

## Chapter 5

# Cultural Factors Affecting the Participation in Research of Children Victims of Child Abuse and Neglect: The Case of Turkey

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### Abstract

Culture significantly influences individuals' lives and shapes their behaviour in an ecological framework. In this chapter, we examine the issue of children's participation in research about child abuse and neglect (CAN) in the context of Turkey – a country that bridges the Asian and European continents. This study was based on a review examining studies on CAN in Turkey. Thus, the main goal was to find cultural explanations for the scarcity of participatory research with children in the field of child maltreatment. A review examining studies on CAN in Turkey found that no study included children victims of CAN or explored why children victims of CAN have not been participating in research. Therefore, we analysed ecological factors influencing the participation of children in CAN studies and interpreted the findings based on our observations as experts in this field. The analysis indicated that causes are not only due the characteristics of the caregivers and children but also result from the interaction of various environmental and systemic factors. Recommendations for politicians and researchers to increase children's participation in research are discussed.

*Keywords:* Turkey; ecological system approach; cultural factors; child abuse and neglect; values; family

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## Introduction

Child abuse and neglect (CAN) is a critical social problem affecting an individual's childhood and adult life (Dobson et al., 2021; Levin & Liu, 2021). To address the problem of CAN in terms of both treatment and prevention, we need to know the prevalence and extent of the problem (Sumner et al., 2015). The creation of policies for families and children, employment of experts working in the field of child protection and services for children and families depend on understanding the mechanisms and estimating the prevalence of CAN.

The literature shows that millions of children around the world are exposed to maltreatment (Mathews et al., 2020; Stoltenborgh et al., 2013a, 2013b). However, in many countries, the extent of CAN is not clearly known, and many nations lack reliable comparative national prevalence data (Mathews et al., 2020; Sumner et al., 2015). This is relevant, particularly for undeveloped countries. According to meta-analyses by Stoltenborgh et al. (2013a, 2013b) and Jud et al. (2016), prevalence rates of CAN are primarily based on data from developed countries, and few studies have focused on underdeveloped or developing countries. Although the rates in developed countries are worrisome, they are much higher in underdeveloped or developing countries (Klevens & Ports, 2017; Stoltenborgh et al., 2013b).

In this chapter, we examine the issue of children's participation in research about CAN in the context of Turkey – a country that bridges the Asian and European continents. Turkey's unique cultural characteristics are unlike European countries or other Muslim countries (Sunar & Fişek, 2005). Legally, it adopts the concept of a secular state and has citizens of different nationalities and religions, although many residents are Muslims (Sunar & Fişek, 2005). Due to this mosaic structure of the country, the child's position in the family and right to participate in research may vary among ethnic cultures (Coşgun, 2019; Güçlü, 2016). In addition, the position of the child in the family in Turkey is affected by many factors, such as the structure of the family (extended or nuclear), socio-cultural status, place of residence and political and religious views of parents (Güçlü, 2016; Taşkın, 2009). In the traditional family type, hierarchical and asymmetrical family relations among father, mother and child are nourished by strict religious and social teachings (Günaydın & Aşan, 2017). In rural areas, a traditionalist perspective often persists in family structures if the parents' education level is low or the parents do not adopt a secular perspective (Güçlü, 2016). Women and children are expected to submit to authority in these family structures, and fathers and other men are seen as authority figures (Koçtürk, 2021; Sunar & Fişek, 2005). The traditional view of children as dependent on parental authority might also be reflected in how research on family relationships, CAN and gendered violence is conducted. Due to urbanisation and the transition from traditional to nuclear family structures, the balance of authority in the family has begun to differentiate; these changes in family structures have led to more democratic parental attitudes of family members towards children (Güçlü, 2016). In family structures where the mother is involved in working life (Ayyıldız, 2005) and a secular perspective is adopted, the position of the child is valued and a more

democratic parenting approach is adopted (Günaydın & Aşan, 2017; Sunar & Fişek, 2005). In other words, the child's position in the family is evaluated in parallel with the mother's position (Koçtürk, 2021). As urbanisation, parents' education level and egalitarian perspectives towards gender equality advance, both family relations and shared authority change, alongside changes in the family position of the child (Coşgun, 2019; Güçlü, 2016). In this book chapter on factors affecting children's participation in research, we focus on the problem in the context of the dominant culture, which is characterised as collectivist and patriarchal.

Children in Turkey are less involved in CAN research (Uslu & Kapçı, 2014). For example, a report that systematically evaluated relevant studies in Turkey emphasised the limited number of studies on the prevalence of child sexual abuse and that child participation is at a low level (Uslu & Kapçı, 2014). Indeed, there is no national database for CAN victims in Turkey; few studies have been conducted with internationally accepted measures and, therefore, data are not comparable internationally (Eratay, 2000). In the Child Abuse and Domestic Violence Research in Turkey study by UNICEF (2010), the prevalence of emotional abuse was 51%, physical abuse was 43% and sexual abuse was 3% in a sample of 1,886 children aged 7–18. In a survey in eight Eastern European countries, among 1,763 children, the physical abuse rate was 14.6%, domestic violence witnessing was 17.9%, emotional neglect was 8.7%, emotional abuse was 3.7% and sexual abuse was 6.9% (Bellis et al., 2014). Methodological problems like differences in the definition of CAN have led to different results among different samples and regions and the inability to compare these results (Koçtürk, 2019). In most studies, data have been obtained from parents or retrospectively from adults (Uslu & Kapçı, 2014), indicating that cultural issues influence how research in CAN is implemented.

This chapter focuses on the impact of cultural factors on children's participation in research. Using ecological theory as the conceptual framework, we examine the effect of cultural barriers to conducting research with children, particularly myths about CAN. The concept of cultural factors affecting children's participation in research, as the term suggests, refers to a psychosocial context. Moreover, this issue, which involves individuals younger than 18 years old, is not independent of their social environment, especially their parents. From a theoretical point of view, this opinion is compatible with the ecological system approach. Although this approach provides a holistic, context-specific and multilevel perspective on CAN (Martinello, 2020), it can also guide researchers and experts in identifying and finding solutions to the problem of why fewer children who are victims of CAN are involved in research. For these reasons, this book chapter primarily provides information on the ecological system approach and the micro and macro barriers and factors that affect children's participation in research. In this framework, this book chapter deals with the difficulties experienced in the legal processes for conducting research with children in Turkey, myths about CAN in society, fear of stigmatisation of children and their families and other systemic problems from an ecological perspective. Finally, recommendations for politicians and researchers to increase children's participation in research are made.

## Conceptual Perspective: Ecological System Approach

According to the ecological point of view (Belsky, 1980; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rosa & Tudge, 2013), the formation of a behaviour is affected by various systems in which the individual exists and their interactions with others; in other words, it is based on a multifactorial etiology. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), human development occurs through progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an actively evolving biopsychological person and the people, objects and symbols in their immediate environment (Eriksson et al., 2018; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). In other words, according to this theory, when the environmental conditions with which a child interacts directly (e.g. family) or indirectly (e.g. parent–school collaboration) are appropriate, the probability of realising their inherited traits and potential increases (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasised four systems with this concept of context: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem.

The microsystem is the most proximal setting where a developing person can interact face-to-face with physical environments such as home, childcare, playground and workplace (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Regarding the CAN phenomenon, four microsystems typically surround children: experiences in the family, with teachers, with peers and in the school environment (Lee, 2011).

The mesosystem is the relationship between two or more microsystems in which the developing person actively participates (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). In the context of CAN, the mesosystem refers to interactions between the child's systems, such as those between the child's family and the perpetrator and between the child's teachers and family (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

The exosystem is an environment in which the developing child does not participate actively but still experiences its influence in their life – for example, school curricula and popular media (Martinello, 2020; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). In the context of CAN, the difficulty of working conditions for parents is an example of this system (Maguire-Jack et al., 2022).

The macrosystem involves the core beliefs, values, cultural attitudes and ideologies such as those of the economic, social, educational, legal and political systems that affect the child's culture and society at a broader level (Martinello, 2020; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). We see the impact of the macrosystem on other ecological environments through its reflection on the functioning of subsystems (e.g. family, school).

## Methods

This study involved a review of studies on CAN in Turkey. Articles and theses were searched in the National Thesis Center Database (Council of Higher Education – Thesis), Ulakbim, and Web of Science databases between November and December 2022 using the following keywords: 'child abuse' *and/or* 'child neglect'

and 'child participation.' Although more than 20,000 studies were identified in the first stage, when the search was limited to the scope of the research question, the research team did not find any article directly looking for reasons why victims of CAN have not participated in research. Therefore, the research question was adjusted to look for cultural factors acting as barriers and hindering children's participation in CAN studies in Turkey, along with factors that enable their participation, in the various ecological systems described in Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework.

## **Ecological Factors Influencing Participation of Children in Research**

Adopting Bronfenbrenner's (1979) conceptual framework, we argue that to understand and increase the participation of child victims of CAN in research, we need to understand values, principles, traditions, norms and regulations intertwined in the process-person-context-time model. Thus, we analysed the Turkish literature on CAN, looking for possible cultural barriers and enabling factors at all levels of the ecological system: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem.

### ***Microsystem***

To gain direct access to children who are victims of CAN, it is necessary to be in environments such as family and school, which are included in the microsystem of children. However, even professionals providing services to children in Turkey, before conducting any research with children or asking for the child's participation request, must obtain permission from the parents. In other words, it is not possible for children to participate in research without the permission of the child's parents. According to the [Patient Rights Regulation \(1998\)](#), the law obligates researchers to get parents' informed consent for their child's participation before consent can be obtained from the children. Factors that may affect children's participation in research in the scope of microsystem include the following:

- Family structure: In families where a traditional patriarchal family structure is dominant, the father may make all final decisions about the child, including participation in research. This situation not only prevents the provision of the most fundamental rights of the child, such as the right to participation, but also prevents reaching the child in the face of problems such as neglect and domestic abuse. To overcome this problem, it is necessary to either reach the child without being dependent on the parents in the framework of the principle of the best interests of the child or encourage parents to allow their child to participate in research.

- Parental beliefs: Factors specific to parents come into play and may negatively affect children's participation in research. Namely, in cases of neglect and domestic abuse, parents likely will not want their children to participate in CAN research to protect them or other family members because of collectivism. The findings of studies on reasons for the late disclosure of child victimisation (Koçtürk & Bilginer, 2020) and withdrawal of complaints (Koçtürk & Bilginer, 2019) also support this view. Sharing problems experienced in the family with others is not desired, as reflected in proverbs such as 'The arm is broken, but it remains in the sleeve.' In other words, macrosystem factors such as culture and ideologies also play a role in the microsystem by influencing parents' attitudes, beliefs and values.
- Parental knowledge and myths: Various myths exist among parents about sexual abuse and disclosure (Kızıldağ & Koçtürk, 2021). These sexual abuse myths specific to the victim, abuser and abuse may also prevent their children from participating in CAN research (e.g. 'Preschoolers all make up that they've been sexually abused'; Kızıldağ & Koçtürk, 2021). Parents who are not abusive do not consider it positive to conduct research on these issues because they see talking about sexuality as a taboo and fear the influence on their children. For example, in one study, 70% of parents reported that talking to their children about sexual abuse is against their beliefs and culture (Üstündağ, 2022). Some nonabusive parents in Turkey do not find it positive to conduct research on sexual abuse, because they consider it taboo to talk about sexuality and think that any questions about sexuality do not match and might adversely affect their child's sexual development. To prevent possible reactions from parents and not affect their children, CAN research may not be allowed by authorised institutions, including ethical committees (Uslu & Kapçı, 2014). This situation hinders research on CAN survivors.
- Fearing of conflict with parents: Studies on CAN are not institutionally favoured due to misconceptions and attitudes such as not confronting parents institutionally (e.g. family getting angry with school administrators for reporting suspected abuse to the authorities; Kabul & Bıkmazer, 2022), not dealing with processes such as forensic notification because it requires additional time and effort (Haylı & Durmuş, 2015), the fact that sexuality is taboo, and because some parents use corporal punishment with their children for disciplinary purposes. Experts working with children fear conflict with parents because they feel alone and have security concerns in any conflict situation (Siviş-Çetinkaya, 2015). In this context, mesosystem and macrosystem factors indirectly prevent access to children.
- Difficulty reaching children: Families with low socioeconomic levels in Turkey do not send their children to preschool (Toran & Özgen, 2018). Considering that the first people to be told about neglect and abuse in the family experienced by children are the people close to the children, in the absence of the educator, disclosure of abuse is difficult, unless children interact with a different social environment and develop trust in a person. At this point, the microsystem through which access to children can be provided in Turkey is health institutions. Considering that some children in Turkey are not taken to health

institutions even for compulsory vaccinations (Bozkurt, 2018; Kurçer et al., 2005), it becomes difficult to reach some preschool children in rural areas or in families with low socioeconomic status. On the other hand, although children's councils have been established by official institutions such as the Ministry of Family and Social Services and municipalities to ensure the participation of children in decisions on issues such as municipal activities, these children's councils are not available in every province and district (Erbay, 2013). Similarly, few nongovernmental organisations allow children to take an active role, and they do not have microsystem resources to present their views via the internet or phone. In summary, apart from child follow-up centres where children who are victims of sexual abuse are interviewed and a few associations and child protection units, no other formal or informal services can advocate for children.

### ***Mesosystem***

As previously highlighted, the mesosystem involves the relationship between two or more microsystems in which the developing person actively participates. In this context, parental interactions with health institutions or school are the most common mesosystem concepts we encounter. However, factors related to child neglect, such as parents' indifference, unwillingness, lack of time and low level of education, are barriers to parental involvement with health and education institutions (Toran & Özgen, 2018). Considering that the involvement of neglectful parents may already be low, low parental involvement can also reduce children's participation in CAN research. On the other hand, the insufficient number of health personnel, teachers and school psychological counsellors prevents meeting with parents by making home visits. In summary, it is difficult to get legal permission (i.e. informed consent) from parents in cases where parental involvement is low due to the lack of a follow-up system where interviews between experts and family members are mandatory. This situation not only prevents the identification of children who are victims of CAN but also prevents children from participating in CAN research.

### ***Exosystem***

Regarding school curricula and media as exosystem variables, child participation is not at the desired level in both areas (Beyazova et al., 2016; Şirin, 2014), and there is no national programme or policy on raising awareness or participation in research on CAN in the school curriculum or media. Similarly, no programmes are conducted across the country for parents. However, the media is a key source of CAN information for families, according to a study by Rheingold et al. (2012), demonstrating that the exosystem can affect how families comprehend CAN. In Turkey, the media does not fulfil the duty of educating society about CAN, and it broadcasts in a way that does not comply with the ethical principles of journalism in terms of language, style and how the news is presented and may lead to the

revictimisation of the child (e.g. revealing the identity of the victim, publishing the victim's photo, not believing the victim's statement; Çakmak, 2018). As Bandura (1973) suggested in social learning theory, the child can learn through observation of various channels such as the social environment, media and school curriculum and predict what they may encounter in the society in which they live if they report a CAN event. In other words, the fact that a CAN incident is seen and being presented as something shameful in society may lead to the fear of being revealed as a survivor (Kabul & Bıkmazer, 2022). This situation can be considered an indirect factor affecting children's participation in research.

### *Macrosystem*

Regarding the formation, emergence and intervention processes of CAN, the effects of culture at the individual, familial and country levels are evident. At the individual level, not wanting to be stigmatised or labelled, such as wanting to forget the event by avoiding triggers or reminders, and the fear of revealing one's identity are essential variables that can affect participation in research and the reliability of research results. These variables are not independent of culture. In this context, possible cultural factors that may affect the participation of child victims in research in Turkey can be expressed as follows:

- Beliefs and myths about CAN: Myths about traumatic experiences and victims can be an essential factor influencing the process of reporting and participating in research. For example, the belief that abuse must be concealed to protect the family's honour (Koçtürk & Bilginer, 2020) or that talking about traumatic events can increase pain (Özbağrıaçık-Çağlayan, 2014) are examples of these myths. Other beliefs in the existing culture include trying to forget rather than expressing embarrassing events to preserve honour or dignity. These beliefs can influence the behaviour of victims. In the ecological system approach, cultural beliefs indirectly direct individuals' behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
- Sexist culture: Myths that blame the victim are also an extension of sexism and fed by the culture in which the individual lives (e.g. 'If sexual abuse has occurred more than once, the victim has consented'; Koçtürk & Kızıldağ, 2018). Unfortunately, these incorrect cultural teachings in Turkey are sometimes conveyed to the child through a comment by their parents or other individuals in their social circle (microsystem) and sometimes through a news report or words of judgment on television or social media (exosystem). This situation may affect victims' participation in research in Turkey, which is a collectivist culture.
- Stigmatisation of the child: According to the findings of studies on trauma and myths, CAN victims are ashamed of the event they have experienced and hide it to avoid being labelled and excluded (Koçtürk & Bilginer, 2019, 2020; Sayın et al., 2013). In this context, it would be helpful to consider social desirability as an essential factor that may affect the participation of survivors in research (Bergen & Labonté, 2020; DiLillo et al., 2006).

- Fear of exclusion and stigmatisation of the family by society: In the familial context, parents' fears of discrimination or exclusion from society often prevent the disclosure of abuse experiences. This culture is modelled as extremely strong to young children via the verbal and nonverbal behaviours of their parents and social environment such that even if they think that their parents will support them, children often do not report their abusive experiences due to various fears (Koçtürk & Bilginer, 2020). For example, in a study with victims of sexual abuse in Turkey, children's most common causes of delayed reporting were fear of creating domestic problems, upsetting their parents and being identified with the event in their social environment (Koçtürk & Bilginer, 2020). In Turkey, where family values and collectivism are praised, it may be inevitable that the individual needs of victims are ignored, and that they want to avoid reporting for the sake of familial and cultural elements. In other words, there is a fear that experiences of abuse may lead to negative consequences in the family such as exclusion and stigmatisation in society, and dishonouring the family. That would explain why children often do not participate in CAN research.
- Insufficient tracking capacity of the child protection systems: The child protection system in Turkey does not yet have sufficient resources to reach out to and manage all cases considered at risk of CAN in their families, which can be also a critical macrosystemic variable that affects identifying the monitoring of child abuse at societal level.

In summary, from an ecological point of view, many factors that prevent access to children arise from macrosystem variables such as social values, the desire to avoid possible criticism in society and inadequate child protection systems.

## **Implications for Increasing Children's Participation in Research**

As evidenced in this review, many systemic barriers affect children's participation in CAN research in Turkey, that can be identified especially at microsystem and macrosystem levels. When families with children (microsystem) embrace traditional societal values and judgments related to parental authority and power imbalance (macrosystem), it results in a vicious circle that bars children's access to participation in research. For this reason, it is necessary to carry out intervention and prevention studies at various levels according to the ecological system approach to increase the participation of children experiencing CAN in research and enable them to raise their voices. In light of this information, the following implications for politicians and researchers in increasing children's participation in research can be proposed according to the different ecological levels (Fig. 5.1).

As shown in Fig. 5.1, to create adequate conditions for research with children, the following changes are recommended at the individual, microsystem, meso-system, exosystem and macrosystemic levels.

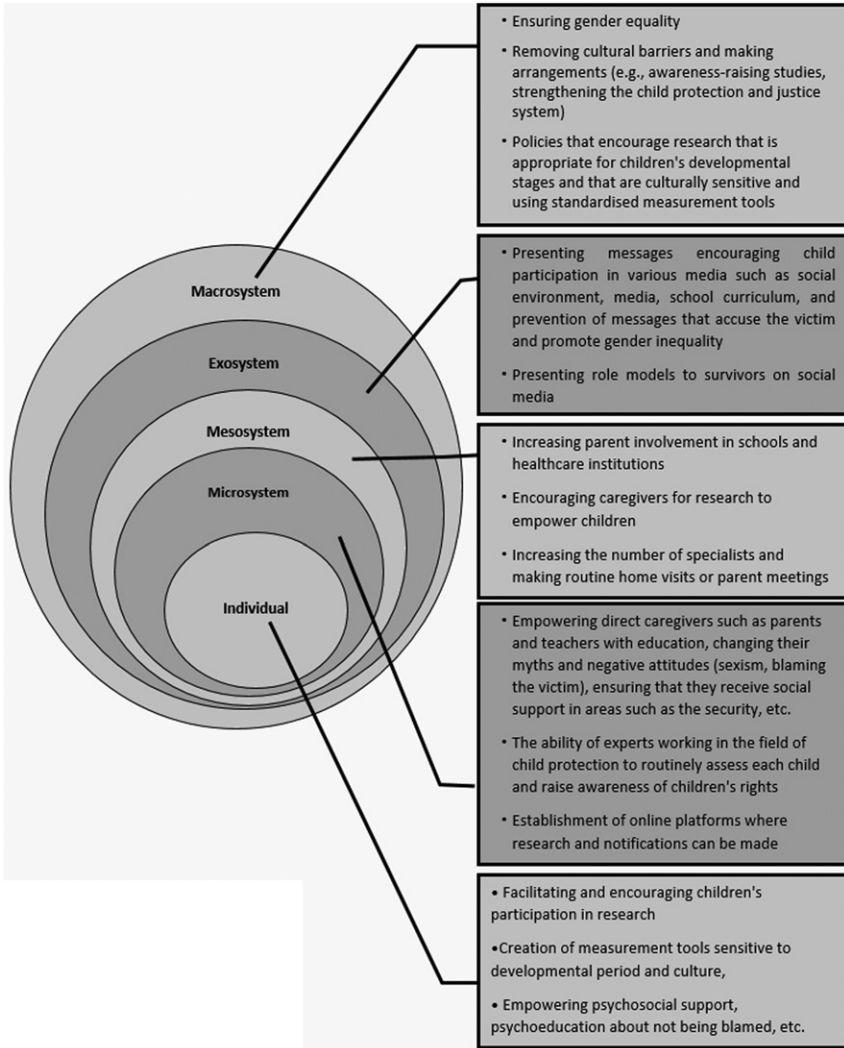


Fig. 5.1. Suggested Implications for Politicians and Researchers to Increase Children's Participation in Research.

**Individual Level**

Studies can be carried out to understand and influence the values and attitudes of children regarding the reporting of CAN and facilitate and encourage their participation in research. In light of the principle of the child's best interests, caregivers' gatekeeping power should be limited and children's consent should be

the primary consideration for CAN research. However, to prevent children from being harmed by research, the content of the research should be evaluated by a scientific ethics board and psychosocial support should be provided to children regarding possible risks after the research. In addition, culturally sensitive measurement tools, which can be used throughout the country, can assess possible CAN exposure among children and identify children who do not want to report, thereby increasing children's participation in research. To increase survivors' self-confidence and eliminate repeat-abuse patterns, studies that psychosocially strengthen survivors should be carried out, and all survivors should be informed about these activities.

### ***Microsystem***

It is essential to strengthen family members and experts (such as teachers and health workers) in the microsystem of children, changing their myths and negative attitudes (sexism, blaming the victim) and ensuring that they receive social support in areas such as security following disclosure, to encourage children's participation in research. In addition, parents can be trained on issues such as the importance of talking about CAN and the fact that the taboo regarding this subject can cause much more harm to children. Experts in the field of child protection should routinely evaluate each child and raise awareness of children's rights. Online platforms can be created by the Ministry of Family and Social Services for research and notifications.

### ***Mesosystem***

For the mesosystem to be effective, it is essential to increase parental participation in schools and health institutions. In settings such as schools, parents can be trained on myths, the importance of disclosure and gender equality. In expert-parent interviews, parents can also be made aware of their children's participation in research. In addition, parents who do not come to health and education centres can be reached by increasing the number of specialists and making routine home visits.

### ***Exosystem***

Messages encouraging child participation should be presented via various channels such as the social environment, media and school curriculum, and these environments should be purged of language that blames the victim and supports gender inequality. Campaigns and studies should explain various social benefits, such as how research with survivors can guide services to be provided to children and contribute to the prevention of CAN. By presenting role models to survivors on social media, survivors can gain the self-confidence to express themselves and be encouraged to participate in research.

### **Macrosystem**

Considering the positive relationship between abuse myths and sexism in Turkey and that gender equality is not at the desired level, one of the most important strategies at the macro level is to reduce patriarchal structures and ensure gender equality. It is essential to remove cultural barriers and make arrangements in various fields to increase the research participation of children who are victims of CAN. First, a social environment should be created in which survivors do not feel shame, blame themselves or feel excluded or stigmatised by their social environment. For this to occur, experts and media should emphasise that the victims have nothing to be ashamed of; the real culprit who should be embarrassed is the abuser and any community that tries to hide the incident and blame the victim. In this context, awareness-raising studies should be carried out to prevent society's negative attitudes towards these individuals. Creating an environment free from social norms and laws that blame the victim may indirectly affect participation in research. Creating policies that ensure gender equality in all macro and micro areas is one step that can be taken in the context of the macrosystem (e.g. strengthening the child protection and justice system). Last, at the macro level, it is necessary to create policies that protect children's best interests and encourage research that uses measures that are culturally sensitive, appropriate for children's developmental periods and standardised.

### **Conclusions**

From an ecological point of view, why children who are victims of CAN are less involved in research takes into account not only the characteristics of the caregiver and child but also the interaction of various environmental and systemic factors that can facilitate or hinder participation of children in research. Interventions and studies on CAN should occur in all domains emphasised by ecological theory that affect the risk of exposure to CAN and the possibility of accessing interventions and support. Finally, given the impact of the macrosystem on other ecological environments (such as family and school), a national policy should be developed to increase the participation of child victims in research and cultural barriers should be studied at each ecological system level.

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