

## Abstract

Social work is a relatively new profession in Mongolia. Over the 15 years of its existence, Mongolian social workers have made significant achievements as well faced challenges in terms of establishing social work schools and introducing social work practice in different sectors. Social workers have advocated for their own niches in different sectors and have set up social work services in several public sectors such as in schools, social welfare agencies, primary health clinics, and correctional facilities in Mongolia. Following the same pattern of development as the profession, a decade ago the positions of social workers and welfare officers were created at the smallest administrative units of Ulaanbaatar known as a khoroo. Over the decade, khoroo social workers and welfare officers have gained acceptance and been legally recognized as important players in addressing various social issues such as domestic violence, child abuse and poverty etc.

The child protection system is underdeveloped and is a new phenomenon in Mongolia as in other developing countries. The Government of Mongolia ratified the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in the early 90s and adopted a number of legislative documents in compliance with the requirements of the convention. As arms of the government agencies at the community level, khoroo social workers and welfare officers play key roles in delivering social services at the community level. However, due to the newness of the profession and child protection services, social workers at the khoroo level encounter challenges in delivering social work services and addressing complex social issues such as child maltreatment.

This study aims to examine Mongolian social workers' perceptions of protective factors for children under 6 years of age. Using mixed methods, the study was conducted in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia. There were 254 participants who worked as social workers and welfare officers. They held positions as coordinators or members of multi-disciplinary teams at the smallest administrative units of Ulaanbaatar, a khoroo. Ecological and phenomenological perspectives offered an opportunity to analyse data collected via survey and interview, with a view to understanding relationships between social workers' background and their perceptions about protective factors at various levels of the human ecology. The findings revealed that from a list of twenty protective factors, factors that were the most agreed upon by the participants were parental and family related. These included the existence of a happy relationship between parents, maternal warmth, and the quality of child rearing conditions. In addition to these protective factors, preserving the cultural values of protecting children was highly regarded. Their application of protective factors to their practice appeared more often informed by their own social and family contexts rather than by their education in social work and welfare. The research findings also provided insight into social workers' lived experiences regarding understanding and using protective factors in their daily practice, which might reflect the strengths and challenges of the newly developing profession of social work in Mongolia. Therefore, the findings are important for the future development of social work education and practice for working with children, families and communities in Mongolia.