



CHILD CARE POST COVID-19: ISSUES AND INITIATIVES

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ABSTRACT:

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the accompanying lockdowns have had an enormous impact on individuals, communities, especially children, worldwide. The pandemic not only caused an immediate international health crisis, but it also gave rise to different challenges regarding other aspects of daily life. As a result of disruptions in education, health-nutrition and protection services, the vulnerabilities of children from rural areas and marginalized communities were compounded. Rising instances of child marriage, child trafficking, illegal adoption and child labour were reported. The pragmatic approach and innovative solutions by the government and non-government organizations to address various problems related to post COVID-19 childcare are highlighted in this mini-review.

KEYWORDS:

INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 brought a great shock to the whole world due to COVID-19 pandemic. As the COVID 19 crisis spread around the world, it has transformed children's day-to-day lives. The pandemic and the associated policy responses of confinement and social distancing touched on almost every part of children's worlds. COVID 19 directly affected formal care arrangements, health, education and leisure services offered by early childhood services, schools and other organizations were adversely affected. According to various reports, 188 countries have imposed countrywide school closures, which had affected more than 1.5 billion children and youth. COVID 19 exacerbates the risks of poor nutrition, experiencing maltreatment, homelessness and being exposed to violence at home. The COVID-19 pandemic has had major and multiple impacts – both direct and indirect. National Commission for the Protection of Children's Rights (NCPDR) in their report has revealed that because of the pandemic, 6,855 children were orphaned, 274 were found abandoned and 68,218 lost a parent between April 1, 2020, and July 23, 2021. The pandemic has undoubtedly resulted in more deaths and more illness – particularly for the most vulnerable women and children. The pandemic has also impacted the process of development on the overall wellbeing of the population for years to come. It reduces the likelihood of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of UN. There is a high prevalence of child marriage, child labour, and domestic violence against children, especially adolescent girls. In recent years, an increase in juvenile crime rates has been a matter of grave concern in many countries. India being one of the largest South Asian countries, disruptions in child protection services will have implications at the regional level as well, particularly in South Asia. A study published in Lancet (2021) indicated that globally, from March 1, 2020, to April 30, 2021, around 1 134 000 children

experienced the death of primary caregivers, including at least one parent or custodial grandparent, 1 562 000 children experienced the death of at least one primary or secondary caregiver. Countries in this study set with primary caregiver death rates of at least one per 1000 children included Peru (10•2 per 1000 children), South Africa (5•1), Mexico (3•5), Brazil (2•4), Colombia (2•3), Iran (1•7), the USA (1•5), Argentina (1•1), and Russia (1•0). Numbers of children orphaned exceeded numbers of deaths among those aged 15–50 years. Between two and five times more children had deceased fathers than deceased mothers. It is quite evident that Covid-19 pandemic has adversely affected the development gains made over recent years and will continue to affect developing nations for the years to come.

After COVID-19, adequate government measures needs to be ensured so that the affected children have access to good food, receive protection against child abuse and neglect, have continued access to child physical and mental health services, and can navigate safely on the internet. Appropriate policies also need to support parental employment since it is key to fighting child poverty. These facts indicate the gravity of problem which has cropped up in every country after the pandemic. The rising number of Orphans is a matter of great concern. In addition to emotional trauma due to the death of their father or mother or both these children have become vulnerable to exploitation such as child labour, trafficking and illegal adoption.

CONCERNS

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequities and vulnerabilities of children especially in developing countries. Due to disruptions in education, health-nutrition and protection services, the vulnerabilities of children from rural areas and

marginalized communities have compounded. The vulnerabilities of children were aggravated during the pandemic as reflected in the rising instances of child marriage, child trafficking, domestic violence against children, illegal adoption and child labour. In many cases due to death of a parent, children are being removed from their homes and social networks to be placed in institutional care, causing severe damage to their mental, emotional, and developmental needs. The child protection system in many places is not fully equipped to secure the safety of each child. There is an urgent need for communities to work together with their national and regional governments, UNICEF & reliable NGOs to protect children at risk.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES FOR COVID-19 AFFECTED CHILDREN

India is home to over 400 million children. The Constitution of India recognizes children as equal right holders and grants highest priority towards their protection and well-being. Therefore, successive governments have enacted and implemented various child-centric laws, child protection programmes and schemes from time to time. The government of India has issued a set of for the care and protection of the children affected by COVID-19 and fixed responsibilities for the states, district magistrates, police, Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies.

- (i) The states need to identify the children in distress through outreach and door -to-door surveys and prepare a database with a profile of each child, along with the details of their specific needs and requirements, and ensure that the data is uploaded on the Track Child portal.
- (ii) (ii) States and Union territories to temporarily allocate child care institutions (CCIs) to house those children whose parents have been unwell due to COVID-19 and provide necessary support to them, in case the extended family is not available to take care of them.
- (iii) The Women and Child Development Ministry (WCDM) has directed the states to issue directions to hospitals to collect the contact details of trustworthy persons known to the patients, to be contacted for taking care of children in case of any eventuality.
- (iv) Immediate temporary rehabilitation of children through the existing child care facilities supported under the Child Protection Services (CPS) scheme must be ensured.
- (v) The states have also been asked to make suitable arrangements for isolation facilities within the CCIs to take care of the children suffering from Covid-19 and prepare a roaster of child psychologists or counselors to visit

the facilities and interact with the children.

- (vi) The states should launch a local helpline number manned by experts for giving psychosocial care or support to the children in distress.
- (vii) District Magistrate (DM) shall be the guardians of the vulnerable children impacted adversely by Covid. They make efforts that such children are rehabilitated in the following order of preference, in the manner as prescribed under the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015.
- (viii) DMs will create a district-level multi-departmental task force to map the needs, monitor the progress and ensure that all benefits reach the affected children and all civil society organizations may be asked to positively inform the Child Welfare Committee or the District Child Protection Unit about any vulnerable child noticed by them.
- (ix) The DMs need to secure the rights of the children on family assets or ancestral properties to ensure that those are not sold or encroached. It should be done through proper oversight maintained by the registration or revenue department.
- (x) The District police teams must stay alert and vigilant to prevent trafficking of children, illegal adoption, child marriage, child labour or any other kind of abuse.
- (xi) All cases of children offered for adoption on social media to be traced and action may be taken against the perpetrators if found guilty. Vigil may be kept on the CCIs and the vulnerable hot spots in the district housing children at risk during the police beats or night rounds in urban and rural areas.
- (xii) The Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies must ensure that the child protection committees at the panchayat level identify and inform the district administration or the District Child Protection Unit about children in distress.
- (xiii) The District Magistrates will organize orientation and sensitization programs of urban local bodies and Panchayati Raj institutions, and inform them regarding measures being taken and schemes announced for such children. Furthermore, it must be ensured that all children orphaned during the pandemic are provided free education through government day schools or residential schools.
- (xiv) Based on the specific need of the child, he or she can also be enrolled in the nearest private

schools under RTE section 12(1c). Efforts may be made to include eligible orphan children under the existing scholarship schemes of the central or state governments,

- (xv) Ministry of Labour and Employment has implemented the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) Scheme for rehabilitation of child labourers. Under the NCLP Scheme, the children in the age group of 9-14 years are rescued / withdrawn from work and enrolled in the NCLP Special Training Centres to provide bridge education, vocational training, mid-day meal, stipend, health care, etc. before being mainstreamed into formal education system. The children in the age group of 5-8 years are directly linked to the formal education system through a close coordination with the *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*. An online portal- "PENCIL (Platform for Effective Enforcement of No Child Labour)" has also been developed for its better monitoring.
- (xvi) The *Mukhyamantri Bal Seva Yojana*: This scheme was launched by U.P. Government to help orphaned children affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The scheme offers a monthly stipend of Rs.4,000 to eligible children. The program also offers educational help and assistance in marriage for orphaned girls. Similar schemes were launched by the other states too.

PM CARES FOR CHILDREN SCHEME: The Prime Minister has announced PM CARES for Children scheme to support children who have lost both parents or surviving parent or legal guardian or adoptive parents due to COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of the Scheme is to ensure comprehensive care and protection of Children in a sustained manner, and enable their well-being through health insurance, empower them through education and equip them for self-sufficient existence with financial support till 23 years of age. The eligible children will receive a monthly stipend from the age of 18 and also receive an amount of Rupees 10,00,000 at the age of 23.

Children staying with relatives will receive Rs.4000/- per month under Mission *Vatsalya* Scheme. Under the scheme, provision has been made for admission in the nearest Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan/Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya or Private Schools. Further, scholarship of Rs.20,000/- are provided to all school going children of class 1-12. Children are also assisted in obtaining education loan for Professional courses / Higher Education in India for which interest would be borne by PM CARES Fund. All children have been enrolled under Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri-Jan Arogya Yojna (AB PM-JAY) with a health insurance cover of Rs.5 lakh. The coverage of health insurance would be provided till they attain the age of 23 years.

Children can also avail the benefits of 'Swanath Scholarship Scheme for Students' which is being implemented by All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) to study further in AICTE approved Institutions and courses. Under the scheme, Rs.50,000/- per annum is provided to each student for every year of study (i.e. maximum 4 years for first year admitted Degree students and maximum 3 years for Diploma Students) as lump sum amount towards payment of college fee, purchase of computer, stationery, books, equipment, software etc.

These children are also covered under the initiative of AICTE, "Kaushal Augmentation and Restructuring Mission of AICTE" (KARMA), for all AICTE approved institutions in the country to overcome the dual challenge of scarcity of skilled manpower in jobs and low skill level of those who are presently in jobs.

Under the PM CARES for Children Scheme, the children have been given assistance for self sustenance, self-belief and motivation. The scheme is implemented nationwide and provides benefits for their comprehensive care and protection and economic independence.

BAL SWARAJ: This is a union government programme that assists children who have been orphaned as a result of COVID-19. In order to fulfil its role as a monitoring authority under section 109 of the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, and in light of the growing problem of children infected with COVID-19. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has created an online tracking portal called "Bal Swaraj (COVID-Care link)" for children in need of care and protection.

SAMVEDNA: It is a toll-free helpline that provides psychosocial and mental assistance to children who have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

TELE COUNSELLING IS OFFERED TO CHILDREN IN THREE CATEGORIES:

- (i) Children in quarantined/isolated/COVID care facilities
- (ii) Children who have lost both parents due to pandemic.
- (iii) Children who have COVID-positive parents, family members, or close

UNICEF which works in over 190 countries and territories to save children's lives, to defend their rights, and to help them fulfill their potential, from early childhood through adolescence has suggested six-point plan which proposes a set of practical and concrete actions to reunite the world around a common cause: *The realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.*

(a) Ensure all children learn, including by closing the digital divide: Reopening of schools safely, increase education funding and impart violence-free education so every child learns. This will require a focus on the most marginalized children, including girls, children with disabilities, and children living in rural communities or without access to the internet. Close the digital divide by connecting all children and young people to the internet by 2030 and reaching 3.5 billion children and young people

with safe, quality, accessible and equitable online learning.

(b) Guarantee access to health and nutrition services and make vaccines affordable and available to every child: Ensure the continuity of key health and nutrition services for children and young people – especially routine immunization, prioritizing the hardest to reach. Ensure every child and young person has equal and affordable access – regardless of where they live – to COVID-19 diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines as part of a comprehensive package of essential care. Ensure any new funding expands access to other essential health services for children and young people, including by training and supporting health-care workers.

© Support and protect the mental health of children and young people and bring an end to abuse, gender-based violence, and neglect in childhood: Integrate sustainable child mental health and psychosocial support funding in all global humanitarian responses and commit to increased multi-year funding to better meet the protection needs of children in crisis. Prioritize the prevention of and response to gender-based violence in global humanitarian action, increasing funding for gender-specific interventions. Invest in gender-sensitive mental health and psychosocial support for children, young people and their caregivers; Provide parenting support to all those who need it and strengthen child help lines and other child-focused reporting mechanisms; Invest in gender-sensitive mental health and psychosocial support services for children, adolescents and their caregivers, including through schools, social services and communities.

(d) Increase access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene and address environmental degradation and climate change: Guarantee universal access to clean water and hand washing for children and families through national policies, private sector cooperation, community engagement and behavior-change initiatives. Invest in climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services in homes, schools, hospitals and public spaces to make communities better prepared for future pandemics and other shocks. Integrate child rights into key national climate change and adaptation strategies, policies and planning documents, including the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), as well as COVID-19 response and recovery plans and budgets. Teaching children and young people about climate change, the environment and responsible and sustainable consumption and production.

(f) Reverse the rise in child poverty and ensure an inclusive recovery for all: Marshal global resources to ensure an inclusive, gender-sensitive recovery, and support national fiscal responses that prioritize children and their families. Expand resilient social protection programmes for the most vulnerable children and their families, including cash transfers for every child and child-friendly services like affordable, quality childcare.

(g) Redouble efforts to protect and support children

and their families living through conflict, disaster and displacement: Increase and maintain funding for emergencies to prevent multiple, catastrophic and protracted crises and to save children's lives, alleviate their suffering and preserve their dignity. In all humanitarian responses, prioritize child rights and child protection, in line with the Core Commitments for Children. Ensure immediate and unimpeded humanitarian access. End attacks on children and on civilian infrastructure critical for their survival, such as water, sanitation, and health-care facilities and personnel. Hold the perpetrators of these attacks to account. Include internally displaced, refugee and migrant children in national systems, policies and plans – starting with COVID-19 recovery and response efforts.

POST-COVID-19 CHILD CARE: WAY FORWARD

- One of the Rights of the Child is the right to live with their parent or relatives. That means children living in institutions need to be reunited with their families whenever possible. This will help their childhood development and ensure they reach adulthood fully supported within a family-based environment. It is an established fact that the family-centered practices can prevent child abuse and neglect as well as provide children with greater safety, better stability, and continued well-being. The reality for most children whose parents die is to go into institutional care provided by the Indian state. The family-based care intervention could reduce children's mental and emotional trauma/stress, strengthen sibling ties, protect them being separated from their kin and community, ensure continuity of education, and most importantly prevent exploitation.
- CCIs continue to be identified as the ultimate and the most common response for children at risk. According to the Report of the Committee, constituted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development shows that among the total Homes mapped (9589 Homes), there are 66.4% (6368) Children Homes, 3.9% Shelter Homes (373), 3.5% Specialized Adoption Agency (336 SAA), 2.9% Observation Homes (278), 0.5% Special Homes (52), 1.9% Swadhar Homes (185), 1% Ujjawala (110), 1% Place of Safety (8) and 0.1% Combination Homes (10) nationwide. A pre Covid-19 report from the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD, 2018) identified more than 370,000 children living in over 9,500 Child Care Institutions in India. These CCI could play an important role in reuniting the affected children with their family or kin.
- CCIs cater to children until they turn 18 years old and in most cases, children leaving CCIs upon themselves without attaining adulthood and any support in the outside world. The absence of aftercare is a huge gap across all such institutions.

Training to sustain young adults in the real world should be a priority.

- There is a need for increased government involvement in the processes of budgetary allocation, mandatory quality checks and monitoring the effectiveness of non-institutional care programmes.
- Setting up more foster care homes for orphans and children who are abandoned due to the economic constraints of their parents/guardians. They should return to their parents once a minimum level of stability has been achieved.
- Increased resource allocation for every component of child protection programme is required, including construction of CCIs, recruitment of human resources, capacity building of personnel working on child protection through regular training, and improving monitoring mechanisms.
- The CPS scheme supports promoting and strengthening of alternative/family-based non-institutional services including sponsorship, foster care, adoption and aftercare. However, there is a greater need and scope for strengthening non institutional care in India.
- In view of emergent situation, adoption process to be made more flexible with constant monitoring of affected children moment, education and health. It is necessary to include health insurance and employment assurance upon completion of their education. NITI Aayog could provide policy directives or frameworks that governments can use to design an integrated child-sensitive social protection scheme.
- After the pandemic, families and children have faced a myriad of problems, such as the loss of a family member or friend due to the illness, their fear of infection, loss of income, and the need to juggle conflicting work and care giving responsibilities. Programs may require that internal staff or staff from community partner organizations support young children with disabilities who are dealing with increased anxiety and social adaptation challenges, in addition to their underlying disability. It is also important to see that Post COVID-19 childcare / family care burdens is not shifted disproportionately onto women, they remain in the mainstream and their jobs are not lost.
- Psychosocial and economic support through Government recognized agencies can help families to nurture children bereft of caregivers and help to ensure that institutionalization is avoided.
- There is an urgent need for collaborative actions by the Government, Child Right activists and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) to

develop much better infrastructure, facilities and opportunities for the COVID-19 affected/vulnerable children to make use of the resources at the optimal level.

It is imperative to translate these suggestions into child-sensitive schemes to ensure that every child who is vulnerable and at-risk as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is protected. Child-sensitive social protection schemes should be designed in a simple and specific manner. They need to provide equal opportunity, address age-specific needs, prioritize children's needs of care, protection and psychosocial well-being, and should be integrated with other ongoing programmes of the government. In this regard, Elizabeth Lule, Executive Director, Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN) statement is quite encouraging "*We have an opportunity to do better than we did before—our partners are working together to make that happen*".

DISCLAIMER: This mini review is a compilation of various child care initiatives taken up by the government and non-governmental organizations for the COVID-19 affected children. It also includes suggestions which may be useful for the social science students & researchers working in this field. The author is not responsible for any omission or discrepancy in the content /information/data/views provided in the review.

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