



EMPOWERING INITIATIVES FOR INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT OF COVID-19 ORPHANS: STRATEGIES AND OUTCOMES AT NATIONAL LEVEL

Dr Shahela Yasmeen Khan

Associate Professor

Maulana Azad College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Aurangabad

Abstract

The end of the year 2019 was marked by the introduction of a third highly pathogenic coronavirus, after SARS-CoV (2003) and MERS-CoV (2012), in the human population which was officially declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. The pandemic COVID-19 not only created a havoc on the environment including the quality of water, air, waste management, and energy consumption, it impacted the human psychology, the educational system, and the global economy to a great extent. India was no exception to this pathetic condition. The worst sufferers were the children who still need to be taken care of, even after 4 years, as the consequences which they have to go through due to being orphaned were more than inhumane. In spite of the several measures taken by the government at central, state and local level, the sufferings are still prevalent which indicates that a concrete inclusive development of the orphaned children through some concrete solutions is still awaited.

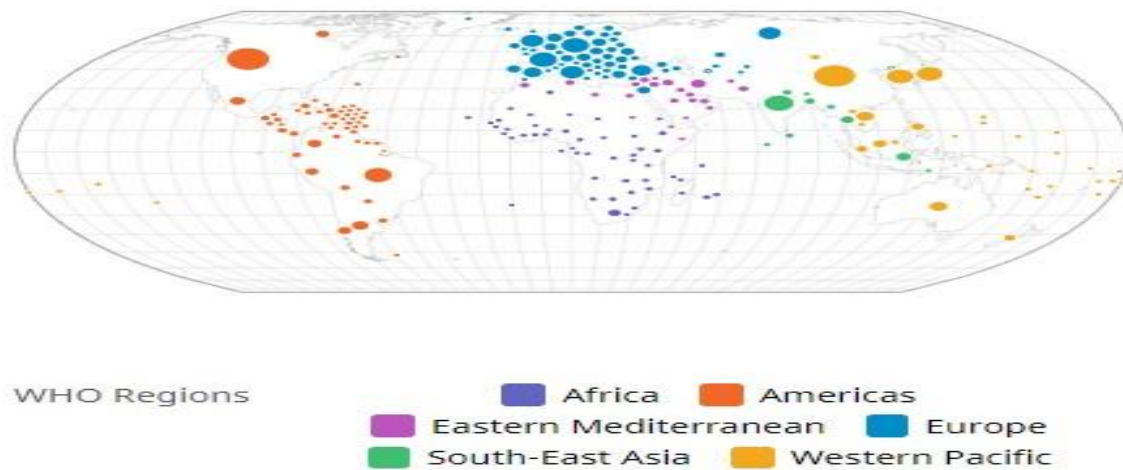
Keywords : Pandemic, consequences, orphaned children, government, measures.

Introduction

In the November 2019, when COVID-19 first knocked the doors of Wuhan China, affecting the first large cluster of people, hardly anyone imagined that it is the beginning of the one of the most hazardous pandemic of the history that costed a dramatic loss of human life worldwide presenting an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems and the entire system of work throughout the world. Along with loss of life, the economic and social meltdown throughout the world was simply devastating resulting into billions of people being at the risk of falling into extreme poverty while the quantity of undernourished people increased to a huge extent by the end of the year.

End number of companies struggled hard to sustain themselves in the already falling global market while nearly half of the *world's 3.3 billion global workforce were at a risk of losing their livelihoods*¹. The condition of daily wages and contractual workers was even worse as most of them were devoid of social protection and therefore were denied of public health care. Most of them were particularly vulnerable as they couldn't even feed themselves and their families due to lockdowns. The pandemic affected the entire human system to a large extent as our systems are inter-dependent on each other. Due to pandemic, there was a complete closure of borders at all levels that automatically led to trade restrictions and confinement which prevented farmers from accessing markets, including for buying inputs and selling their produce, and agricultural workers from harvesting crops, thus disrupting domestic and international food supply chains and reducing access to healthy, safe and diverse diets. At the same time COVID- 19 decimated employment due to which millions of people got jobless. The low -income countries which have marginalized population including small scale farmers and indigenous people were the worst affected.

A number of agricultural laborers faced acute poverty, malnutrition, poor health and absence of labour protection that resulted into an exodus of the labourers in most of the parts of the world. The pathetic state of these laborers resulted into increase of child labors, predatory loans taken by these workers and increased number of suicides and other forms of violence.



Source: World Health Organization

How India suffered from COVID-19?

It has been found out that those countries that deal with existing humanitarian crises or emergencies got particularly exposed to the effects of COVID-19. That is the reason, in spite of stringent lockdown and demographic factors, India is the third-worst affected country worldwide. As of 18 January 2024, according to Indian government figures, India has the second-highest number of confirmed cases in the world (after the United States of America) with 45,013,908 reported cases of COVID-19 infection and the third-highest number of COVID-19 deaths (after the United States and Brazil)². In October 2021, the World Health Organization estimated 4.7 million excess deaths, both directly and indirectly related to COVID-19 to have taken place in India³. As a result, India was estimated to have approximately 1.9 million Covid-19 orphans or 36.54% of the global total. The ministry of women and child development on 2 March 2022 disputed this estimate as well in a press release⁴.

Impact of COVID-19 on the children of India

Education

During the pandemic period, the government had to enforce a strict lockdown that led to the complete closure of public and private universities, colleges and schools. This resulted into replacing the traditional teaching method to online teaching by using ICT methods. However, this online teaching pedagogy has its own drawbacks as the government schools and the low-income schools who have particularly those students who come from lower classes were not able to gain access to online education despite countless efforts by both the managements and the government. Also, online teaching includes basic knowledge of technology that most of the students lacked along with a continuous parental control that couldn't happen due to the limitations on the part of parents. This

led to the absentia of most of the students while many students couldn't cope up with the new educational environment and got completely deviated. The most important factor was the internet connectivity in online education but in many areas, due to poor internet connectivity, the communication between teachers and students got completely hampered.

Mental Health

The global pandemic crisis has led to social isolation which affected the economic situation of the country, rather adversely. This resulted into the deterioration of the mental state of millions of people who had to face severe financial losses. Also, many families lost their sole breadwinners due to which they got into traumatic situations. The worst sufferers in this scenario were the children as Counselors and psychologists believe that children with physical, emotional and mental health issues require counseling for a long time in order to get out of this trauma.

Grueling consequences of Orphanage

The Constitution of India provides certain basic rights to the children of this country such as Article 21 of the Constitution of India includes the Right to Health that can be interpreted as every orphan child has the right to good physical and mental health while, Article 21A deals with the Right to Free and Compulsory Elementary Education for all children between 6-14 year of age group including the orphaned children who can get education with the State acting as their guardian. Along with this, Article 45 of the Constitution of India deals with the Right to Early Childhood Care and Education for all children until they complete the age of 14 years. However, during the period of pandemic when COVID-19 took millions of lives, the situation of the orphaned children got more than worse. *"In what we believe to be almost a post-pandemic world, Covid-induced orphans and widowed women are two of the gravest yet most invisible communities in not just India, but nations around the world,"* Susan Hillis, senior technical advisor on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Covid-19 International Task Force, told Article 14. According to their data, two of every three Covid-orphans worldwide are between 10 and 17. In India, 65% of the children who lost one or both parents were adolescents. As per the report submitted to Supreme Court, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) said that *6,855 children were orphaned, 274 were found abandoned and 68,218 lost a parent*⁵. The loss of parents put these children in question under horrible consequences. Some of them were:

- The loss of both the parents/ one parent resulted into growing anxiety, depression, mood disorders, and other behavioral disorders amongst children.
- These orphaned children not only had to cope with the emotional trauma of losing both their parents but there have been a number of other hazards such as domestic and external violence, child labour, trafficking, child marriage, sexual exploitation, etc.
- Orphaned children were placed at an amplified risk of neglect and exploitation.
- Even social media platforms that shared the news of orphaned children started indulging in illegal activities like human trafficking and selling of children as indirectly by flashing such news, they gave more opportunities to those rackets who were into all this business.

- Since no one was there to take care of orphans, smugglers found it a perfect opportunity to make use of their vulnerabilities.
- Buying and selling of children saw a considerable hike during the period of pandemic.
- The home portrays a source of security and safety. But for a minority, the opposite is, unfortunately, the case. Violence by caregivers and people who adopt children was the most common and unnoticed form of violence experienced by children
- Sexual abuse became common within the walls of a family where a child was abused by his/ her own family member due to the loss of parents. Such acts of violence are more likely to occur when families are confined to the home and experiencing intense stress and anxiety. The pandemic pushed orphans in this direction and made them prone to domestic violence.
- A large number of children who lost their parents became prone to trafficking.
- With no one to guide them and provide them with the basic facilities, innocent children too found it easy to make money and survive.
- Girls become vulnerable to sexual abuse and harassment.
- There were instances where, after the death of the mother, fathers pushed their children into manual labor work.

Corrective Measures taken to deal with this grave problem

NCPCR has highlighted the need of protecting the rights of children amidst the surge of deaths due to Covid-19⁶. The Ministry of Women and Child Development immediately came into action post this report by identifying the children through outreach and surveys along with surveying their needs, requirements on the “Track Child” portal. They also took several measures to combat this grave issue such as establishing temporary Child Care Institutions (CCI) to house those children who have been orphaned in Covid-19, rehabilitation facilities for children under the Child Protection Services scheme, appointment of child psychologists and counsellors along with launching a local helpline number to provide support to such children⁷. Along with this, the district administrations and panchayat-level institutions came up with several financial packages for children to support them economically and ensure a secure future. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) also announced under PM CARES scheme that there will be a special scheme under which a corpus of 10 lakhs for each child will be created till they reach 18 years of age. This corpus will provide monthly financial assistance from 18 years of age, for the next five years to take care of personal requirements and at the age of 23 years, the child will get the corpus amount as one lump-sum amount for personal and professional use. Every child will be admitted to the nearest school and the expenditure on the uniform, textbooks and notebooks will be done from PM-CARES funds. Every child will also be enrolled under the Ayushman Bharat Scheme (PM-JAY) with a health insurance cover of Rs 5 lakhs. The premium amount for these children till the age of 18 years will be paid by PM CARES⁸.

State governments such as Uttar Pradesh government announced the ‘Mukhya Mantri Bal Sewa Yojana’ for these children where a monthly allowance of Rs. 4,000 will be provided to them for their education and nutrition till they get adults while, the Maharashtra state government declared to take custody of orphaned children along with a fixed deposit of 5 lakhs which the child can withdraw once they are 21 years of age. Kerala government also did the similar measure by offering 2,000 rupees until the child’s 18th birthday with a lump sum amount of 300,000 rupees as immediate aid and *Karnataka state government launched the Bal Seva scheme under which 3500 rupees will be paid to children every month who are below the age of 10 along with free education in a residential school and a girl child will get one lakh rupees of financial assistance*⁹.

Uttarakhand state government also went for a similar measure along with other states like Assam, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu by providing some financial assistance to these orphaned children. While financial assistance may have provided some assurance to such children, the issue of anxiety and the loneliness is still a big threat to them which can directly affect their mental efficacy in the coming future. “The pandemic has been a disaster in more ways than one,” former Supreme Court Judge, Justice Madan Lokur, observed in the DCPCR’s second issue of *Children First: Journal on Children’s Lives*, released in August 2022. “*We still do not know the extent to which children have been traumatised.*”

Keeping the same fact in consideration, on 20th March 2020, a centralised child-helpline (1098), officially called ‘CHILDLINE’, was launched to take the calls of those children who are in distress due to Covid-19. Within the first 21 days of this expansion, *CHILDLINE received 460,000 calls*¹⁰ which was indeed shocking. According to CHILDLINE’s records, till date, *the helpline, which runs day and night, has answered over 5.3 million and assisted or rescued 3,95,000 children*¹¹. It is the also the sole calling-facility available for children orphaned by Covid-19 in Maharashtra, the state with the second-highest population of Covid-orphans in the country. While, *in June 2020, Médecins Sans Frontières—a global humanitarian medical non-governmental organization launched a similar mental health helpline in India which got operational in seven languages which were Hindi, Tamil, Gujarati, Marathi, Assamese, Punjabi and English*¹². This helpline was run by the trained counsellors who provided one-on-one telephonic consultations for those facing any kind of Covid-induced distress.

CONCLUSION

In March 2024, along with the rest of the world, India will complete four years of struggling with the Covid-19. During this period, needless to mention, many have moved on, others struggle, especially orphaned children, who are still being discovered.

When we talk about inclusive development, ‘Inclusive’ means all round development of the society and empowerment of every citizen, to develop own capabilities & competence through application of mind and effort. Through its continuous efforts since the outbreak of the pandemic, the government has indeed been able to solve most of the issues, however, the issue of unemployment, increased poverty and people’s deteriorated

mental conditions still remain a thing of concern. As mentioned earlier, more than adults, it is the problem of children which is the most pathetic problem to deal with. The Constitution of India provides these vulnerable children with certain fundamental rights in spite of that the brutalities that children had to go through during the pandemic were unimaginable. While the financial assistance through schemes marks a promise of a secure future along with the establishment of several child care institutions at various levels, it is also crucial to develop robust monitoring mechanisms and clear implementation guidelines to ensure every child is benefitted from the schemes. Along with that, other recommendations include establishment of Community Awareness Camps, Foster Care Homes and some kind of alternative care, etc.

Ultimately, it can be said that ensuring all children to grow in a secure and protected environment, and providing support to them is critical for the holistic development of children. Children's right to protection is linked to the realisation of other rights to education, development and participation. Depriving children from their rights to decent living shall go on to hinder their future participation in democracy. Thus, there is a strong case for public provisioning of care and support to every child of the country. The government has already begun to take steps for supporting children in distress during the pandemic thus ensuring the hope for a child-sensitive policy along with collaborative efforts of the state, NGOs, and civil society.

References:

1. Abubakar L., Salemcity A. J., Abass O. K., Olajuyin A. M. The impacts of COVID-19 on environmental sustainability: a brief study in world context. *Bioresource Technology Reports* . 2021;15 doi: 10.1016/j.biteb.2021.100713.100713 [[CrossRef](#)] [[Google Scholar](#)]
2. El Zowalaty M. E., Järhult J. D. From SARS to COVID-19: a previously unknown SARS- related coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) of pandemic potential infecting humans - call for a One Health approach. *One Health* . 2020;9 doi: 10.1016/j.onehlt.2020.100124.100124 [[PMC free article](#)] [[PubMed](#)] [[CrossRef](#)] [[Google Scholar](#)]
3. Montesinos I., Gruson D., Kabamba B., et al. Evaluation of two automated and three rapid lateral flow immunoassays for the detection of anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies. *Journal of Clinical Virology* . 2020;128 doi: 10.1016/j.jcv.2020.104413.104413 [[PMC free article](#)] [[PubMed](#)] [[CrossRef](#)] [[Google Scholar](#)]
4. Sohrabi C., Alsafi Z., O'Neill N., et al. World Health Organization declares global emergency: a review of the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) *International Journal of Surgery* . 2020;76:71–76. doi: 10.1016/j.ijsu.2020.02.034. [[PMC free article](#)] [[PubMed](#)] [[CrossRef](#)] [[Google Scholar](#)]
5. Mofijur M., Fattah I. M. R., Alam M. A., et al. Impact of COVID-19 on the social, economic, environmental and energy domains: lessons learnt from a global pandemic. *Sustainable Production and Consumption* . 2021;26:343–359. doi: 10.1016/j.spc.2020.10.016. [[PMC free article](#)] [[PubMed](#)] [[CrossRef](#)] [[Google Scholar](#)]
6. The New Indian Express . (2020). COVID-19: Over 100 children below 12 years of age have contracted coronavirus in India so far. Available from <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/apr/19/covid-19-over-100-children-below-12-years-of-age-have-contracted-coronavirus-in-india-so-far-2132143.html> [last accessed 21 May 2020].
7. Jacob, P. , Rajendra, K.M. , Ghosh, S. , & Sagar, V.J. (2020). COVID-19 Pandemic and Mental Health Issues in Children and Adolescents, in Mental Health in the times of COVID-19 Pandemic Guidelines for General Medical and Specialised Mental Health Care Settings. Bengaluru: National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences. <http://nimhans.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/MentalHealthIssuesCOVID-19NIMHANS.pdf> [last accessed 21 May 2020]. [[Google Scholar](#)]
8. Gao, J. , Zheng, P. , Jia, Y. , Chen, H. , Mao, Y. , Chen, S. , ... & Dai, J. (2020). Mental health problems and social media exposure during COVID-19 outbreak. Available at SSRN 3541120. [[PMC free article](#)] [[PubMed](#)]

9. Ransing, R. , Adiukwu, F. , Pereira-Sanchez, V. , Ramalho, R. , Orsolini, L. , Schuh Teixeira, A.L. , ... & Kundadak, G.K. (2020). Early Career Psychiatrists Perspectives on the mental health impact and care of the COVID 19 pandemic across the world. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 51, 102085. [PMC free article] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]
10. Dalton, L. , Rapa, E. , & Stein, A. (2020). Protecting the psychological health of children through effective communication about COVID-19. *The Lancet – Child & Adolescent Health*, 4, 346–347. [PMC free article] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]
11. Danese, A. , Smith, P. , Chitsabesan, P. , & Dubicka, B. (2020). Child and Adolescent mental health amidst emergencies and disasters. *The British journal of psychiatry: the journal of mental science*, 216, 159–162. [PubMed] [Google Scholar]
12. Dong, L. , & Bouey, J. (2020). Public Mental Health Crisis during COVID 19 Pandemic China. *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 26, 202407. [PMC free article] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]

