

The Perils of the Pandemic and India's Child Victims of Covid-19

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Abstract: *Aim:* The following paper attempts to trace the impact of Covid-19 on the younger generation, mostly from economically underprivileged sections, by focusing on specific themes such as health, education, vulnerability to abuse, and violence. The paper tries to address how the pandemic has affected various dimensions of the lives of these younger generation-children and adolescents, alongside tracing the measures taken by the government in the fight against the virus.

Methods: We curated the information based on credible data as published in leading news media, PMC published peer-reviewed materials

Conclusions: The paper concludes with recommendations that a coherent government policy and the active participation of NGOs are needed to address the problem. The children's mental health needs to be dealt with utmost care at home, which will pave the way towards a better future for the younger generation during and after the pandemic.

Keywords: Children, covid-19, nutrition, child marriage, screen-time, online education, anxiety, alienation.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic that began almost 1.5 years back has wreaked havoc in India, impacting all areas starting from the economy to the health of individuals. The apocalypse has influenced the younger generation to a great extent, disrupting the social fabric of their lives in many ways. The most affected are those from socially and economically deprived sections of society [1]. The constant stress of parental job losses, deaths of family members, domestic and sexual violence, forced confinement at home, disruption in offline education, and trafficking have had a psychosocial impact on the lives of children in India. According to a report by UNICEF [2], the number of children living in the streets without access to food, sanitation, etc., has increased over the last year [3]. UNICEF representative Yasmin Ali Haque notes that among others, one of the most significant issues that have transpired on account of the pandemic is the loss of parents and caregivers of children, making way for illegal adoption pleas on social media [4]. The healthcare sector has been overburdened to such an extent on account of the rising number of cases that it has led to a complete halt of routine immunizations and treatment for pneumonia and other such diseases, making children extremely vulnerable to these diseases [5,6]. Haque has rightly pointed out that pregnancies and deliveries have also become risky amidst the pandemic on account of the unavailability of medical

help, leading to a rising maternal mortality rate across the country [7].

The second wave of Covid-19 has been challenging, with 79,588 children testing positive for the virus in Maharashtra, Chattisgarh, UP, Karnataka, and Delhi between March and April 2021 (data by Union Health Ministry) [8]. Even though most of the children who have contracted the virus have exhibited mild symptoms, the psychosocial impact of living through the pandemic has had a far-reaching effect.

HEALTH

Lack of immunization facilities during the pandemic has had a negative impact on children's physical health. The governmental venture of awareness concerning menstrual hygiene has come to a stop on the nationwide lockdown. Following a survey conducted in 2020, 58% of girls under the age of 18 did not have access to sanitary pads, increasing the risk of reproductive tract infections and toxic shock syndrome on account of unhygienic methods [1,9,10]. Additionally, with the disruption of child nutrition programs like the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and mid-day meals, children's health security in rural areas has been brought to a halt [3,11].

Some scholars have also expressed concern that children living in slums might also have a higher risk of getting infected by the virus, given the poor and unhygienic living conditions in such areas with regard to access to healthcare and water, and sanitation [12]. Also, to note that the impact of Covid-19 on children's health is not restricted to children's physical health.

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Children have been the most vulnerable to mental health issues as well as psychological trauma during the pandemic as they grapple to make sense of the new reality [13-15]. With the closing of schools in March 2020, children have been suffering from physical interaction with their peers and friends, altering the social fabric of their lives in its entirety. Their school life has been reduced to online classes, leading to an unprecedented increase in screen time. This has led to feelings of alienation and disinterest in children, not only about school but also about education in general. As per a survey conducted with parents of children in New Delhi, 84% of parents have expressed worry over the increased screen time for children [3]. The frequent conflict between couples brought forth by home confinement has also impacted the children's mental health, as they struggled to cope with the new reality of their everyday. Following Parekh and Dalwai [16,17], children often suffer adjustment difficulties when their parents are quarantined. Such intermittent separations have impacted the psychosocial health of children of especially single parents and medical professionals.

Covid-19 and subsequent lockdown that has led to the 'Cage Syndrome' [3], wherein the risk of post-partum depression in mothers have increased, wherein children having been affected by feelings of loneliness and anxiety from their parents are developing severe speech and language impediments along being slow to take to social skills. The pandemic has also disrupted physical activities in children, exposing them to a greater risk of muscular and cardiorespiratory fitness. The children who fall in the adolescent category have shown signs of anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, and loss of appetite, having been exposed to much disturbing information on social media.

Following a report by ORF, the government has started a program titled "Manodarpan" that attempts to address mental health issues of young people through a toll-free helpline number (and a website), alongside providing a handbook on the life skills necessary to survive the pandemic [18]. Psychosocial support centers called Snehi have also been set up in different parts of India to help children and adolescents in their crisis [1].

NUTRITION

The impact of Covid-19 has been severe on contractual and private sector jobs loss of jobs, pushing thousands of families into poverty. Subsequently, malnutrition has been on the rise as thousands of

families struggle to make their ends meet. Malnutrition has been a pre-existing problem in India [19-21], with data suggesting that as many as one out of every three children suffer from some form of malnutrition (stunting, underweight, or wasting). The pandemic has invariably worsened the situation, making children susceptible to diseases they otherwise would be immune to. Data suggests that there will be an additional 410 /413 cases of underweight issues in India [1]. Following an article in BMJ [22], middle and low-income countries would be marked by an estimated increase of 18-23 % of additional child deaths per month [23]. Malnutrition has also been catalyzed to a great extent in India by disrupting the mid-day meal scheme. A large segment availed that from the rural populations who otherwise can't afford by themselves [24]. Therefore, it has become imperative to ensure consistent food supply to counter the pandemic's negative impact on the nutrition of children and young adolescents.

EDUCATION

Education has become synonymous with online learning in the era of covid-19, after the schools closed down in March 2020. Online education has brought to the forefront the existing socio-economic inequality in the country, as proven by data from April 2020, which reveals that only 43% of the schoolchildren across 23 states had access to smartphones, while 12% did not have access to any phones [3]. Additionally, remote places in India do not often have steady access to the internet or electricity, making online learning inaccessible. Following Deka (2021) [25], a report by NITI Aayog (2018) stated that 55,000 villages in India do not have access to mobile networks. Another study by the Ministry of Rural Development in 2017-18 notes that 36% of the schools functioned without electricity [25]. This has brought the education of lower socio-economic classes to a halt and a possible increase in the learning gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. The coinciding of school closures and rising child poverty could be explored as an impending social crisis [12].

Additionally, the parents and teachers from the villages lack digital literacy making the situation even more problematic. For those who have access to the internet and smartphones, an increase in screen time has become a cause of worry for parents. Several parents have sought counseling for their wards to help them cope with the stress of online education. A study by ORF has pointed out that schools' closure has negatively impacted 247 million students from primary

and secondary schools [1]. Another study points out that only 30% of the students accessed the state's online platform DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing). Data reveals that only 0.8 percent of the population has access to laptops and smartphones [26]. Following from an article by Chaturvedi [27], 21.5% of children managed to use teaching aids such as videos, while 59.7% of teaching accounted for traditional methods such as worksheets and books at home.

School dropouts have become much more frequent given the above circumstances, with a higher incidence of dropouts among girl children, children with disabilities, or those living in rural areas. India has always been backward when it came to the education of girl children, and now the pandemic has set it back by many years. Following the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) data, 7.3% of girls between the age of 6-9 years have never attended school, while 3.2% of 10-14 year-olds and 4.3% of 15-19 year-olds have never attended school [28]. Surveys have further revealed that girl children are at a higher risk of gender-based violence and unintended pregnancy, alongside the loss of education, on account of the pandemic. The state government has rolled out a set of guidelines for online education titled "Pragyata" and advised the use of DIKSHA to facilitate online education [1].

RISK OF VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

The pandemic has worsened the situation for child sexual abuse survivors without a social support system. Loss of income on account of the pandemic has brought further stress on the parents dealing with the fragile psychological state of the survivors. Following a report by Indian Express, CHILDLINE India Foundation reported a 50% increase in the number of calls reporting abuse. Lockdown and complete home confinement have led to the abusers and their victims co-existing in the same physical space, increasing abuse cases [3].

The lockdown has also led to an increase in the number of child marriages across the country [29-31] as government efforts to prevent the same were disrupted by the pandemic. According to the Indian Express [32] report, simply a year of delay in protecting girl children from getting married could result in 13 million more child marriages across the country. Kumar *et al.* [33] predict that cases of gender-based violence are expected to rise to 15 million for three months of lockdown as per the IAP report.

Financial issues brought in by the pandemic have led to parents marrying off their daughters to sustain their families. Data reveals that the pandemic has also been marked by increased domestic violence on account of anxieties concerning income loss, home confinement, and lack of mobility [34-39].

Cybercrimes have also increased as children spend more and more unsupervised time in front of the internet [3].

STEPS AND SUGGESTED RECOMMENDATIONS

COVID-19 pandemic has left an unprecedented footprint of misery and misfortune in the lives of about 180-200 million adolescents and kids in ASIA's 2nd most populous nation, India [40,41]. With nearly two-thirds of India's population living below the poverty line and about 70% of its population earning less than 2 dollars a day, childhood mortality, malnutrition, child labor, lack of education, child marriage, sexual abuse, and child trafficking are one of India's ongoing problem [42,43]. COVID-19 pandemic has further worsened the scenario [44]. The most affected are the socially unprivileged sections of society, many of whose livelihoods were shattered due to lockdown and disease burden [45]. Children are the most vulnerable sections of society and heavily depend on parental and community support [46]. In the absence of this social safeguard mechanism disrupted due to COVID-19, they are at significant risk for abuse and exploitation [47,48]. Though the central government initiative under the 'PM-CARES for children' scheme is praiseworthy [49,50], equal or greater participation by Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and philanthropy funding are also much needed. Mental health counseling for depressed kids tops the list [51,52]. With kids in online classes dealing with screen fatigue and social detachment, fewer families can afford this for a long time.

Further, a large-scale vaccination drive aimed at a large-scale immunization of the younger generation is still a long way and needs to be seriously explored. Millions of children who have dropped out of school need to be rehabilitated through government-assisted programs. One way to accomplish this is to restart the mid-day meal program, draw a substantial number of kids to school, waive the fees, and provide other educational allowances. The mid-day meal program supplies free lunches on working days for children in primary and upper primary classes in government, government-aided, local bodies, as covered by the

National Food Security Act, 2013 [53,54]. COVID-19 pandemic has seen a spike in abuse against the children due to a sudden and long-term increase in family uncertainty [55,56]. NGOs must mitigate the risk against such abuses by coordinating and through a partnership with local law enforcement. While efforts are undertaken to protect the virus, an equal effort is needed to secure the future of millions of children in developing nations like India who face a gloomy lot. It will require the collective effort of both the government and the citizens to take initiatives to secure our future generations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

SS and SK drafted the manuscript with assistance from RD. SK has overseen the entire work.

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