

Struggle for Survival: A Study of Impacts of Lockdown on Children from Disadvantaged Backgrounds

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ABSTRACT

Emphasis of COVID-19 pandemic coverage has been on "corona warriors"- doctors, paramedical staff, police and the lot; Indian children from disadvantaged backgrounds are vulnerable to risks of different order. Though according to the figures children are not affected much from the health effects of novel corona virus, the lockdown and its aftermath will definitely have deep ill effects on the well being of children particularly the children from disadvantaged backgrounds. India is a young nation with 39% population below the age of 18 years. Children are the future human capital; the profound effect of lockdown on disadvantaged children will be catastrophic and long lasting to society, economy and business. This research paper relying on secondary sources is an attempt to shed light on the plights of the disadvantaged categories of children due to lockdown in India.

1. Introduction

According to UNICEF (2020), across the world 99% (2.34 billion) of children and young people under the age of 18 years live in one of the 186 countries which have imposed some form of restrictions on movement due to COVID-19 pandemic and 60% of all children live in one of the 82 countries with a full (7%) or partial (53%) lockdown which accounts for 1.4 billion young lives. To curb the infection of COVID-19, nationwide lockdown in India was first imposed on 25th March when there were around 530 corona infected cases across the nation. Later on it was extended three times with some relaxations to specific sectors. A United Nations report stated that- "Though children are not the face of Corona pandemic but they risk being among its biggest victims". India is a home to approximately 472 million children which is the largest child population in the world. Studies reveal that lockdown has impacted around 40 million children of poor Indian families. The affected children are child beggars, street children, child labourers, children of migrant labourers, homeless or 'nowhere' children, children of homeless families, rag pickers, children in institutional care, children in conflict with law and children in vulnerable circumstances. Though the struggle of disadvantaged children for survival is never ending; during lockdown they are fighting more than they can at their age. The mitigating measures for fighting COVID-19 have been inadvertently doing more harm than good through their harsh socio-economic impacts on the above categories of disadvantaged children. According to UNICEF (2020), this health crisis may result in child-rights crisis in absence of urgent global coordination to prevent it.

2. Objectives

Objectives of this study are to-

- ❖ Explore the sufferings of disadvantaged children during the lockdown period in India.
- ❖ Study the aftermath of lockdown on these categories of children.

3. Research Methodology

This study is a result of desk research conducted during the lockdown period in India and primarily relies on secondary sources of information..

4. Findings and Discussion

A report of Housing and Land Rights Network India stated that-

"After 40 days of India's lockdown, life for the urban and rural poor is overridden with loss of income, hunger, ill health, desperation, destitution, and a rise in malnutrition. Other fateful consequences of the lockdown have been a significant increase in domestic violence against women and child sexual abuse, adverse mental health impacts and psychological stress, disruption in children's education, and loss of life for reasons other than the coronavirus, including inter alia starvation, denial of medical aid/inability to access medical assistance, exhaustion, and suicide.

Lockdown has brought fresh challenges to the already vulnerable disadvantaged children and at the same time also severed the existing troubles they face in their day to day life. Following sections underscore such challenges being faced by disadvantaged children during lockdown and the future impact of lockdown on them.

Threat to survival

Majority of the economic activities stopped during lockdown in India. IMF estimates that global income will contract by 3% in the year 2020, in case corona pandemic recedes in the next half of the year. Income shocks at the level of poor households will left them with no choice but to cut back their expenditure on food and health which can have overwhelming effects on their children. Secondly, in 143 countries, poor children depend on school meals and India has the world's largest school feeding scheme known as 'mid day meal scheme', which guarantees one nutritional meal for at least 200 days in a year to 12 crores children. Shutting down schools during lockdown will force these poor children to look

to other sources of daily nutrition. Disruptions in food supply chains and local food markets may pose another problem of food security to poor households. Due to long closure of schools during lockdown, drop-out rate will also increase particularly in case of female child. With only 24% families having the facility of internet in India, and 50,000 students from economically weaker sections in Delhi itself from whom laptop, android phones and high speed internet connectivity are luxuries; the ICT option of accessing school education will further widen the learning divide between children from privileged backgrounds and children from underprivileged backgrounds. Due to lockdown, children living with chronic diseases are at higher risk of less or no access to healthcare and medicines. Disruption of immunization services and non-availability of certain medicines during lockdown will also have serious health impacts.

Vulnerability to abandonment

Regardless of child abandonment being punishable under IPC section 317, India has 12 million abandoned and orphaned children. In 2011 there were 11 million abandoned children and 90% of them were girls. Post lockdown, there is the high probability of increase in the cases where poor parents will either abandon or will try to seek to give away their children due to economic and financial hardships resulting from lockdown. During lockdown there is a ban on child adoption so there would be a surge in the cases of children who will be given up by their families for adoption after the lockdown is lifted. During lockdown instances have been reported from Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra where the children including babies as old as two months were abandoned by their parents, and families also trying to hand over their children to NGOs.

Vulnerability to trafficking

In the year 2016, 61% persons trafficked were children below 18 years. 40,000 children in India are abducted every year, and everyday 3,00,000 children in India are forced to beg in a multi million rupees industry which is controlled by human trafficking cartels. Studies reveal that the trafficked children are generally from poor and marginalized communities. There are the chances of increase in child trafficking post lockdown because poor families would find themselves in the situation where it will be difficult for them to fend for their children and children will either be renounced or sold to make some money. At the time of writing this article, Government of India has been directed by the Supreme Court to enquire into the issue of child trafficking post lockdown, within 14 days.

Vulnerability to abuse and violence

For disadvantaged children, homes do not provide safety and security; UNICEF 2020 stated that “2 in 3 children are subjected to violent discipline by caregivers”, other studies also reveal that children experience violence mostly from the caregivers. During lockdown, children can not to go out and at home they are at risk of witnessing abuse due to parents’ frustration resulting from poverty and other hardships, domestic violence, or an alcoholic or drug-addict family member, mostly the fathers. In lockdown-1 which lasted for 21 days, Childline India received 4.6 lakhs complaints and intervened in 9385 cases where 20% were related to protection of child from

abuse. In just 11 days from 20th March to 31st March 2020, 92105 sos calls related to protection against abuse and violence on children were received. There is a possibility of these numbers being on lower side because during lockdown children are isolated from teachers, members of child welfare committees, volunteers of NGOs or other concerned adults.

Vulnerability to hunger

In Global hunger Index of 2019 India was ranked at 102nd position out of 117 countries. In spite of producing 291.95 million tonnes of food grains in 2019-20; a UNICEF report stated that 69% of the deaths of children below 5 years of age were attributed to malnutrition. There are approximately 2 million street children in India and one in four of them go to sleep empty stomach; lockdown has pushed them in more severe situation. Street children are usually found engaged in begging, vending on streets or rag-picking at the hotspots such as traffic signals, railway stations, religious places, bus and auto stands. They depend on random sympathy of strangers but during lockdown street children just disappeared, their whereabouts and the conditions in which they are living are not known to anyone. If they cannot work on the streets, they cannot make their living. Instances have been reported in media where street children are not getting food during lockdown; street children from Lucknow, Ghaziabad and Delhi sending video messages to authorities to provide them food; children of wage earners starving, poor families dependent on alms received by their children through begging.

Psychosocial problems

UNICEF (2020) stated that in addition to profound economic and health impact, the current pandemic will also have serious effects on psychosocial well being also and children will face additional challenges in the COVID-19 world. Restrictions on movement during lockdown; and physical distancing which does not seem to coming to a halt soon, are the areas of concerns on the mental well-being of children. According to few news articles published during lockdown period, there are 200,000 street children in New Delhi and during lockdown majority of them got sequestered in small impermanent huts without basic amenities, they also experienced difficulties of muck gathering around their slums, unbearable stench, their eatables and wearables soaking wet. Confinement in such conditions may have serious physical and mental health issues. Few street children addicted to drugs, pelted stones on vehicles in Delhi during lockdown, it is a sign of withdrawal symptom.

Vulnerability to infection

“Stay home, stay safe” is the recommended preventive measure for controlling the corona virus infection. But what about those who do not have homes? Census 2011 figures reveal that 4.5 lakhs families with total population of 17.73 lakhs in India do not have any roof cover. Infectious diseases, asthma, malnutrition, poor health, prevalence of substance and drug abuse and other pre-existing health conditions among street connected children and homeless children make them more prone to risk of COVID-19 infection. In addition to social distancing, hand-washing is also one of the preventive measure to control the spread of COVID-19 but according to UNICEF (2020) 40% population of the world lacks basic hand-

washing facility with soap and water which will also put disadvantaged children at higher risk of infection. Mapping of the advisories and circulars for the homeless issued between 9th March 2020 to 3rd May, 2020 by state governments reveal that except Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Karnataka and Maharashtra no other state has mentioned either the general relief measures related to sanitation and health facilities or the homeless population is not linked to them at all. Similarly, only Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi and Kerala have general relief measures related to new shelter for homeless. On the other hand, children in institutional care are vulnerable due to substandard hygiene practices and difficulties in maintaining physical distancing due to disproportionate numbers.

Difficulty in assisting help to marginalized children and rescuing and rehabilitating children in difficult circumstances

During lockdown volunteers of different NGOs and other concerned members from civil society are finding it difficult to reach out to children due to restriction on public movement. Childline service is an emergency service and it remains active

and functional under any circumstances and situations, however its volunteers without Personal Protection Equipments (PPEs) are at higher risk of direct exposure to the virus in their efforts to rescue and rehabilitate children in difficult circumstances.

5. Conclusion

Studies reveal that children from marginalized and vulnerable groups such as street children have not got assistance from most relief measures announced during lockdown. For protecting the children of poor families working in informal economy, there is an immediate need of food, shelter and financial assistance for few months after the lockdown ends. Free water supply and increase in community toilets across the nation are also required. Database of disadvantaged children, street children, vulnerable children and children in difficult circumstances need to be created by NCPCR and SCPCRs so that these categories of children could be linked to various social schemes of central and state governments.

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