




# The Role of Economic Sanctions in Violating Children's Rights

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The aim of this article is to examine the role of economic sanctions in violating children's rights, addressing the question of how international sanctions affect children's rights and their right to health in sanctioned countries. The findings reveal that comprehensive economic warfare through the imposition of unilateral and unlawful sanctions, along with extending their scope to all countries' relations with Iran, violates the right to health, welfare, and living standards of Iranian children and refugee children in Iran. These sanctions may deprive children of their fundamental rights, including the right to life, the right to food, the right to health and medical care (such as access to medications for patients with specific conditions), the right to education (including schooling and welfare), and, ultimately, the right to an adequate standard of living.

**Keywords:** Sanctions, Children's Rights, Security Council, United States, Islamic Republic of Iran, Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most significant coercive measures against any country can be linked to international sanctions, which are primarily implemented in the economic domain. Sanctions, by their nature, reflect a hostile relationship that may arise between nations; however, they do not represent the most severe form of sanctions (Separi, 2005). Today, countries use sanctions as tools to achieve their objectives in various fields. Countries employing these tools aim to undermine the economic relations of the sanctioned state, thereby pressuring it to comply with their demands. In the modern world, Western countries frequently use sanctions to advance their goals, asserting dominance over weaker and isolated nations. Through this approach, they seek to establish political and, ultimately,

economic control over the sanctioned states (Babazadeh, 2014).

In summary, it is essential to define and clarify the concept of sanctions to understand their nature. Sanctions refer to any activities imposed by one or more countries (senders) in the international arena against one or more other countries (targets) with the intent to punish governments by depriving them of certain values or compelling them to adopt or accept specific norms deemed significant in the international context. In other words, sanctions are political tools within the scope of foreign policy used to coerce governments into changing their behavior. To understand the position of sanctions among foreign policy tools, it is important to note that strategic tools in foreign policy aimed at influencing governmental policies, in order of increasing severity, include diplomatic pressures, international demands



and pressures, sanctions, and, ultimately, military operations (Asadi, 2011).

One of the tools of state or supra-state foreign policy to exert pressure on a country or its governing regime is the imposition of economic sanctions, which ultimately impose significant pressure on citizens, particularly children and adolescents, in sanctioned countries. The violation of human rights resulting from these sanctions is a fundamental issue closely monitored by the international community. In general, economic sanctions, as leverage against governments, directly and indirectly have numerous adverse effects on "children and adolescents, as well as other groups within sanctioned states," as well as "the rights of non-residents in those states, particularly migrant and non-national children." Within the field of international law, unilateral, secondary, and Security Council sanctions have particularly significant impacts on various aspects of human rights, especially children's rights, which are foundational principles of this branch of law (Zamani & Gharib Abadi, 2017).

Sanctions affect all aspects of children's rights, including their right to contact their parents, their right to dignity, appropriate civil and criminal rights, and their fundamental needs such as education, healthcare, physical protection, freedom from racial or religious discrimination, and disability or ethnic identity-related considerations (Bakhshi Mohammadi & Sajedi, 2018). It is noteworthy that children's rights are a subset of human rights, with a specific focus on their protective and caregiving aspects. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as a human being under the age of 18, who from birth is entitled to a name, nationality, and parental care (Article 7), with their identity also being recognized (Article 8) (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990).

In contemporary international law, the issue of children's rights is confronted with significant risks and international threats such as war, terrorism, and sanctions. While war and terrorist operations have profound effects on children, the actual and potential impacts of sanctions on children's health, lifestyle, and future are equally significant. Given the importance of this issue as a major challenge in international law and human rights, and considering the importance of civilian rights, particularly for ordinary citizens, women, children, and adolescents, understanding the impact of

international sanctions on children, their living conditions, and health, as well as their implications for international law, is of paramount importance (Evans & Jafari, 2012).

This article seeks to address the question: What impact do international sanctions, including those imposed by the United States, the United Nations, and other international organizations, have on children's rights and their right to health in sanctioned countries?

## 2. Sanctions in International Law Perspective

Sanctions not only have unavoidable effects on the lives of individuals, particularly children and adolescents in the target country, but they also impact their rights, such as the right to health or food, which are nearly universally accepted. Even narrowly tailored sanction regimes violate general principles of human rights. In some cases, sanctions have direct effects, such as travel restrictions or flight bans that may disrupt the right to freedom of movement and entry or exit from one's own country. They can also hinder the effective delivery of medical services. In other cases, sanctions have indirect effects. Regardless, even well-designed sanction regimes significantly affect human rights (Zamani & Gharib Abadi, 2017).

Scholars and human rights advocates have noted in numerous reports and articles that economic sanctions adversely affect large numbers of innocent civilians in target countries, including children, adolescents, and women, by limiting access to food and medicine, disrupting the entire economy, depriving them of essential income, and reducing national capacity for water, electricity systems, and other critical infrastructures vital for survival and health (Sukback, 2008). This discussion highlights some fundamental needs of children and adolescents that are significantly affected by sanctions imposed by the United States, the United Nations, and other international organizations (Haddadi, 2003).

### 2.1. Right to Life

Since the enjoyment of human rights depends on the existence of life, the right to life takes precedence over other rights, as without life, other rights hold no value or utility. The right to life, as the most fundamental and supreme right, from which all other rights originate, is

emphasized in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 6 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and many other international documents. All nations recognize this as an inherent right of human beings.

The catastrophic effects of sanctions on the right to life, a *jus cogens* norm that is non-derogable, are undeniable in many sanction regimes, especially comprehensive ones. Poverty, disruption in social services, and shortages of food and medicine due to sanctions result in the spread of disease and increased mortality rates, particularly among children, women, and the elderly (Zamani & Gharib Abadi, 2017). The right to life remains non-derogable even in emergencies and forms the core, inviolable concept of human rights. According to Article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, limiting the right to life is fundamentally contrary to the Covenant's objectives. The Covenant prohibits the violation of the right to life under Article 6, even during a public emergency that threatens the life of the nation and is officially declared (Momeni, 2014).

The Human Rights Committee has recognized the right to life as a profoundly important human right that cannot be ignored even in emergencies (Human Rights Committee General Comment 29 on States of Emergency, 2001, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.11). The Committee elaborated on the development of the right to life, stating that "the inherent right to life cannot be understood in a restrictive manner, and the protection of this right requires states to take positive measures." Initially understood as a prohibition against arbitrary killing, the concept of the right to life has evolved to include a broad range of protective aspects, such as preventing malnutrition and combating epidemic diseases.

In General Comment No. 4, the Committee stated that a limited interpretation of the "inherent right to life" is incorrect, and member states must take all positive measures to reduce infant mortality and improve children's life expectancy, particularly by addressing malnutrition and epidemic diseases (Evans & Jafari, 2012). This obligation is reinforced by Article 6 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes every child's right to life and requires states to ensure, to the maximum extent possible, the survival and development of children's rights.

From the Human Rights Committee's perspective, fulfilling commitments such as reducing child mortality constitutes a governmental role in supporting humanity, which can help improve life expectancy and eliminate or mitigate malnutrition and widespread diseases (Yamin, 2003, 2005). Thus, Security Council-imposed sanctions must not prevent individuals and children from accessing essential goods and services necessary for survival. Deliberate actions by Security Council members or states that restrict access to food and cause hunger are prohibited (De Wet, 2001).

## 2.2. *Right to Food*

The right to food, as a fundamental human right, is highlighted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Article 25).

Similarly, Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights states: "... States Parties to the present Covenant, recognizing the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, shall take, individually and through international cooperation, the measures, including specific programs, necessary to improve methods of production, conservation, and distribution of food by making full use of technical and scientific knowledge and ensuring an equitable distribution of world food supplies."

The Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights has outlined general observations regarding food, emphasizing that it should meet both qualitative and quantitative needs, be free from harmful substances, and ensure sustained and consistent access for people (Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, 1999, paras. 1-4). The right to food encompasses normative standards for adequacy, benefit, and accessibility (Sollner, 2007).

The draft on state responsibility provisionally adopted by the International Law Commission states, "Measures of reparation shall not under any circumstances result in depriving a population of its means of subsistence." While the Commission later replaced this provision with references to proportionality, James Crawford, the

Commission's Special Rapporteur, clarified that the principle of international law, which prohibits actions threatening the starvation of a country's population, remains accepted (Crawford, 2000).

Widespread starvation as a consequence of sanctions cannot be justified by their goals. Even in cases where economic sanctions are deemed lawful, their disproportionate impact undermines their legitimacy (Forlati & Picchio, 2004). Zarif argues that deprivation measures, such as restricting the right to food, can be considered acts of war under international human rights law, with the starvation of civilian populations, particularly children and women, potentially constituting genocide (Zarif, 1998).

Food shortages and malnutrition do not occur in isolation but are compounded by infrastructural failures primarily linked to sanctions, further reducing health standards. The clearest indicator of this phenomenon is the increased infant and child mortality rates during sanction periods (Asian-African Legal Consultative Organization, 2013, pp. 145–173).

The Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights has explicitly stated that the "right to food," essential for the realization of other human rights, must not be restricted through food sanctions or similar actions that jeopardize food production and access in other countries (Committee on Economic, 1999, paras. 1–4).

### 2.3. *Right to Health and Well-Being*

The right to health and well-being has been recognized and emphasized in various international documents. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms every individual's right to a standard of living adequate for health and medical care (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Article 25). Similarly, Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights recognizes the right of everyone to attain and enjoy the highest standards of physical and mental health (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966, Articles 11–12). This right is also emphasized in Article 12 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and Article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

The World Health Organization's Constitution does not limit the definition of health to the absence of disease or infirmity; instead, health is described as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being (WHO Constitution, 1946, Preamble). The preamble further declares that enjoying the highest attainable standard of health without discrimination based on race, religion, political belief, economic, or social condition is a fundamental right of every human being.

States party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights have three levels of obligations concerning the right to health:

1. They must respect the right to health by refraining from direct violations, such as systemic discrimination in healthcare systems.
2. They must protect this right against third-party interference, for example, through environmental regulations concerning third-party actions.
3. They must fulfill this right by taking appropriate measures (Yamin, 2005).

Medicines are a visible and essential aspect of the right to health, particularly for children, women, the elderly, and patients. Unilateral and secondary sanctions imposed on many developing countries have severely impacted citizens' standards in these countries by making essential and life-saving medicines and medical equipment inaccessible.

Access to clean drinking water is another critical indicator of the right to health, particularly for children and adolescents. Since two-thirds of the human body consists of water, access to clean drinking water is essential for survival. Contaminated water is a major cause of death worldwide. Consuming unsafe water not only increases child mortality but can also result in permanent physical and mental developmental impairments (Al-Kajbaf & Ansarian, 2014). Water remains a crucial issue in sanctioned countries, as sanctions can hinder water supply programs and projects (Setareh News, 2017).

A clean and healthy environment is another indicator of the right to health. Today, enjoying a healthy environment is considered a fundamental right. Scientific, technical, and economic sanctions against countries accelerate environmental degradation. Increased pollution and limited access to international resources hinder appropriate responses to

environmental issues, reducing the quality of life and health in sanctioned countries. The resulting decrease in family living standards disproportionately affects the health and hygiene of infants and children (*Collection of Articles of Second International Conference on Economy in Sanctions Situations, 2014*).

#### 2.4. Right to Education

Education is a fundamental human right, an enabler, and a prerequisite for exercising other human rights. It is essential for individuals to realize their potential and abilities (Habibi Mogende et al., 2012, p. 19). According to UNESCO's Recommendation on Education for International Understanding, Cooperation, and Peace, as well as Education Relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, "education" encompasses all learning processes within social life, enabling individuals and groups to consciously develop and benefit from their abilities, talents, inclinations, and knowledge.

Paragraph 2 of Article 1 of UNESCO's Convention Against Discrimination in Education relates education to all types and levels, specifying standards for access, quality, and conditions of delivery (Convention Against Discrimination in Education, 1960, Article 1, Para 2). The UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights regards the right to education as inseparable from and interdependent on all human rights (Court of The Hague, 2012).

The dependence of education on a society's micro and macroeconomic conditions is evident, and economic sanctions can adversely affect it. Economic sanctions can lead to increased illiteracy, school dropouts, and the destruction and weakening of modern educational structures and infrastructures, such as the internet and virtual education systems. These impacts are particularly felt by students, including children and adolescents in schools and young adults at universities. Restricting access to education for Iranians in nuclear-related fields violates relevant international documents and constitutes discrimination in education. As stated in Paragraph "a" of Article 1 of UNESCO's Convention Against Discrimination in Education, "Depriving any individual or group of access to any type or level of education constitutes discrimination."

This view is supported by rulings of the Court of The Hague and the Dutch Supreme Court in 2011 and 2012. Iranian students studying in Dutch universities filed a

lawsuit against the Dutch Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Education, Culture, and Science, alleging discrimination based on nationality. On February 3, 2010, the Court of The Hague ruled that sanctions against Iranian students constituted unacceptable discrimination based on nationality. The Appeals Court, on April 26, 2011, upheld this ruling, which was further affirmed by the Dutch Supreme Court on December 19, 2012 (Court of The Hague, 2012).

#### 2.5. Right to an Adequate Standard of Living

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being, including food, housing, medical care, and necessary social services (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Article 25). This right is further detailed in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which recognizes every individual and family's right to an adequate standard of living and the progressive improvement of their living conditions. It obligates member states to take appropriate measures to achieve this goal (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966, Articles 11-12).

Sanctions negatively affect production, employment, and national income, resulting in low economic productivity, inequitable distribution of goods and services, and social disorder and disparity. Ultimately, sanctions reduce living standards, depriving people of adequate living conditions (Zamani & Gharib Abadi, 2017).

### 3. Sanctions and the Violation of Children's Rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989 and ratified by many countries, emphasizes numerous measures to protect and promote children's rights. It recognizes appropriate and special humane treatment for children and ensures the enforcement of these rights through other international instruments. Additionally, Resolutions 1261 and 1995 highlight the importance of safeguarding internationally protected spaces such as schools, hospitals, childcare centers, and other locations frequented by children. Beyond these documents, other international instruments pay special attention to the conditions of children targeted during armed conflicts and hostilities.



The CRC emphasizes the family unit and prioritizes the best interests and welfare of children. It asserts that recognizing children's rights is impossible without addressing their challenges, given the family's critical role as the primary and most influential environment for children's growth during their formative years and beyond. The role of governments in realizing children's rights is a crucial feature of the CRC. Many programs concerning children's development, education, health, and protection must be incorporated into national-level planning. Therefore, governments play a vital role in ensuring children's fundamental rights and are obligated to guarantee their growth and well-being. However, this obligation does not negate the role of public participation in achieving children's rights.

The CRC consists of a preamble and three parts. The preamble outlines the treaty's overall framework. Part One (Articles 1-41) defines children's rights. Part Two (Articles 42-45) specifies mechanisms for implementation and monitoring. Part Three (Articles 46-54) addresses the procedures for adoption, ratification, and accession to the treaty by countries (Rostamzadeh, 2005).

One early advocate for children's rights, who founded the Save the Children organization in the UK, believed that children are disproportionately victims of flawed economic policies, political errors, and wars. Following World War I, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child was drafted in Geneva, focusing primarily on nutrition, health, and protection from the physical and psychological harm caused by war. Subsequently, the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, serving as the foundation for the CRC.

In 2000, two optional protocols were added to the CRC: one on the involvement of children in armed conflict and the other on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography. The CRC, adopted unanimously in 1989 through the efforts of Poland and Professor Adam Lopatka, consists of a preamble and 54 articles—41 addressing children's rights and 13 outlining procedural and implementation mechanisms in each country. The CRC aims to create a better life for children and foster their harmonious and balanced development in various domains (Farokhi, 2008).

Iran recognizes the dignity of all humans and provides greater protections for children, considering their

innocence, vulnerability, and critical role in the future of society. Iran joined the CRC in 1990 and has submitted and defended four periodic reports on children's rights. Additionally, Iran has acceded to the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography and is currently preparing its initial report on its implementation.

The development of children's rights in the U.S. legal system began with the General Assembly's adoption of the CRC in 1989. This period saw advancements in Article 19 of the American Convention on Human Rights. A second phase involved the analysis of cases reviewed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights concerning violations of children's rights. These cases highlighted violations of individual freedom, humane treatment, and discrimination based on gender and religion—challenges that continue to impede the development of the regional system in the Americas (Bakhshi Mohammadi & Sajedi, 2018).

Many of Iran's reports on children's rights have been acknowledged by reputable international organizations, such as UNICEF and the World Health Organization. Domestically, collaborative efforts among internal institutions have ensured that all children, regardless of nationality or ethnicity, benefit from their rights. Following directives from Iran's Supreme Leader, educational opportunities and enrollment have been extended to all children residing in Iran, including those without identity documents. This initiative is significant in light of the geopolitical instability, influx of refugees, and migrants displaced by foreign military interventions and economic, social, and political insecurity in the region.

Furthermore, the recent approval of the bill to amend the law determining the citizenship of children born to Iranian mothers and foreign fathers by the Cabinet marks another milestone in advancing children's rights in nationality matters. Granting citizenship to these children ensures their permanent residency and addresses discrimination (Rahimi Rigi & Esmaeili Darke, 2018).

Currently, the CRC, to which the Islamic Republic of Iran is a party, includes provisions on the gradual assumption of responsibility and differential juvenile justice procedures. These provisions are binding international commitments, provided they do not conflict with Islamic principles. Islam adopts an educational approach toward

children, emphasizing their reform and upbringing. Accordingly, juvenile delinquency procedures must draw on rich Islamic jurisprudence to support reformative and rehabilitative efforts.

In the absence of specific regulations in the past that considered children's gradual assumption of responsibility, addressing such offenses necessitated comprehensive legislation. Significant progress has been made in this area through the Islamic Penal Code and the new Code of Criminal Procedure. Moreover, courts, police, prisons, and other organizations dealing with juvenile offenders must adopt specific approaches and receive specialized training. These entities must handle juveniles differently from adults throughout trial and sentencing processes—an approach partially implemented.

The CRC aims to create better living conditions and welfare for children. Achieving this goal requires economic stability and security at both the family and national levels. However, under Security Council-imposed economic sanctions, how can a country ensure the economic security of families, especially those comprising multiple children or living in developing or southern nations? In such scenarios, children's rights are at risk. It is not far-fetched to assert that the perpetrator is the very Security Council responsible for global peace and security (Rahimi Rigi & Esmaeili Darke, 2018).

As evidenced, protecting children during conflicts has been a primary concern of the Security Council, driven by the severe harm such conflicts inflict on children. Considering the harm caused by sanctions, which violate the CRC, a shift in the approach to comprehensive sanctions appears necessary (Zamani & Gharib Abadi, 2017). This shift requires the Security Council to devise measures that avoid imposing broad sanctions or implement them in a manner that minimally affects vulnerable groups, such as children.

In response to pressures accusing the Council of human rights violations, targeted sanctions emerged, focusing on specific groups rather than applying universally. Consequently, comprehensive and targeted sanctions have been partly replaced by a third category of sanctions.

Article 6 of the CRC recognizes every child's inherent right to life. This foundational right, acknowledged by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is at risk of being undermined by Security Council sanctions.

If sanctions disregard the geographic, agricultural, and environmental conditions of targeted nations, their adverse effects could jeopardize the rights enshrined in both the CRC and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Anabestani, 2013).

The existence of comprehensive sanctions fundamentally contradicts Article 6 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 24 of the CRC further emphasizes this issue by recognizing every child's right to the highest standard of health and access to necessary treatment and rehabilitation facilities. The states party to the CRC are committed to ensuring that no child is deprived of this right or access to healthcare services. Additionally, Paragraph 3 of the same article obliges states to take all necessary measures to eliminate traditional and superstitious practices concerning child health. This requires replacing outdated, less expensive but substandard methods with modern, scientifically validated medical practices. For this, global peace is essential to facilitate the free transfer of medical equipment and technology across borders and ensure their availability and affordability in sanctioned countries.

Sanctions—whether comprehensive or targeted—create adverse economic conditions, leading to increased poverty, misery, and crime. Children, being the most vulnerable group, are disproportionately affected.

Article 18 of the CRC recognizes the shared responsibility of both parents for safeguarding children's physical and mental health and promoting their social and spiritual well-being. It obliges member states to provide legal institutions, facilities, and services to achieve these goals, especially for children of working parents. Financial and economic hardships faced by parents may prevent them from addressing their children's healthcare needs, leading to violations of children's rights to health and life.

Sanctions imposed by the United States, the Security Council, and other organizations pose a significant threat to Iranian children's health and access to essential medications. These sanctions have resulted in shortages of critical drugs, such as chemotherapy medications for children with cancer and treatments for epilepsy. Severe financial restrictions and the sharp decline in Iran's currency value have further limited the ability of Iranian companies and hospitals to procure life-saving medical equipment and medications from abroad.

Additionally, U.S. sanctions have directly impacted household purchasing power, contributing to an annual inflation rate of approximately 30%. This economic situation, despite humanitarian exemptions, has inflicted unnecessary harm on Iranian children with various medical conditions, particularly those requiring specialized care. Among the most affected are children with rare diseases, cancer, or chronic conditions requiring specialized medications or equipment previously accessible (Wallenstein, 2007).

Children suffering from leukemia, epidermolysis bullosa (a skin condition causing blistering), epilepsy, or injuries from chemical weapons used during the Iran-Iraq war face life-threatening consequences. For instance, children with severe epidermolysis bullosa lack access to specialized bandages, leaving them vulnerable to bacterial infections, sepsis, and physical disabilities. Similarly, children with drug-resistant epilepsy who cannot obtain foreign-made medications face uncontrolled seizures, leading to severe and permanent brain damage (Euronews, March 29, 2019).

Overcompliance by banks and pharmaceutical companies fearful of violating U.S. sanctions has further restricted Iran's access to funds necessary for importing medications and medical equipment. Despite humanitarian exemptions, European companies often refrain from selling such supplies to Iran, severely impacting humanitarian needs and the realization of children's human rights. Immediate measures are needed to ensure the effectiveness of humanitarian exemptions to facilitate Iranian access to essential medical supplies.

Another impact of sanctions on children's rights is the increased reliance on child labor due to rising production costs and the economic difficulties faced by manufacturing businesses. To mitigate costs, employers often turn to child labor as a cheaper alternative, bypassing labor laws that prohibit the employment of children under 15 and impose conditions for employing those aged 15–18. Economic pressures also increase school dropout rates and the number of children working in unregulated workshops and on the streets. Traditional sanctions theory assumes that imposing economic pressure on civilians, including children, in the target country will compel the government to change the policies that led to the sanctions. The hardship inflicted on the population is expected to pressure the

government into compliance. However, this approach has two significant challenges:

1. **Human Rights Consequences:** The devastating impact of sanctions on human rights, particularly children's rights.
2. **Practical Ineffectiveness:** The limited ability of sanctions to achieve meaningful changes in the targeted government's policies (Momeni, 2014).

For instance, sanctions imposed on Iraq after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait caused widespread hunger, disease, and death, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups such as women, children, and people with disabilities. Despite humanitarian exceptions, a 1998 UNICEF report revealed that the annual mortality rate for children under five exceeded 40,000, primarily due to diarrhea, pneumonia, and malnutrition. These problems were rare in Iraq before the sanctions but became widespread afterward.

Children in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iran have long suffered from U.S. policies and interventions, including military operations, terrorism, and sanctions. Idriss Jazairy, the UN Special Rapporteur, highlighted the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on children's rights, reporting that between 1991 and 1998, 100,000 to 227,000 Iraqi children died due to sanctions (IRNA, December 7, 2018).

Despite enduring an eight-year war, Iran has made significant progress in advancing children's rights, including reducing child mortality and improving access to economic, social, and cultural rights. Nonetheless, the region's children continue to suffer due to U.S. unilateralism and the ambitions of its allies.

Millions of children worldwide are victims of war and its consequences, including psychological and physical harm, lack of education, malnutrition, and exposure to life-threatening diseases. UNICEF's Executive Director reported that since the beginning of the war in Yemen, over 2,400 children have been killed, 3,400 injured, and 2 million deprived of education. Millions more lack access to food and clean water, suffering from diseases such as cholera (IRNA, December 7, 2018).

Yemeni children are victims of multi-billion-dollar arms deals that prioritize economic gains over human rights, violating fundamental principles enshrined in international human rights treaties.

The adverse consequences of comprehensive sanctions have led to the development of "smart sanctions," aimed



at reducing the human cost and garnering greater international support. Although smart sanctions differ from traditional sanctions in their targeted application, they still struggle to prevent harm to civilians, as distinguishing between governments and their citizens remains challenging.

Humanitarian exemptions for food and medicine in sanctions resolutions often fail to prevent human rights violations due to the complexity of approval processes for importing such items. Moreover, humanitarian actions are delayed, as fulfilling many human rights obligations requires sustained infrastructure and resources, which cannot be addressed through limited exemptions (Zamani & Gharib Abadi, 2017).

#### 4. Health and Well-being of Iranian Children During Sanctions

The right to health is a fundamental human right recognized in both national and international legal frameworks and is considered a universally accepted principle, including in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes the right to health as one of the fundamental human rights (Rahimi Rigi & Esmaeili Darke, 2018).

Health and the right to a healthy life are integral aspects of citizenship and foundational elements of an ideal society. Both domestic and international laws must support the realization of this critical right. According to Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living, including health and medical care. Similarly, Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights recognizes the right of every individual to attain the highest standards of physical and mental health.

This right is further emphasized in Article 12 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and Article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Article 2 of the Charter of Citizens' Rights also asserts that citizens are entitled to a decent life, including access to clean water, adequate food, improved health, environmental sanitation, appropriate medical care, and access to medication, equipment, and health services that meet modern scientific standards and national criteria.

These provisions underscore the global commitment to the right to health, a principle that has been overshadowed in the Middle East by the impacts of war and sanctions, with no effective mechanisms to hold violators accountable (Iranian Students News Agency [ISNA], March 4, 2019).

While the public may associate the right to health primarily with healthcare and treatment services, this right extends far beyond, encompassing a broad range of factors that contribute to a healthy life—especially concerning children.

Children, due to their inherent vulnerability, are the most susceptible group in society. A healthy population is the cornerstone of sustainable development, and healthy children form the foundation of a prosperous future society. Unfortunately, in recent years, this fundamental human right in Iran has been targeted by nations claiming to defend human rights and by the Security Council, under various pretexts (Rahimi Rigi & Esmaeili Darke, 2018).

Comprehensive sanctions imposed by the United Nations violate the UN Charter and human rights standards. Similarly, unilateral U.S. sanctions against Iran, following its withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), have violated numerous human rights principles. These sanctions, particularly those targeting medical supplies and equipment, directly endanger lives, especially those of children.

During war and sanctions imposed by powerful nations, the first right to be undermined is the right to health. From limited access to medicine to shortages of food and clean water, the foundations of physical and mental well-being are severely disrupted.

Under the current intensified sanctions regime, one of the consequences has been the violation of fundamental rights for children and society at large in Iran. Economic sanctions, often implemented as a coercive measure to compel compliance, serve as a form of warfare with countless innocent victims. Just as acts such as genocide, crimes against humanity, and global health crimes are condemned under international law, sanctions share a similar global stigma. Their effects, such as the dire conditions faced by Yemeni children who lack food and water, inflict profound harm on collective human conscience.

Beyond other fundamental human rights, every individual is entitled to health, medical care, and access

to necessary medicines and services. Unfortunately, these areas have been significantly affected by sanctions, with children—the most vulnerable segment of society—bearing the brunt of these irreparable damages. Sanctions in Iran have increased the prices of essential goods, rendering them unaffordable for many. While sanctions are often associated with economic impacts, they also profoundly affect health and welfare, directly targeting well-being. By restricting medicine imports and diminishing government capacity to ensure affordable prices, sanctions leave thousands of patients with critical needs—particularly vulnerable children—without access to treatment. This leads to increased disease prevalence and higher mortality rates, systematically violating children's rights to health and welfare (ISNA, March 4, 2019).

As financial resources dwindle, social welfare erodes, public health is jeopardized, and millions of citizens face the consequences of policy changes imposed by sanctions, often at the cost of their lives. Innocent children, the country's future, lose their lives to a lack of basic necessities such as water and food—some of the most tragic consequences humanity has witnessed.

Sanctions, whether imposed during military conflict, as in Yemen, or through economic and trade restrictions, as in Iran, result in the suffering and loss of innocent lives. These measures deprive individuals of their right to self-determination, development, welfare, education, and healthcare, effectively punishing them for actions they did not commit.

## 5. Conclusion

Respecting and guaranteeing international human rights standards have become focal points for international organizations, particularly the United Nations, and have evolved from customary international law into binding global commitments. The imposition of coercive and mandatory economic sanctions on states is considered a violation of various aspects of human rights. These sanctions cause parallel damages and compounding effects on citizens of the targeted countries, often yielding outcomes comparable to the use of military or armed force. Consequently, economic sanctions imposed by the Security Council or unilaterally by states have frequently served as precursors to coercive military actions.

It is crucial to note that the protection of human rights, especially children's rights—particularly those enshrined in customary international law and *jus cogens* norms—is binding even on states not party to human rights treaties. Sanctions cannot be regarded as an unlimited prerogative for states or the Security Council, especially as their ineffectiveness in achieving foreign policy objectives has been well-documented. The theoretical justification for sanctions—that economic pressure on civilians will lead to pressure on the government to change its policies—has proven ineffective.

The Security Council, as a principal organ of the United Nations tasked with maintaining international peace and security, may inadvertently create additional problems through its resolutions, particularly comprehensive sanctions against a country. Such sanctions invariably violate the rights of vulnerable groups, especially children, whose rights are constantly at risk. Restrictions imposed by the Security Council may disrupt children's rights, as parents may be unable to afford basic necessities or access well-equipped hospitals due to economic hardships. These issues result in inadequate housing, clothing, and shelter for children or substandard conditions unsuitable for their needs.

Over recent years, Western societies, the European Union, the Security Council, the U.S. Congress, and other international organizations have exerted considerable pressure on Iran, imposing numerous unilateral sanctions. These organizations have spared no effort in targeting Iran's economy, culture, politics, national security, and nuclear energy programs. One of the areas significantly affected by these pressures is the realm of children's rights.

Sanctions, regardless of their nature, impact the economic, cultural, political, familial, and social stability of the targeted country, with profound effects on children's rights. While each of these areas warrants independent analysis, the interconnectedness of sanctions across different domains cannot be overlooked. For instance, the economic consequences of sanctions inevitably lead to social and cultural repercussions, affecting the lives and futures of children. Economic pressures from sanctions result in higher prices for basic goods, economic struggles, and hardships for children, often contributing to crimes such as theft, murder, delinquency, anxiety, depression, family

breakdown, homelessness, and even suicide. These issues subtly but significantly influence children's lives and futures. The duration and severity of sanctions also determine the extent of their impact on different sectors of a country.

Although sanctions are typically justified as targeting a state, their effects on the population, particularly children, are undeniable. During the recent sanctions against Iran, various sectors—governmental and non-governmental—have faced sanctions-related pressures at different times. While some sanctions target specific banks or sectors of the government, their cumulative effects are felt nationwide. However, the brunt of these sanctions is borne disproportionately by vulnerable groups, including workers, low-income families, the unemployed, and middle-class households, impacting the health and futures of children.

Given the ongoing challenges in Iran, such as blocked financial accounts and the paralysis of international trade, it has become impossible to use letters of credit and banking guarantees to procure medications, particularly for children with special medical needs. This lack of access to essential medicines has tragically resulted in the daily deaths of many children with specific illnesses.

It is hoped that regional solidarity will create a better and safer future for our children, fostering optimal living conditions, preserving peace and friendship, and promoting sustainable development in the region through increased cooperation.

The expectations of nations and their children from UN offices, country representatives, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and reputable non-governmental organizations such as Terre des Hommes include taking decisive actions against the challenges impeding the advancement and protection of children's rights. They must actively oppose unilateralism and the violation of international norms by powerful and wealthy entities.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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