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**THEORETICAL CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL WORK IN  
PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS WITH A FOCUS ON THE  
SITUATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

**Abstract:** *Social work in preschool institutions plays a crucial role in promoting children's well-being, ensuring inclusion, and providing support to families in addressing social and emotional difficulties. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, social work in preschool institutions is regulated by legal frameworks; however, its implementation in practice is limited and unevenly distributed. This paper analyzes the current state of social work in preschool institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, compares it with regional practices, and offers recommendations for improving its application. Grounded in theoretical frameworks of social work, this study draws upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, which emphasizes the multilayered environmental influences on child development, resilience theory, which focuses on the mechanisms enabling children and families to adapt to stressful situations, and systems theory, which highlights the importance of an integrated approach in social work. Furthermore, social capital theory provides insight into the role of social workers in building support networks, while critical and anti-discriminatory theory underscores the importance of social work in reducing social inequalities and advocating for inclusive policies. The analysis reveals that social work in preschool institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains underdeveloped, with a limited number of professionals and an inadequate legal framework. A comparative examination with regional countries highlights the need for systemic reforms, enhanced*

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*interdisciplinary cooperation, and the permanent employment of social workers in preschool institutions.*

**Keywords:** *social work theories, preschool institutions, social work, and multidisciplinary approach.*

## Introduction

Preschool education represents a fundamental stage in every child's development, as it is during this period that essential cognitive, emotional, and social skills are formed (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Social work in preschool institutions serves as a key instrument in addressing challenges such as poverty, discrimination, family crises, and other social difficulties. According to ecological development theory, a child exists within a complex system of interconnected contexts—from the family and preschool institution to the broader social community—necessitating an understanding of how each of these levels influences child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Early childhood development shapes cognitive, emotional, and social abilities and significantly affects a child's future integration into society. In this context, social work in preschool institutions becomes a crucial tool for tackling issues such as poverty, discrimination, family crises, and other social difficulties. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the legal framework governing preschool institutions includes social work activities, yet in practice, this component is often neglected or insufficiently developed. From the perspective of resilience theory, institutional support in early childhood can play a pivotal role in strengthening children's capacity to overcome social barriers and adverse circumstances (Masten & Reed, 2002). This raises the question of how well-equipped preschool institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina are for implementing social work and to what extent social work professionals are involved in the daily work with children and families. One of the key aspects of social work in preschool education is the identification of risk factors that may affect a child's development. According to UNICEF data (2020), children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, children from rural areas, and children from Roma communities face significantly greater obstacles in accessing quality preschool education. Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) can be employed to analyze how families' economic and social resources influence children's ability to fully benefit from preschool programs. Social workers, through collaboration with families and communities, can play a crucial role in overcoming these barriers, fostering greater inclusion, and ensuring equal access to education.

## **Methodological Framework of the Research**

This study applies a qualitative approach with an emphasis on descriptive-analytical and comparative analysis of available materials. Given the nature of the topic, the research is based on the analysis of secondary sources, including relevant legislative acts, reports from international organizations (such as UNICEF and UNESCO), as well as existing academic and professional literature in the fields of social work and educational policy. From a methodological standpoint, special attention is given to a comparative review of practices in the countries of the region (Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Slovenia), which enables the identification of institutional and normative differences, as well as potential directions for improving the model of social work within the preschool education system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The main methods used in the study are:

- Descriptive method, which examines the current situation and existing practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina,
- Comparative method, which allows for a comparison with neighboring countries,
- Content analysis, applied to legal documents, strategies, and reports with the aim of identifying the structural and functional characteristics of the system.

### *Research Questions*

Based on the defined objectives, the research is guided by the following key questions:

- To what extent is social work integrated into preschool institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina?
- What are the main factors limiting the implementation of social work in this segment of education?
- How does the practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina differ from approaches in neighboring countries?
- How can theoretical concepts such as resilience and social capital be applied in the specific context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly in addressing child and family poverty and social exclusion?

### *Implications and Recommendations*

Linking theoretical concepts with the real-world challenges in preschool education is essential for designing effective measures. For instance, the application of resilience theory enables the analysis and strengthening of the capacities of children from families affected by poverty or social exclusion. In this context, social workers in preschool institutions can play a crucial role in identifying risk factors, providing psychosocial support, and strengthening parenting competencies, thereby directly contributing to building resilience in children and their families. The research findings indicate a need for systemic reforms, including mandatory employment of social workers in preschool institutions, especially in rural areas. It is essential to enhance collaboration between preschools and social work centers through the development of co-operation protocols and continuous professional training for staff. It is also important to emphasize that the legislative framework does not represent the starting point, but rather a derivative step in shaping institutional practice – it is the result of prior needs assessment, public policy development, and empirical validation through pilot projects and strategies.

#### *Further recommendations include:*

- Amending and supplementing legal acts regulating preschool education in order to clearly define the role of the social worker,
- Establishing mechanisms for sustainable funding of social worker positions in educational institutions,
- Integrating social work into inclusive education strategies and national early childhood development plans.

These measures could significantly improve the quality of preschool education and support for at-risk children and families.

### **Social Work in Preschool Institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The legal framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while providing certain forms of support within preschool education, lacks precise guidelines for integrating social work into preschool institutions. According to the Law on Preschool Education of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2013) and the Law on Preschool Education of the Republic of Srpska (2017), preschool institutions are expected to ensure conditions for the optimal development

of children through the support of a professional team. However, the role of social workers remains marginalized.

According to research conducted by Halilović (2020), only 12% of preschool institutions in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina employ a social worker, while in the Republic of Srpska, this percentage is even lower, around 8%. These figures indicate a significant lack of a systemic approach. Unlike pedagogues and psychologists, who are standardly included in preschool institutions, social workers are employed only sporadically, usually through projects funded by international organizations. This model is neither sustainable nor capable of addressing the complex needs of children and families. One of the key challenges in implementing social work in preschool education in Bosnia and Herzegovina lies in the uneven regional development. Rural areas are particularly affected by the lack of professional staff. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Srpska (2021), more than 70% of rural preschool institutions lack access to even basic psychological and pedagogical services, while social workers are practically nonexistent. This leaves a large number of children in socially vulnerable situations without adequate support. Another major issue is the lack of systemic coordination between preschool institutions and social work centers. Although social work centers are key actors in addressing family-related issues, their cooperation with preschool institutions is rarely structured. According to Halilović (2020), communication between these institutions typically occurs only in crisis situations, such as domestic violence or child neglect, while preventive work is virtually absent. Although legal frameworks provide a general structure for the functioning of preschool institutions, no explicit regulation mandates the compulsory employment of social workers in these institutions. As a result, the presence of social workers in preschool institutions depends on local policies, available resources, and awareness of their role. Detailed statistical data on the number of social workers employed in preschool institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not widely available. However, indications suggest that their presence is concentrated in larger urban centers, where resources and awareness of the importance of social work are at a higher level. Their involvement is most often the result of collaboration between preschool institutions and non-governmental organizations or international institutions. The capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo, leads in the implementation of programs that incorporate social workers into preschool institutions. For instance, the project "Inclusion through Early Development", implemented in collaboration with UNICEF, facilitated the engagement of social workers in preschools working with children from vulnerable groups. This program has proven suc-

cessful in increasing social inclusion and providing support to families, particularly those from marginalized communities. However, the employment of social workers in Sarajevo remains dependent on project-based funding rather than institutional resources. In contrast, in Banja Luka, social workers are not typically part of preschool institution staff. Nonetheless, there are individual cases of engagement through projects funded by international organizations. A notable example includes private preschool institutions that employ social workers to provide additional support to children with developmental difficulties.

Despite these efforts, systemic integration of social workers into preschool education has not been achieved. When analyzing other major cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is evident that social workers are primarily involved through short-term projects. While these projects are beneficial, the lack of permanent solutions remains a challenge. Social work in preschool institutions has the potential to significantly improve the quality of preschool education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly in the areas of inclusion and support for vulnerable groups.

### **Social Work in Preschool Institutions - A Theoretical Perspective**

The development of social work in preschool institutions can be analyzed through various theoretical frameworks of social work, which provide a deeper understanding of the relationships between the child, family, education system, and broader social community. Through ecological systems theory, resilience theory, systems theory, social capital theory, attachment theory, and critical social work theory, it is possible to examine how social workers contribute to improving inclusive education, preventing social issues, and strengthening parental competencies.

#### *Ecological Systems Theory and Its Impact on Preschool Education*

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) provides a framework for understanding how different levels of the social environment influence child development. This theory identifies multiple levels of influence:

- Microsystem – the family, preschool institution, peers, and closest social interactions that directly affect the child.
- Mesosystem – the relationships between different microsystems, such as

interactions between parents and preschool institutions.

- Exosystem – the broader social context, including parents' workplaces, local communities, and social welfare institutions.
- Macrosystem – social norms, laws, and economic conditions that shape the environment in which the child grows.
- Chronosystem – temporal changes that influence child development, including social transformations or family transitions.

In the context of preschool education, ecological systems theory emphasizes the importance of synergy between the family, preschool institution, and the social welfare system. Sustainable development theory enables the consideration of each child's development individually, within the broader context of the various social environments from which the child originates, thereby further supporting individualized and inclusive educational processes (Šindić, 2021). According to UNICEF (2020), children from disadvantaged family environments often lack equal support in early development, placing them at a disadvantage compared to their peers. Social workers in preschool institutions can operate at the mesosystem level by improving communication between parents and preschools, and at the exosystem level by advocating for stronger institutional connections between preschools and social work centers. In doing so, they further contribute to individualized approaches within the educational framework of the institution.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, practice shows that the links between these systems are weak, and strengthening multi-sectoral collaboration based on the ecological model could significantly enhance the inclusivity and quality of preschool education in the country.

### *Resilience Theory and the Role of Social Workers in Supporting Children*

Resilience theory (Masten & Reed, 2002) highlights the importance of protective factors that enable children to cope with stressful situations and develop positive adaptive strategies. Resilience does not develop in isolation; rather, it results from a combination of a child's individual characteristics and support from their environment, including the family, preschool institution, and broader community. Social workers in preschool institutions play a key role in strengthening children's resilience through:

- Working with families – helping parents develop positive parenting strategies.
- Providing emotional support – working with children to mitigate the ef-

fects of family problems or socio-economic challenges.

- Strengthening preschool support systems – involving children in early intervention programs and multidisciplinary collaboration.

According to UNICEF (2020), in Bosnia and Herzegovina, children from poor families are often exposed to multiple stress factors, including food insecurity, family conflicts, and inadequate housing conditions. Interventions by social workers can significantly contribute to the development of protective factors and facilitate better adaptation to the educational system. The application of resilience theory in Bosnia and Herzegovina requires the development of systematic and long-term support programs that do not rely solely on temporary projects or crisis-based responses. In the preschool context, this means that social workers should be present not only in cases where problems have already been identified, but also in the daily lives of children, in order to build relationships of trust, recognize vulnerabilities, and empower children through consistent emotional support. Resilience is most effectively developed when support is embedded in everyday routines, rather than being exceptional and episodic.

### *Systems Theory and the Need for a Multidisciplinary Approach*

Systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) emphasizes that social problems cannot be solved in isolation but require cooperation between different sectors—education, social welfare, health, and justice. In the context of preschool institutions, this means that social workers must be part of a broader professional team that includes pedagogues, psychologists, and healthcare professionals. However, research indicates that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this collaboration is often weak, and preschools and social work centers communicate only in crisis situations instead of developing preventive programs. Research into practices within preschool institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from the perspective of educators, indicates the need to strengthen multidisciplinary teamwork among various professionals, including social workers, whose absence is notably pronounced (Šindić, 2019). The lack of social workers in preschools often prevents timely identification and intervention in cases of family risk, poverty, or child neglect, which can have long-term negative consequences for children's development and social inclusion. Systems theory suggests that, in the absence of clearly established protocols for inter-institutional cooperation, the responsibility for children's well-being remains fragmented and often insufficiently effective. In practice, this means that social workers must



have access to educational, health, and judicial data systems and information in order to respond preventively rather than merely reactively. Models of integrated early childhood services, successfully implemented in Nordic countries, can serve as a reference point for reforming intersectoral collaboration in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Introducing social workers into preschool settings would improve the quality of educational processes and contribute to the prevention of social exclusion in early childhood.

### *Social Capital Theory and the Role of Social Workers in Strengthening Communities*

Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000) highlights the importance of social networks and resources that enable individuals to achieve better social integration. In preschool institutions, social workers can play a crucial role in empowering children through:

- Connecting families with available resources – ensuring access to social benefits, healthcare, and support programs.
- Organizing parent support groups – providing education and facilitating experience-sharing among parents.
- Promoting joint activities for children and parents – strengthening family relationships and fostering a sense of community.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to UNICEF (2020), parents from economically disadvantaged families are often unaware of available support programs, which further exacerbates their social and economic hardships. This situation contributes to the intergenerational transmission of poverty, as children from marginalized backgrounds do not have access to the same quality of educational and developmental opportunities as their peers from more affluent environments. Social workers play a key role in mitigating these inequalities by actively engaging families with local resources, educational programs, and support networks. Such actions provide a concrete operationalization of social capital, wherein social workers act as intermediaries in the distribution and access to social resources, thereby creating a support network that directly impacts the developmental potential of children. Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes that social capital is the accumulation of actual or potential resources that stem from networks of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, which, in the context of preschool institutions, can be manifested through community support, educational initiatives, and parental participation. In this context, the ap-

plication of findings derived from the Heckman curve is particularly significant. This model clearly demonstrates that economic returns on investments in early childhood development—especially in education and social support during the preschool years—are substantially higher than those made in later stages of life (Heckman, 2006). According to Heckman (2008), early childhood interventions have the potential to significantly reduce social inequalities and improve life outcomes for children from impoverished families. Investment in early development enhances not only cognitive abilities but also social and emotional skills that are crucial for long-term labor market integration. When Heckman's theory is integrated with the theory of social capital, it becomes evident that effective early childhood interventions depend not only on financial investment but also on social connectedness and access to resources made possible by a strong network of social capital. Putnam (2000) highlights the importance of “bridging” and “bonding” social capital, which can act as a catalyst for the effective use of developmental programs. Heckman's findings further confirm that such early engagement is not only socially beneficial but also economically efficient. Thus, the development of social capital through social workers' interventions constitutes a foundational strategy for achieving the long-term benefits described by the Heckman curve. Neglecting this stage of development may lead to increased social costs in the future, including a greater need for remediation, welfare support, and corrective interventions. Therefore, it is recommended that social protection strategies and educational policies be grounded in the principles advocated by the Heckman curve, which is particularly relevant for children from impoverished backgrounds, as high-quality early programs can reduce educational and developmental disparities that are difficult to overcome later in life. In line with social capital theory, social workers in Bosnia and Herzegovina should play an active role in mobilizing local communities, strengthening parental networks, and fostering collective responsibility for child well-being. This involves organizing workshops, joint activities, and fieldwork in local communities characterized by high unemployment rates and low educational attainment. These efforts not only reduce the isolation of families but also increase trust in institutions that provide support. Such processes are essential for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. In this regard, social capital not only provides a framework for understanding access to resources, but also represents a concrete mechanism through which the effects of early interventions—as anticipated by Heckman's model—can be maximized.

*Attachment Theory and the Importance of Social Workers in Early Childhood Development*

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) emphasizes that emotional bonds with primary caregivers are crucial for a child's development. Children raised in unstable family environments often develop insecure attachment patterns, which can negatively impact their social and emotional adjustment. Social workers in preschool institutions can identify children showing signs of insecure attachment and provide additional support through:

- Working with parents on developing positive parenting strategies.
- Providing individual support to children through counseling and group activities.
- Collaborating with educators to ensure stable emotional support in preschool settings.

In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where many parents are exposed to economic pressures, migration, or the consequences of family traumas stemming from the post-conflict period, the stability of family relationships is often compromised. This can hinder children's emotional bonding with their primary caregivers, particularly in families living in poverty, violence, or parental neglect. When integrated into preschool institutions, social workers can play a crucial role in the early identification of insecure attachment patterns in children and in the development of targeted interventions involving the family, preschool, and professional services. The application of attachment theory in this context enables the development of preventive measures that do not wait for problems to manifest through behavior, but instead act proactively to strengthen a child's emotional security. As a result, the risk of later developmental difficulties, behavioral issues, and even school failure is reduced. In this way, the theory becomes a foundation for practical models of work that connect the individual needs of the child with the structural capacities of the support system.

*Critical Theory and the Anti-Discriminatory Approach in Social Work*

Critical theory (Dominelli, 2002) argues that social inequalities stem from structural factors that marginalize certain groups. In preschool education, this means that children from poor families and minority communities often face institutional barriers that hinder their access to quality education. Social workers can act as advocates for children's rights by:

- Working on reforms in education policies.
- Fighting discrimination in preschool institutions.
- Connecting marginalized families with the social welfare system.

In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the application of critical theory requires the active recognition and deconstruction of institutional practices that perpetuate inequality—such as unequal funding of preschool institutions, discriminatory attitudes toward the Roma population, and limited access to free programs for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. In this context, social workers must take on the role of advocates and educators, working to dismantle stereotypes within the educational system. Special attention must be paid to children who do not speak the majority language or who come from rural and institutionally neglected communities, where the chances for quality early childhood development are significantly reduced.

### *Sustainable Development Theory*

The theory of sustainable development implies a balanced approach to economic growth, social justice, and environmental preservation, taking into account the needs of both present and future generations. Sustainable development is defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In the context of early childhood education, sustainability entails empowering children to develop an awareness of community, interconnectedness, and personal responsibility (UNESCO, 2017). The importance of education for sustainability is recognized precisely in the need to begin such education as early as possible (Lepičnik & Šindić, 2025). Social sustainability, in particular, which pertains to equity, inclusion, and the strengthening of social bonds, should be actively promoted by preschools through everyday relationships and activities. However, it has been observed that social sustainability is less frequently promoted through cooperation with the local community (Šindić & Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2025), where greater involvement of social workers could positively influence the implementation of participatory activities and foster stronger connections with the surrounding environment. In the Bosnian context, the concept of social sustainability is still not systematically integrated into early childhood education policies. While some preschools implement projects related to environmental sustainability, aspects of social equity, participation, and intergenerational solidarity often remain marginalized. The role of the social worker here is to ensure that the values of sustainability are not reduced to symbolic

activities, but are reflected in everyday practices—such as involving parents in decision-making processes, creating spaces for children's voices, and connecting educational institutions with local non-governmental and humanitarian sectors. In this way, a true “culture of sustainability” is built, rather than merely fulfilling formal educational objectives.

Analyzing various theoretical frameworks highlights the crucial role of social work in providing support to children, families, and educational institutions. Ecological systems theory emphasizes the importance of connecting different support systems, while resilience theory underlines the significance of early intervention for children from high-risk environments. Systems theory demonstrates the necessity of a multidisciplinary approach, while social capital theory highlights that social inclusion and opportunities for children can be enhanced through active engagement by social workers. Critical theory further emphasizes the necessity of combating social inequalities through the advocacy of systemic change, while the theory of sustainable development provides a foundation for interventions aimed at building a more inclusive, empathetic, and sustainable society. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where social work in preschool education remains underdeveloped, applying these theoretical concepts could help create a more efficient and inclusive support system for children and families.

### **The Importance of Social Work in Preschool Institutions**

Social work in preschool institutions plays a crucial role in supporting children and their families, particularly in the context of early childhood development, the prevention of social problems, and the promotion of inclusive education. Preschool education serves as the foundation for a child's overall development, as it lays the groundwork for future academic success and general well-being. The role of social workers in this process is reflected in their support for children, families, and professional staff in overcoming social and psychosocial barriers that may impact a child's development.

#### *Psychosocial Development of the Child and the Role of the Social Worker*

The preschool period is a time of intense emotional, cognitive, and social development. During this stage, children acquire fundamental skills such as communication, problem-solving, and peer relationships. However, children growing up in disadvantaged social conditions often face challenges that may hinder their development. Social workers possess specific competencies that

enable them to recognize early risk factors, such as neglect or economic deprivation, and take action to prevent negative consequences. They assist children and families in developing resources and capacities to overcome these challenges. Research indicates that social workers play a pivotal role in supporting children from low-income families by facilitating their access to education and essential resources (Kecman, 2021).

### *Inclusive Education and Social Work*

One of the fundamental principles of modern preschool education is inclusion, ensuring equal access to education for all children, regardless of their individual differences. Children with developmental disabilities, as well as those from marginalized groups, are often excluded from the education system or do not receive the same quality of education as their peers. Social workers play a key role in promoting inclusion, as they are trained to work with children from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Their role in inclusive education involves assisting families in overcoming barriers to preschool enrollment and collaborating with professional teams to develop individualized educational plans. For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, social workers participate in support programs for Roma children, facilitating their access to education and providing assistance to their families (UNICEF, 2020). Through such initiatives, social workers contribute to reducing social exclusion and fostering an inclusive environment within preschool institutions.

### *Working with Families and Strengthening Parental Competencies*

The family is central to a child's life, and the quality of relationships within the family significantly influences the child's development. It serves as the primary support system, and the quality of parenting has a profound impact on a child's well-being (Kecman, 2021). Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of stable and secure relationships between children and their primary caregivers, which play a crucial role in emotional and social development. Social workers in preschool institutions recognize the need to support families, particularly those facing challenges such as poverty, unemployment, or difficulties in parenting.

One of the primary tasks of social workers in working with families is enhancing parental competencies. This includes educating parents about the importance of early stimulation, positive parenting, and emotional support for their children. Additionally, social workers provide counseling services to

parents struggling with issues related to discipline, communication with their children, or other aspects of parenting (Marušić, 2018). Through their work with families, social workers help create a stable and supportive environment for children. For example, UNICEF research has shown that families who received social work support during the preschool years were better equipped to meet their children's needs, positively influencing their overall development (UNICEF, 2019).

### *Prevention of Developmental Problems*

A key objective of social work in preschool settings is the prevention of developmental problems. This involves identifying children at risk of developmental delays and designing and implementing support programs. Social workers frequently collaborate with other professionals, such as pedagogues, psychologists, and medical practitioners, to assess children's needs and provide appropriate support. For instance, children exhibiting signs of developmental delays may receive additional assistance through individualized or group programs designed by expert teams in collaboration with social workers (Kecman, 2021). The role of social workers in preventing developmental problems is particularly significant in the context of working with children from disadvantaged social backgrounds. These children are often exposed to multiple risk factors, including poverty, poor health conditions, and a lack of adequate parental support. Social workers help mitigate these risks by empowering families, ensuring access to essential resources, and providing direct support to children.

### *Promoting Social Justice and Equal Opportunities*

One of the fundamental aspects of social work in preschool institutions is the promotion of social justice and equal opportunities for all children. This involves efforts to reduce disparities in access to education and provide additional support to children from marginalized groups. Social workers in preschool institutions often encounter challenges such as discrimination, stigmatization, and social exclusion. Their role is to ensure that all children have equal opportunities for development and learning, regardless of their social, economic, or cultural background. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, social workers are involved in programs that support children from Roma communities, enabling them to access education and integrate into the wider society (UNICEF, 2020).



### *Collaboration with Other Professionals*

Effective social work in preschool institutions requires close collaboration with other professionals, including pedagogues, psychologists, speech therapists, and medical staff. This interdisciplinary approach ensures a comprehensive response to children's emotional, cognitive, and social needs. Social workers play a crucial role in coordinating teamwork, ensuring that all aspects of a child's well-being are recognized and addressed appropriately.

The significance of social work in preschool institutions lies in its role in supporting children, families, and communities in creating an inclusive, supportive, and safe developmental environment. Social workers are essential in identifying and preventing problems, promoting inclusion, working with families, and collaborating with other professionals. Although social work in preschool education in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not yet systematically regulated, examples of good practice demonstrate that social workers can significantly contribute to the quality of preschool education.

## **The State of Social Work in Preschool Institutions Across the Region and Comparison with Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Social work in preschool institutions assumes different roles and levels of development across the countries of the region, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Slovenia. These differences primarily stem from specific legislative frameworks, societal needs, and the level of investment in the education system and social protection. This analysis provides an overview of the state of social work in preschool education in the region, with a detailed comparison to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### *Social Work in Preschool Institutions in Serbia*

In Serbia, social work in preschool education is legally regulated through the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System (2020), which recognizes the need for a multidisciplinary approach in working with children. Social workers are part of expert teams in preschool institutions and are engaged in prevention, early intervention, and inclusion efforts. According to data from the Institute for the Improvement of Education and Upbringing of Serbia, social workers are employed in approximately 20% of preschool institutions, which is significantly higher than in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kecman, 2021). A particular focus in Serbia is placed on working with families from socially



vulnerable communities, as well as on the inclusion of children with developmental disabilities. A notable example of best practice is the “Education for All” program, which provides support to Roma children and their families through the engagement of social workers. Compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia demonstrates a higher level of integration of social workers into the preschool system, although there is still considerable room for improvement, especially in rural areas.

#### *Social Work in Preschool Institutions in Croatia*

Croatia stands out with a well-developed system of social work in preschool education, integrated into the broader framework of social policy. According to the Law on Preschool Education and Upbringing (2013), preschool institutions in Croatia are required to have expert teams that include pedagogues, psychologists, and social workers. This model enables a comprehensive approach to working with children, with a particular focus on inclusion and early intervention. One of Croatia’s key programs is “Step by Step”, which promotes inclusion in preschool education. Social workers in this program play a crucial role in supporting children from marginalized communities and in empowering parents. Unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina, where social workers are not systematically integrated into all preschool institutions, Croatia has made progress in this area, resulting in a higher level of inclusion and better support for families.

#### *Social Work in Preschool Institutions in Montenegro*

Social work in preschool institutions in Montenegro is regulated by the Law on Preschool Education and Upbringing (2010). Although the role of social workers in this system is still relatively modest, recent years have seen progress in integrating social workers into the preschool system, particularly through early intervention programs. According to the Montenegrin Ministry of Education, social workers are employed in approximately 15% of preschool institutions, which is slightly higher than in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ministry of Education of Montenegro, 2020). One of the key challenges in Montenegro is the lack of personnel in rural areas, a problem shared with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The unequal availability of social work services across different regions remains a significant obstacle to achieving a comprehensive and effective system.

*Social Work in Preschool Institutions in North Macedonia*

In North Macedonia, social work in preschool institutions is still underdeveloped. Although the Law on Preschool Education (2004) acknowledges the importance of a multidisciplinary approach, social workers are rarely employed in preschool institutions. According to the Ministry of Education and Science of North Macedonia, social workers are present in less than 10% of preschool institutions, a situation similar to that in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ministry of Education and Science of North Macedonia, 2020). The main challenges in North Macedonia include high poverty rates and the limited availability of preschool education in rural areas. Compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia faces greater difficulties in terms of resources and institutional support, further complicating the integration of social workers into the preschool system.

*Social Work in Preschool Institutions in Slovenia*

Slovenia stands out as a regional leader in the integration of social work into the preschool system. According to the Law on Preschool Education and Upbringing (1996), every preschool institution is required to have an expert team that includes a social worker. Slovenia has developed a comprehensive approach to social work, encompassing work with children, families, and the local community. One example of best practice is the “Friends of Children” program, which focuses on the integration of migrant children into preschool institutions. Compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia has a significantly more developed system of social work in preschool education, which is the result of long-term investment in the educational and social sectors.

A comparative analysis clearly shows that countries with better-defined legislative frameworks and higher investment in social work within preschool education achieve better results in inclusion and the prevention of social problems among children. When comparing the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina with other countries in the region, it is evident that Bosnia and Herzegovina lags behind in the integration of social workers into the preschool system. While countries such as Slovenia and Croatia have developed inclusive models, Bosnia and Herzegovina faces numerous challenges, including a lack of legal regulations, financial resources, and qualified professionals. One of the main issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the unequal availability of social workers in preschool institutions. While some cantons and municipalities have recognized the importance of social work in preschool education, many rural communities lack access to these services. On the other hand, countries in the

region, such as Slovenia and Croatia, have demonstrated that ensuring equal access to social services is possible through systematic regulation and investment in professional staff. In conclusion, social work in preschool institutions is not only a matter of professional practice but also a social responsibility. Bosnia and Herzegovina has the opportunity to enhance its preschool social work system to contribute to the creation of a more inclusive and fair society, where every child will have equal opportunities for development and success. By adopting best practices from the region and investing in social work, Bosnia and Herzegovina can significantly improve its preschool education system, ensuring that social work becomes a standardized and essential component of early childhood development.

### **Challenges and Recommendations for the Improvement of Social Work in Preschool Institutions**

Social work in preschool institutions faces numerous challenges that affect the quality and accessibility of services for children, parents, and the community. It is crucial to analyze each of these challenges and, more importantly, propose solutions that can contribute to the advancement of social work in preschool institutions, taking into account the specificities of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as experiences from countries in the region. The main challenges of the social work profession in preschool institutions are as follows:

- Lack of a legal framework – One of the primary challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the inadequate legal framework regulating social work in preschool education. Although laws on preschool education and social protection recognize the importance of an interdisciplinary approach, the role of social workers is neither clearly defined nor systematically regulated (Kecman, 2021). As a result, many preschool institutions do not recognize the need to employ social workers, while existing professionals face ambiguous job descriptions and limited resources.
- Shortage of personnel and resources – Social workers in preschool settings often work under conditions of staff shortages and limited resources. According to UNICEF data (2020), only 10% of preschool institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina employ social workers, highlighting a severe lack of personnel. The situation is particularly difficult in rural areas, where access to professional support is even more limited.
- Weak collaboration with parents and the community – Another challenge is the insufficient cooperation between social workers, parents, and the local community. Social workers often lack the opportunity to actively partic-

ipate in family support programs, limiting their ability to address issues such as poverty and domestic violence. Additionally, parents are often not well-informed about the role of social workers, which can lead to a lack of trust and cooperation (UNICEF, 2020).

- Uneven practices across different parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina – Bosnia and Herzegovina faces the issue of inconsistent practices in social work within preschool institutions, largely due to the country's complex administrative structure. While some cantons and municipalities have recognized the importance of social work, others have neglected this area, leaving children and families without the necessary support (Kecman, 2021).

Based on the aforementioned challenges, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance social work in preschool institutions:

- Development and implementation of a legal framework – The first step toward improving social work in preschool education is adopting legislation that clearly defines the role of social workers within preschool institutions. This law should mandate that preschools employ social workers as part of multidisciplinary teams, with precisely defined responsibilities and duties.

- Increased investment in human resources and infrastructure – Another crucial step is increasing investment in human resources and infrastructure within preschool institutions. This includes hiring additional social workers, particularly in rural areas where their services are most needed. Additionally, it is essential to provide adequate working conditions and resources, including spaces for individual and group work with children and parents.

- Strengthening collaboration with parents and the community – Social workers should be actively involved in family support programs to improve cooperation between preschool institutions and parents. This includes organizing workshops, counseling sessions, and educational programs for parents, as well as collaborating with local NGOs and social protection institutions. For instance, Slovenia and Croatia have developed successful parenting support programs that could serve as a model for Bosnia and Herzegovina (UNICEF, 2020).

- Promoting social work in preschool education – To raise awareness about the importance of social work in preschool institutions, it is necessary to conduct public information campaigns targeting parents, educators, and policymakers.

The challenges facing social work in preschool institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not insurmountable. With appropriate legal reforms, increased investment, and stronger collaboration between preschools, parents, and the community, it is possible to develop a system that supports the overall development of children and contributes to reducing social inequalities.

## Conclusion

Social work in preschool institutions plays a crucial role in ensuring comprehensive support for children, families, and the community. However, its full potential in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains underutilized. The analysis shows that Bosnia and Herzegovina has a fragmented and underdeveloped system of social work in preschool education, mainly due to the country's complex political and administrative structure, inconsistent practices, and insufficient resources. Despite these challenges, there is room for improvement through legal reforms, increased investment in human resources, and continuous education and professional development of social workers. A comparative analysis with countries in the region, such as Slovenia and Croatia, demonstrates that these countries have more advanced systems where the role of social workers in preschool institutions is clearly defined and legally regulated.

The findings of this research highlight that social work in preschool institutions is a key element in creating an inclusive, fair, and efficient support system for children and families. With appropriate reforms, Bosnia and Herzegovina has the potential to build a system that ensures equal access to quality services for all children, regardless of their socioeconomic status or place of residence. Based on theoretical and empirical data, it can be concluded that social work in preschool institutions should not be viewed in isolation but rather as part of a broader social protection and educational policy framework.

Theories of social work emphasize that early childhood is a critical period for interventions that can significantly improve children's long-term social outcomes. Without systemic reforms and an increase in the capacity of social workers in preschool institutions, Bosnia and Herzegovina will continue to lag behind regional countries in terms of inclusion and social support. Therefore, it is imperative that future educational and social policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina recognize the importance of social work in preschool institutions and ensure sustainable support for its implementation.

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