

## Module-8: Child protection during pandemics

### Session 1: Impact of COVID 19 on children

Duration: 10:31 Minutes

#### Now let's learn about the vulnerability of children during pandemics.

During any disastrous or pandemic situation, vulnerable groups including children, elderly, and person with disabilities, people with HIV/AIDS, migrants, ethnic minorities and indigenous people are likely to suffer the most. These vulnerabilities aggravate in the case of marginalised children such as:

- Children in child care institutions/alternative care/without family care
- Children in conflict with law
- Children on the move with migrant families or unaccompanied/separated /residing in isolation facilities
- Children on the streets
- Children with disabilities
- Children living with HIV
- Children of sex workers
- Children in other NGO Shelters.

#### COVID-19 or any such pandemics have huge impact on children's lives

For instance, you may have seen several news on the plight of children during COVID-19, including the vulnerability of migrant children and increasing violence against children.

Any pandemic situation like COVID-19 can create long term impacts on children's lives. Such situations disrupt the safe and secure environment in which they grow and develop.

Disruptions to families, friendships, daily routines and the wider community can have negative consequences for children's well-being, development and protection.

In addition, measures used to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19 can expose children to protection risks.

Home-based, facility-based quarantine and isolation measures can all negatively impact children and their families.<sup>1</sup>

Being at home shut the possibilities of sharing such experiences with friends or teachers whom they mostly trust.

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<sup>1</sup> Technical Note: Protection of Children during the Coronavirus Pandemic (v.1)

### Let's understand the specific effects of COVID-19 on children

COVID-19 is a health crisis that risks evolving into a broader child-rights crisis. The socio-economic impact of the virus is potentially catastrophic for many children.

- Millions of children are likely to drop out of school altogether in the absence of access to digital devices and internet for online classes. Many children may also drop out to provide economic support to their families.
- For children facing extreme deprivations, acute stress can trigger longer-term mental health challenges.
- Children, being out of school and stuck at home may be exposed to potential neglect, domestic abuse and exploitation. India has seen an increase in cases of child abuse since the lockdown measures were imposed, and there is evidence that child trafficking is on the rise. <sup>2</sup>
- Lockdowns come with heightened risk of children witnessing or suffering violence and abuse<sup>3</sup> including
  - Child Sexual Abuse
  - Gender based violence
  - Maltreatment
  - Online abuse<sup>4</sup>
- COVID-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerability of those children whose families are already at risk of loss of livelihoods. The pandemic has deteriorated financial health of families thus, increasing the threat of child labour, child marriage, child trafficking and sexual exploitation and commercial exploitation.

### Events during lockdown further brought to the fore child protection concerns.

CHILDLINE received more than [92,000 SOS](#) calls asking for protection from abuse and violence during March 20- March 31, 2020.

The number of calls on the helpline since the lockdown increased by **50%**. Around 8% of other calls out of a total of [3.07 lakh](#) calls received were regarding child labour, another 8% dealing with missing or runaway children. The threat for physical, sexual, as well as emotional abuse looms over the children along with COVID-19.

**CHILDLINE** received as many as 5,584 phone calls to prevent **child marriage** during the COVID-19 induced lockdown.

According to UNICEF, the estimated number of children exposed to **domestic violence** in India lies between [27.1 million to 69 million](#).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/india-covid-19-survey-eight-ten-households-are-struggling-meet-their-daily-expenses-warns-save>

<sup>3</sup> Child Protection during COVID 19: Threat Of Trafficking Of Children, RLSA, UNICEF

<sup>4</sup> Child Protection during COVID 19: Threat Of Trafficking Of Children, RLSA, UNICEF

<sup>5</sup> <https://feminisminindia.com/2020/04/15/children-covid-19-lockdown-abusive-households-street-children/>

## Let's now discuss in detail about the child protection risks during pandemics

As discussed earlier, pandemics like COVID-19 expose children to several risks. Some of them have been observed in the current COVID-19 pandemic and some are potential risks observed in previous infectious disease outbreaks.

### Risks presented by COVID-19

- i. Physical and emotional maltreatment
- ii. Gender-based violence
- iii. Mental health and psychosocial distress
- iv. Child labour
- v. Child Trafficking
- vi. Unaccompanied and separated children
- vii. Social exclusion

Let's discuss about each of these risks in detail.

#### 1. Physical and emotional maltreatment

Under economic duress and psychological stress parents may not be able to ensure well-being of their children. This may manifest in the following forms:

- Reduced supervision and neglect of children
- Increase in child abuse and domestic/interpersonal violence
- Poisoning and other danger and risks of injuries to children in the absence of adult supervision
- Pressure on or lack of access to child protection services.

#### Let's now see the specific **causes of the physical and emotional maltreatment**

- Childcare/school closures, continued work requirements for caregivers, illness, quarantine/isolation of caregivers
- Increased psychosocial distress among caregivers and community members
- Availability and misuse of toxic disinfectants and alcohol
- Increased obstacles to reporting incidents.

#### 2. Violence, particularly Gender-based Violence (GBV)

- Increased risk of sexual abuse, including online sexual abuse and harassment
- Increased risk of sexual exploitation of children, including sex for assistance, commercial sexual exploitation of children and forced early marriage
- Pressure on or lack of access to child protection/GBV services.

**Let's now learn about the causes of Gender Based Violence during COVID-19.**

- Reduced family protection of children
- Lockdown created conditions – the child and the abuser forced to be together for long periods of time
- Reduced household income and/or reliance on outsiders to transport goods and services to the community
- Girls' gender-imposed household responsibilities such as caring for family members or doing chores
- Increased obstacles to reporting incidents and seeking medical treatment or other supports.

**3. Mental health and psychosocial distress**

- Distress of children due to the death, illness, or separation of a loved one or fear of disease
- Worsening of pre-existing mental health conditions
- Pressure on or lack of access to Mental Health Psychosocial Support services.

**What are the causes of Risk?**

- Increased stress levels due to isolation in treatment units or home-based quarantine
- Children and parents/caregivers with pre-existing mental health conditions may not be able to access usual supports or treatments
- Quarantine measures can create fear and panic in the community, especially in children, if they do not understand what is happening.

**Child labour**

- Increased engagement of children in hazardous or exploitative labour

**We know that major causes of child labour during lockdown are :**

- Loss or reduction in household income
- Opportunity or expectation to work due to school closure

**Child Trafficking**

- Increase in trafficking of children for child labour/ bonded labour
- Increase in trafficking of children for commercial sexual exploitation

**Causes of risk:**

- Lack of resources available during pandemic for tracking missing children
- Stalling of functioning of government departments/Police that deal with trafficking
- Follow up of cases in courts hampered.

**Unaccompanied and separated children**

We know that Unaccompanied and separated children are the most vulnerable children during any pandemic due to:

- Separation: Children can be separated from their caregivers in case their caregivers are placed in isolation/quarantine
- Becoming unaccompanied or child head of household
- Being placed in institutions.

**Now let's understand the causes of vulnerability of such children:**

- Loss of parents/caregivers due to disease
- Isolation/quarantine of caregiver(s) apart from child(ren)
- Children sent away by parents to stay with other family members in non-affected areas.

**Social exclusion**

We know that social exclusion leads to discrimination against people and depriving them from opportunities, choices and dignity.

**How Social Exclusion is a child protection risk during COVID-19.**

- Social stigmatisation of infected individuals or individuals/groups suspected to be infected
- Increased risk/limited support for children living/working on the street, other children already at risk and those in institutions
- Increased risk/limited support to children in conflict with the law, including those in detention.

**Let's now understand the causes of risk of social exclusion**

- Social and racial discrimination of individuals/groups suspected to be infected
- Disproportionate impact on more disadvantaged and marginalised groups
- Closure/inaccessibility of basic services for vulnerable children and/or families<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Technical Note: Protection of Children during the Coronavirus Pandemic (v.1), The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action

**Children of sex workers:**

We know that children of sex workers are most vulnerable and invisible. Since their parents are without livelihood and facing stigma and discrimination they are at an increased risk of malnutrition, being forced into trade, exploitation and abuse at the hands of traffickers.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page/covid-19-and-children/article32124061.ece>