attention to the issue of electronic exploitation and the role of the discipline of social work in mitigating it will allow for social work practice, research, and family counselling to be more useful in mitigating the problem of electronic exploitation. Despite practice, research, and family counseling seeming ill-equipped to protect children from online exploitation, family counseling appears to provide a natural entry point for the discipline of social work to play a role in protecting children from external exploitation. Multiple studies have demonstrated that the approach can be substantially beneficial, more so when it comes to mitigating problems facing children and young people (Carr, 2019; Piotrowska, 2023). It can be relied on as

a standalone approach or as part of a multi-method approach. However, it is important to note that the approach is yet to be shown to be effective in preventing electronic exploitation among children.

## CONCLUSION

This research sought to establish the role of social work in safeguarding children from electronic exploitation. It established that social work plays a limited role in the protection of children from electronic exploitation. Across the three dimensions assessed, practice, research, and family counseling, engagement with issues related to the shielding of children from electronic exploitation was low to moderate at best. Findings related to the social work practice dimension revealed the weak integration of child protection themes in everyday social work practice, training, and outreach programs, with underdeveloped practical interventions and preventive programs targeting child electronic exploitation. Social work research and studies were found to contribute minimally to the field of electronic child protection, with limited studies addressing the issue or working towards generating evidence-based interventions. While family counselling through social work was present, it failed to give sufficient focus to digital exploitation of children. This study therefore, highlights the urgent need to the digital competencies of professionals in the field, adapting education provided and advocacy functions to the emergent online risks that face children in modern times. Effective child safekeeping from electronic exploitation needs comprehensive initiatives that leverage the capacities in practice, research, and approaches such as family counseling.

## Contributions

The contributions of the current study cut across practice, research, education, and policymaking. The study considers child protection through the lens of electronic threats bringing forward a view that pushes current practice and research towards considering these emergent online threats. Traditional frameworks of child welfare have usually failed to consider the perspective of electronic exploitation. Besides bringing fresh perspectives the study also makes contributions by providing empirical insights on various ways social workers in Saudi fail to contribute to child protection. It sheds light on pertinent shortcomings in the capacity and training of social work professionals in the Kingdom. The study also demonstrates the importance of incorporating digital

safety guidelines into family counseling, making a valuable contribution to practice. It also contributes to policymaking initiatives. It highlights the presence of policy gaps in addressing electronic exploitation, presenting areas for improving policies related to child protection and welfare in Saudi Arabia.

## Recommendations

Several recommendations can arise from this study to enhance the role of the field in shielding children from electronic exploitation. The study recommends the introduction and integration of digital child protection components into the social welfare framework of Saudi Arabia. The study also recommends the institutionalization of digital safety education into social work curricula in the Kingdom. Education on safeguarding children from electronic exploitation should be introduced as a compulsory component of social work education in Saudi to ensure that education matches modern day threats. Components of digital safety and online protection of children could also be integrated into workshops and in-job training initiatives to enhance professional development and make it more relevant to the shielding of children from electronic exploitation. In practice, the field could also look to incorporate these components into family counseling initiatives to support the capacities of parents to monitor and enforce digital safety at home.

## Limitations

This study did have some limitations that are important to acknowledge. Primarily, these limitations related to the methodology adopted by the study. The study used self-reported data to assess the role of social work in protecting children from electronic exploitation which could have introduced biases such as the response's bias. The responses were also provided based on a three point Likert scale which may have constrained gathering richer responses. Only 130 social work personnel were also sampled which may not be fully representative of the professional landscape across Saudi Arabia. Since the study also relied on a quantitative approach, the opportunities for providing qualitative insights that could have provided more in-depth understanding was limited. There are also limitations related to generalizability. The study was set in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and therefore may not necessarily have findings that are relevant to different cultural, social, or policy contexts beyond Saudi.

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