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Sofija Georgievska¹,
*Faculty of Philosophy, Ss. Cyril
and Methodius University in Skopje,
Republic of North Macedonia,*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7628-532X>

Natasa Stanojkovska Trajkovska,
*Faculty of Philosophy, Ss. Cyril
and Methodius University in Skopje,*
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7214-8993>

Republic of North Macedonia

Ratko Duev,

*Faculty of Philosophy, Ss. Cyril and
Methodius University in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4491-1426>

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EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF VIOLENCE, DISABILITY, AND RELIGION: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY ON CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN MULTICULTURAL NORTH MACEDONIA

Abstract: This study delves into the intersection of violence, disability, and religion within the diverse and multicultural landscape of North Macedonia, focusing on the experiences of children with disabilities who are particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence. The research aims to shed light on how cultural and religious factors influence the prevalence and impact of both primary and secondary traumatization and victimization among these children. Utilizing a sample of 152 children with disabilities from various educational and social institutions across North Macedonia, the study employs rigorous quantitative methods, including t-tests and correlation analyses, to explore the relationships between these children's experiences of violence and their religious and cultural backgrounds. The findings reveal a statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$) between the degree of religious conservatism in communities and the incidence of violence against children with disabilities, indicating that cultural and religious norms play a critical role in their vulnerability. Moreover, the research identifies a significant

¹ sofija.arnaudova@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

difference ($t = 2.86$, $p < 0.05$) in the level of secondary traumatization between children who receive support from their religious communities and those who do not. This highlights the potential protective effect of community support in mitigating the harmful impacts of violence. The study underscores the importance of considering the complex interplay of disability, religion, and cultural context when developing interventions aimed at safeguarding vulnerable children from violence and its enduring consequences. These insights are crucial for informing policy and practice in social work, particularly in multicultural settings like North Macedonia.

Keywords: *Violence against children, children with disabilities, primary and secondary traumatization, religion, multiculturalism*

1. Introduction

Children with disabilities represent a highly vulnerable population globally, especially in contexts where cultural and religious norms shape societal attitudes towards both disability and violence. Research shows that children with disabilities are at greater risk of abuse and neglect due to multiple factors such as dependency on caregivers, social isolation, and stigma (Jones, Bellis, Wood et al, 2012). In multicultural societies like North Macedonia, where religious and cultural diversity is significant, these risks are compounded by community-based perceptions of disability, which are often deeply intertwined with religious beliefs. For example, in some communities, disabilities may be viewed as a form of divine punishment or misfortune, which can lead to increased discrimination and exclusion of disabled children from social protection mechanisms (Hosking, 2008).

This study investigates the intersection of violence, disability, and religion in North Macedonia, focusing specifically on the experiences of children with disabilities. The research explores how religious and cultural factors influence the rates of both primary and secondary traumatization among these children. Previous studies have indicated that children with disabilities face a higher likelihood of experiencing physical, emotional, and sexual violence. Still, few studies have explored how religious conservatism or support from religious communities may affect these experiences in a multicultural context like North Macedonia (UNICEF, 2013).

This research seeks to fill this gap by examining the relationship between the degree of religious conservatism and the incidence of violence against children with disabilities. Furthermore, the study explores whether support from religious communities may serve as a protective factor, mitigating the effects of secondary traumatization. By employing a quantitative approach, this study provides robust evidence that can inform social policies and interventions aimed at protecting these vulnerable children.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Violence and Disability

Children with disabilities are at an increased risk of experiencing various forms of violence, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Studies have shown that disabled children are significantly more likely to be subjected to violence compared to their non-disabled peers (Brown & Turk, 1992). The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that children with disabilities are three to four times more likely to experience physical or sexual violence (Walker, 2019). This increased vulnerability is often attributed to their reliance on caregivers, social isolation, and limited communication abilities, which can hinder their capacity to report abuse. Furthermore, the societal perception of disability often plays a critical role in shaping these children's experiences. In many cases, disability is viewed through a lens of pity or neglect, leading to increased marginalization. For example, caregivers and institutions may feel justified in using violence or neglect as a form of control, under the assumption that children with disabilities are "less capable" of understanding or resisting such actions (Petterson & Smith, 2007).

2.2 Traumatization and Victimization

Traumatization, particularly secondary traumatization, is a key focus in understanding the long-term effects of violence on children with disabilities. Primary traumatization refers to the direct experience of violence, while secondary traumatization refers to the emotional and psychological consequences that arise from witnessing or being closely associated with traumatic events (Bride, 2007). Children with disabilities are particularly susceptible to both forms of traumatization due to their dependency on caregivers and their frequent social isolation.

Victimization is another critical factor in this context. Disabled children are often viewed as easy targets by perpetrators of violence due to their perceived vulnerability (Turner, Finkelhor & Ormond, 2010). This victimization can manifest in various ways, including bullying, neglect, and physical or emotional abuse, both at home and in institutional settings. Studies have shown that disabled children who experience victimization are more likely to develop long-term psychological issues, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kassah, Kassah & Agboli, 2014).

2.3 Religion, Disability, and Cultural Contexts

Religion plays a significant role in shaping societal attitudes towards disability in many cultures. In more conservative religious communities, disability may be seen as a sign of divine displeasure or as a form of punishment for sins committed by the child or their family (Reeves, Merriam & Courtenay, 1997). This belief can lead to further stigmatization and exclusion of children with disabilities, who may be denied access to social services, education, and healthcare. Conversely, more progressive or inclusive religious communities may offer support and protection to disabled children, viewing them as deserving of compassion and care (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011).

In North Macedonia, where religious diversity is pronounced, these differing attitudes towards disability are often culturally ingrained. Orthodox Christianity and Islam, the two predominant religions in the country, each have their own theological interpretations of disability, which can either exacerbate or alleviate the vulnerability of disabled children (Braddock & Parish, 2001). In conservative Orthodox communities, for example, disability may be seen as a test of faith. In contrast, in more liberal Islamic communities, children with disabilities may be offered social protection through community-based welfare programs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between violence, disability, and religion. Data was collected from 152 children with disabilities, aged between 7 and 17, who were

enrolled in educational and social institutions across North Macedonia. The research team worked closely with these institutions to ensure that the sample included children from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, reflecting the multicultural nature of the country.

The study used structured interviews and questionnaires to gather data on the children’s experiences with violence, their religious affiliations, and the presence of secondary traumatization symptoms. The questionnaires included sections on both primary and secondary traumatization, with questions adapted from validated psychological scales.

3.2 Sample Characteristics

The sample consisted of children from different religious and ethnic communities, including Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and members of smaller religious minorities such as Roma and Turkish groups. The demographic breakdown is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Data of Participants

Demographic Data of Participants	Percentage (%)
Gender (Male/Female)	56% / 44%
Ethnic Background:	
Macedonian	52%
Albanian	32%
Other (Roma, Turkish, etc.)	16%
Religion:	
Orthodox Christian	48%
Muslim	34%
Other	18%

3.3 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using SPSS, with t-tests and Pearson’s correlation coefficients employed to examine the relationships between religious conservatism, violence, and traumatization levels. A t-test was used to determine whether children who received religious support experienced significantly lower levels of secondary traumatization compared to those who did not receive such support. Correlation analyses were conducted to

assess the relationship between religious conservatism and the incidence of violence against children with disabilities.

4. Results

The results revealed a significant positive correlation between the degree of religious conservatism in a community and the incidence of violence against children with disabilities ($r = 0.47, p < 0.01$). This finding supports the hypothesis that more conservative religious environments tend to have higher rates of violence against vulnerable children.

Additionally, the t-test indicated a statistically significant difference in the levels of secondary traumatization between children who received support from their religious communities and those who did not ($t = 2.86, p < 0.05$). Children who received support from their religious communities reported lower levels of secondary traumatization, suggesting that community support can mitigate the psychological effects of experiencing or witnessing violence.

Table 2. Difference in the levels of secondary traumatization

Group	Mean Level of Traumatiza- tion	t-Value	p-Value
Supported by Religious Community	32.5	2.86	< 0.05
Not Supported	42.7		

5. Discussion

The results of this study highlight the complex relationship between violence, disability, and religion, emphasizing how cultural and religious contexts significantly shape the experiences of children with disabilities in North Macedonia. The findings demonstrate that religious conservatism can heighten the vulnerability of disabled children to violence, while religious community support can mitigate some of the negative psychological effects of violence. These results align with the broader body of research that explores the role of religion and culture in influencing societal attitudes towards disability and violence.

5.1 The Role of Religious Conservatism in Vulnerability

The significant positive correlation between religious conservatism and the incidence of violence against children with disabilities suggests that traditional religious communities may reinforce harmful stereotypes and attitudes that increase the likelihood of abuse. These findings are consistent with the work of Goodley and Runswick-Cole, who argue that religious and cultural beliefs often contribute to the marginalization of disabled individuals. In conservative communities, disability is sometimes perceived as a form of divine punishment or a reflection of moral or spiritual failing. Such perceptions can lead to increased stigma and social exclusion, as children with disabilities are viewed as “different” or “inferior” within these communities.

Conservative religious frameworks tend to uphold strict social hierarchies, which can perpetuate inequality and justify violence or neglect towards those seen as socially or physically “imperfect.” For children with disabilities, this often translates into physical abuse, emotional neglect, or even the denial of basic rights such as education and healthcare. Braddock and Parish’s historical analysis of disability shows that these attitudes are deeply embedded in many societies, making it difficult for individuals with disabilities to challenge the status quo or assert their rights.

This study builds on earlier work by Brown and Turk, who explored how societal perceptions of disability often translate into higher rates of victimization. In communities where religious conservatism is dominant, the rigid moral codes and traditional values may foster environments where violence against marginalized groups, including disabled children, is either normalized or goes unchallenged. In such contexts, violence may take many forms, including physical abuse, verbal degradation, or systematic neglect, all of which can have long-term psychological impacts on children.

5.2 Protective Role of Religious Communities

In contrast to the negative effects of religious conservatism, the study also found that religious communities can serve a protective function when they provide active support to children with disabilities. Children who received support from their religious communities reported lower levels of secondary traumatization, suggesting that religious groups can play a

vital role in mitigating the psychological harm caused by violence. This finding is in line with the work of Patterson and Smith, who have shown that social support networks, including religious communities, can provide emotional and psychological resilience for individuals facing trauma.

Religious communities that offer inclusive and compassionate responses to disability can serve as critical sources of protection and advocacy for vulnerable children. When religious institutions adopt progressive interpretations of faith that emphasize care, protection, and social inclusion, they can help counteract the stigma associated with disability. These findings suggest that religion can function both as a source of risk and as a protective factor, depending on the community's interpretation of religious teachings. In more progressive religious settings, the emphasis on charity, compassion, and social responsibility can lead to proactive efforts to support children with disabilities and protect them from violence.

Reeves and colleagues have argued that religious institutions have a unique capacity to foster environments of acceptance and support for disabled individuals. In communities where religious teachings are framed around inclusivity and care, religious leaders and institutions can serve as advocates for the rights and protection of disabled children. The role of these communities is particularly important in multicultural societies like North Macedonia, where children with disabilities may face intersecting forms of discrimination based on their ethnicity, religion, and disability status.

5.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

The dual role of religion—as both a potential risk factor and a source of support—has significant implications for policy and practice. Social workers, policymakers, and educators must be aware of the ways in which religious and cultural contexts influence the experiences of children with disabilities. In particular, interventions aimed at reducing violence against disabled children must take into account the religious dynamics of the communities in which these children live.

The findings from this study suggest that programs aimed at preventing violence should focus not only on reducing religiously motivated stigmatization of disability but also on strengthening the protective role that religious communities can play. This could involve training religious

leaders and community members on the rights of disabled individuals, encouraging more progressive religious interpretations that promote inclusion, and creating partnerships between religious institutions and disability advocacy organizations.

Braddock and Parish emphasize that historical attitudes towards disability must be addressed through education, advocacy, and legal reforms. In the context of North Macedonia, where religious and cultural diversity is high, policymakers must work collaboratively with both secular and religious institutions to create comprehensive strategies that protect children with disabilities from violence.

The research also highlights the need for more targeted support for families of children with disabilities. Walker's work on secondary traumatization underscores the importance of providing emotional and psychological support to both children and their families, particularly in communities where social support networks may be limited. Religious communities, when properly engaged, can serve as valuable resources in providing this support and ensuring that children with disabilities are not only protected from violence but also empowered to thrive within their communities.

6. Limitations

While this study provides important insights into the intersection of violence, disability, and religion, several limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants may underreport or overreport their experiences due to fear of judgment or reprisal. Additionally, the sample size, though sufficient for quantitative analysis, may limit the generalizability of the findings across different regions of North Macedonia. Future research should aim to include larger sample sizes and incorporate qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, to gain a deeper understanding of the complex factors that influence the experiences of children with disabilities.

Moreover, future studies should explore the role of specific religious teachings and doctrines in shaping attitudes toward disability. While this study focused on the broader concept of religious conservatism, more research is needed to understand how different interpretations of faith influence both the risk of violence and the provision of support for disabled children. Examining these nuances will help policymakers and

practitioners design more effective interventions that are tailored to the specific religious and cultural contexts in which children with disabilities live.

7. Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on the intersection of violence, disability, and religion, highlighting the complex ways in which cultural and religious factors influence the experiences of children with disabilities in North Macedonia. The findings suggest that religious conservatism increases the risk of violence against these children, while support from religious communities can mitigate the psychological effects of such violence. These insights are crucial for informing policy and practice in social work, human rights advocacy, and disability services, particularly in multicultural and religiously diverse settings.

8. Literature

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Sofija Georgievska,

Filozofski fakultet, Sv. Kirila i Metodija u Skoplju,

Republika Severna Makedonija,

Nataša Stanojkovska Trajkovska,

Filozofski fakultet, Sv. Kirila i Metodija u Skoplju,

Republika Severna Makedonija

Ratko Duev,

Filozofski fakultet, Sv. Kirilo i Metodije univerzitet u Skoplju, Republika Severna Makedonija

ISTRAŽIVANJE UKRŠTANJA NASILJA, INVALIDITETA I RELIGIJE: KVANTITATIVNA STUDIJA O DECI SA SMETNJAMA U MULTIKULTURALNOJ SEVERNOJ MAKEDONIJE

Rezime

Ova studija se bavi ukrštanjem nasilja, invaliditeta i religije unutar raznolikog i multikulturalnog pejzaža Severne Makedonije, fokusirajući se na iskustva dece sa smetnjama u razvoju koja su posebno ranjiva na

različite oblike nasilja. Istraživanje ima za cilj da rasvetli kako kulturni i verski faktori utiču na prevalenciju i uticaj primarne i sekundarne traumatizacije i viktimizacije među ovom decom. Koristeći uzorak od 152 dece sa smetnjama u razvoju iz različitih obrazovnih i društvenih institucija širom Severne Makedonije, studija koristi rigorozne kvantitativne metode, uključujući t-testove i korelacione analize, kako bi istražila odnose između iskustava ove dece sa nasiljem i njihovog verskog i kulturnog porekla. Nalazi otkrivaju statistički značajnu korelaciju ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$) između stepena verskog konzervativizma u zajednicama i učestalosti nasilja nad decom sa smetnjama u razvoju, što ukazuje da kulturne i verske norme igraju ključnu ulogu u njihovoj ranjivosti. Šta više, istraživanje identifikuje značajnu razliku ($t = 2.86$, $p < 0.05$) u stepenu sekundarne traumatizacije između dece koja dobijaju podršku od svojih verskih zajednica i one koja je nemaju. Ovo naglašava potencijalni zaštitni efekat podrške zajednice u ublažavanju štetnih uticaja nasilja. Studija naglašava važnost razmatranja složene interakcije invaliditeta, religije i kulturnog konteksta kada se razvijaju intervencije koje imaju za cilj zaštitu ugrožene dece od nasilja i njegovih trajnih posledica. Ovi nalazi su ključni za informisanje politike i prakse u socijalnom radu, posebno u multikulturalnim okruženjima kao što je Severna Makedonija.

Ključne reči: *nasilje nad decom, deca sa smetnjama u razvoju, primarna i sekundarna traumatizacija, religija, multikulturalnost*