



NEGATIVE IMPACT OF COVID - 19 ON THE LIVES OF CHILDREN: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The world has witnessed multiple outbreaks of newer and unknown diseases. The 21st century has already been marked by major epidemics. COVID-19 is the new and latest pandemic added to this list. Numerous clinical trials and investigations are going on across the world to understand and learn more about the virus, its origin, and its management. Still, the researchers have not been able to come up with the cure. With limited options available to deal with this pandemic, most countries across the world have imposed a complete lockdown. This imposed lockdown has both short-term and far-reaching implications; ranging from isolation, family confinement, school and business closures to increased physical and psychological health risks along with economic vulnerability. Children are at a heightened risk of exploitation, violence and abuse when schools and day care centres are closed, movement restricted and economies going through the global recession. This article is a review of the impact COVID-19 is having on the lives of Indian children and the problems faced by them in dealing with this pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Child abuse, Sexual abuse, Violence

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of human civilization, the world has witnessed multiple outbreaks of newer and unknown diseases. The 21st century has already been marked by major epidemics. Old diseases like cholera, plague and yellow fever have reappeared, and the newer ones have emerged like pandemic influenza, SARS, MERS, Ebola and Zika [1, 2].

COVID-19 is the new and latest pandemic added to this list. It is a highly contagious severe acute respiratory infection caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 [3-7]. WHO first declared it a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020, while on 11 March 2020; it was declared a pandemic [8]. The current body of evidence suggests that human transmission happens via close contact with droplets emitted by infected individuals while talking, coughing and sneezing. It may also happen via direct contact with the infected person or through fomites [8-10]. Numerous clinical trials and investigations are going on across the world to understand and learn more about the virus, its origin, and its management. Still, the researchers have not been able to come up with the cure. With limited options available to deal with this pandemic, most countries across the

world have imposed a complete lockdown. This imposed lockdown has both short-term and far-reaching implications; ranging from isolation, family confinement, psychological impact in terms of pay cuts and layoffs, school and business closures to increased physical and psychological health risks and economic vulnerability. In this entire scenario, poor, migrant labours, women and children in particular are most vulnerable.

2. IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON CHILDREN

COVID-19 global pandemic and associated long lockdowns are directly affecting the lives of children and causing changes in the surrounding environment of children in which they develop. All the Interruptions caused to daily routines, families and surrounding community hamper children's well-being. Home-based, facility-based and zonal-based quarantine and isolation measures can all negatively impact children and their families.

Institution-based children are at greater risk due to lack of basic services, reduced supervision and monitoring etc. The closure of schools, including existing feeding programs, puts children at greater risk of harmful coping mechanisms, such as hazardous child labour, early/

forced marriage etc. Recent figures from Karnataka, India suggest that there has been an abnormal rise in the child marriage and abuse complaints in the state. In 2 weeks, the state has received around 37 complaints of child marriage, which is quite alarming. This spike could be attributed to the fact that people are trying to dispose of their young girls from homes. Since the focus of the machinery of the state has shifted to controlling the pandemic, people are using this time to perform child marriage secretly at a very low cost [11]. The socio-economic and lockdown measures have resulted in a significant reduction of economic activities across the globe causing a global recession. It is expected that countries are going to see a fall in the average income levels. This fall and collapse in household income poses a threat to the livelihood of millions of families with children around the world.

Children are at a heightened risk of exploitation, violence and abuse when schools are closed, movement restricted and economies going through the global recession. Also, there is a rise in cases of domestic violence at home [12]. Violence in the home can also lead to adverse physical and mental health outcomes, including a higher risk of chronic disease, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and risky sexual and substance use behaviours. The change of behaviour of adults, struggling with work and household responsibilities in a constrained environment of lockdown, further increases the risk of abuse of children in the hands of the parents and caretakers.

Various forms of abuse which are on a rise during this pandemic are:

2.1. Physical maltreatment

Although many definitions of maltreatment exist, physical abuse and neglect are generally referred to in this review as defined in the most recent National Incidence Study (NIS-3) [13]. With the increase in lockdown across the globe, there is an increase in domestic/interpersonal violence which can also lead to poisoning of child and can put the child in other dangerous risks and with the child protective agencies and social/peer pressure being absent during this Covid-19 times. The chances increase even more. Many schools or community programs that prevent child abuse are also currently on hold [14, 15]. The various reasons leading to these risks are closing of Childcare homes and schools where the child used to spend a few productive hours under the watchful eyes of teachers and the caregiving

community. Owing to this Covid-19 stress, now the parents and caregivers feel overwhelmed and distressed with stresses of continued work requirements, risk of illness and quarantine/isolation of caregivers in case they get infected. Easy availability of toxic disinfectants over the counter also adds risk to children. The Indian government initially banned the sale and purchase of alcohol but due to falling revenues, many states decided to resume the liquor sale, thereby increasing the chances of domestic violence and abuse during the lockdown. According to reports, The Childline India helpline received 50 per cent more calls than usual during the first 11 days of lockdown [16]. With the closing of the majority of child protection agencies and redirection of their manpower to fight Covid-19 in COVID centres set up by the government, the preventing measures set up for child abuse and neglect are hindered. Even a petition has been filed in the Delhi High Court by All India Council of Human Rights, Liberties & Social Justice (AICHLS) - an NGO and to Chief Justice of India through a group of lawyers, for urgent involvement of the Court for protecting women and children across the country who are suffering from domestic abuse and violence [17, 18].

2.2. Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse includes increased risk of sexual manipulation of children, including commercial sexual exploitation and forced early marriage/child marriage due to reduced household income etc. According to some investigations, there has been an increase of over 200 percent in the online posting of images and videos of sexual abuse of children on known child sex abuse forums across the world. On the contrary, the amount of child abuse material being removed from the internet has decreased by 89 per cent in past 4 weeks, according to The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), a UK charity responsible for finding and removing images and videos of children suffering abuse on the internet. This can be attributed to the fact that due to lockdown restrictions, these analysts are working at just 50 per cent capacity, thereby reduction in the output [19]. According to a report published in a leading Indian daily, the online child sexual abuse material available has increased from India [20].

2.3. Negative mental and psychosocial health

Due to the death, illness, or separation from the loved one due to isolation in treatment units or even home based quarantine mental health can get adversely

affected. Loss of parent and caregiver due to disease or isolation of parents can make the child anxious and alone. Also, children separated from parents like those who are in hostels/coaching institutes in distant cities and countries are prone to abuse and are under tremendous mental stress. Quarantine procedures can create anxiety and panic in the community, especially in children, if they are not able to assess what is happening. In the case of special children or children with a pre-existing mental health condition, there can be worsening of mental health conditions due to lack of support.

2.4. Increase in Child Labour

Due to loss or reduction in household income, there can be an increase in child labour with increased involvement of children in hazardous or abusive labour. Also, with the closure of all academic institutes, the poor and needy force their children to work to gain access to food and housing and trying to making ends meet [11].

2.5. Social exclusion

There is a lot of social and racial discrimination of individuals/groups infected by coronavirus especially seen in disadvantaged and marginalized groups, thus leading to decrease or closure of basic services to them as well as their family. Also, there is limited support for children living or working on the street and in detention centres.

3. PROTECTING THE CHILDREN

Outbreaks of Infectious diseases require close coordination and collaboration between various sectors of the community. A multi-sectoral response involves coming together of government with children and caregivers, health care workers, education sector and traditional and religious leaders. In a country Like India, where religious leaders hold a lot of importance, religious practices, meditation etc. can help caregivers in coping up with the panic and anxiety created by the pandemic. This can help parents in better management of fears of children. These leaders can also help in reducing the humiliation and social omission that may result from the disease.

3.1. Role of the government

It is important that government work in collaboration with other sectors, NGO's upon specific child protection programs during COVID-19 period. In this context, the following measures can be considered to curtail the negative effects of this pandemic on children: [12]

1. Providing social assistance to families, i.e. giving child allowances which can in a simplified and effective manner shield children from extreme poverty
2. Securing the food supply chains, thereby protecting the children from a food security crisis
3. Adaptation of standard physical distancing and lockdown strategies in low-income settings, refugee areas and places of active conflicts, where there is an extremely negative impact of the pandemic on children
4. Maintaining the continuity of child-centred services like schooling, nutrition programmes, community-based child protection programmes, Immunization services and care for mother and new-born, sexual and reproductive health services, HIV treatment, mental health and psychosocial services. Special attention to be given to case registration and management for children requiring personalized care, including those with disabilities, and abuse victims
5. Making investments in digital literacy and adapting regulations to ensure children's privacy, safety online and making active regulations to protect children from online child sexual exploitation and abuse
6. Providing practical and social support to parents and caretakers through various helplines and health teams. Making parents understand how to talk to children about the pandemic and at the same time managing their mental health and the mental health of their children.

3.2. Role of the Health Sector

Clear guidelines should be fabricated to deal with children and their problems like:

1. Free Access to healthcare for vulnerable children and their families
2. Developing standard protocols for documentation and referring child abuse cases to ensure children receive safe, appropriate, family-based care if separated
3. Development of child-friendly admission and discharge facilities with the provision of regular communication between children and parents who are briefly separated
4. Children-friendly health care services, including training of staff to support children's psychosocial well-being when admitted or in quarantine.
5. Training of health workers regarding child safeguarding, predominantly when children are separated from their caregivers

6. A collaboration of general health, mental health and psychosocial support system for children and caregivers affected by COVID-19.

3.3.Role of Education Sector

Children spend a lot of time in school and with their teachers. A sudden disruption in this field can have a very serious impact on the health of the child. Hence few measures can be taken like:

1. Limiting the impact of school interruption by using various modes of distance education methods such as Television, radio or online learning
2. Parents with a flexible working arrangement can actively take part in the education of their children.
3. Schools can ensure that protection and safety messages to limit panic and distress get delivered to parents and children in a simple yet understandable manner.
4. Teachers and other school staff should be trained to recognize the signs of distress amongst children who may have specific child protection needs. They should have the necessary knowledge related to Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POSCO Act 2012), [21] child safeguarding and reporting, and safe referral practices.

India has a very large population; hence the challenges faced are also unending. However, various efforts are being taken by the Indian government, ranging from starting of various helpline numbers in different states; to providing training to health care workers so that they can understand, register and solve the problems faced by children. A special tool has been developed by CHILDLINE and UNICEF, as part of the Minister of Woman and Child Development (MWCD), to increase awareness of parents and motivate them to be more empathetic towards their children [22, 23]. Also alertness is being spread through the health care workers at the grass-root level regarding the sexual abuse of children, explaining their increased susceptibility during the lockdown. At the levels of various schools and organisations, programs are being run to create awareness regarding identifying the signs and symptoms of abuse and its reporting to the authorities.

4. CONCLUSION

COVID-19 is an unparalleled crisis and it presents extraordinary risks to the safety and development of the children. Lockdown though the only means of controlling the spread of pandemic COVID-19, tragically also presents the opportunity for child abusers to harm

children. It is a rare situation if children can report such egregious acts. Not only this, at this time of increased need, but they are also no longer able to have the same communication with teachers; along with suspension or scaling down of the related social work, legal and protective services. Relying of children on online platforms for distance learning has also increased the risk of exposure to inappropriate content and online predators.

There is a need to work together in collaboration in all the sectors so that the pandemic can be defeated and transformation can be brought in the way we nurture and invest in the young generation.

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