

The State of Children during Pandemic: An Alarming Situation for Pakistan

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Coronavirus and pandemic has led to drastic and unexpected changes in the whole world. It has affected people's lives and their ways of living drastically. Although lockdowns and mobility restrictions were imposed to save lives but on the other hand, it put the lives of underprivileged population at other risks too such as violence and abuse. This paper attempts to describe the situation of children during this epidemic of covid-19. Evidence and researches proved that emergency situations are significantly related to increased level

of violence especially against children. A number of problems from which children suffered during pandemic and lockdown have been discussed such as excessive screen use, domestic child abuse, witnessing domestic violence etc. Furthermore this paper also suggests essential recommendations for not only government but also for public as they must cooperate with government in such high alert time.

Keywords: Covid-19, Children, Abuse, Neglect and Domestic violence.

INTRODUCTION

Emergency situations such as pandemics and natural disasters in any country or continent can lead to a number of fatal problems for the individuals who survived such as property and possessions destruction, deaths of the loved ones, challenges of poverty and hunger, unemployment, financial and economic crises etc. Crises, pandemics and disasters in any country affect people of every class and status by causing irreversible changes in the course of their lives, routines and living conditions. Such situations affect individuals differently depending on their gender, age, social class, abilities etc. Usually in pandemics and in crisis situations, the marginalized segments of the every society get affected the most. In the context of low income countries such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh etc. These marginalized segments are mainly Women, Transgender community, children and individuals with disabilities. Also, in the current epidemic situation, they have to face neglect and abuse due to the strict lockdown going on around the world. Whereas, these strict restrictions and guidelines for children and adolescents have impacted their mental health by confining them into their houses with the domestic abuse which further put them at a greater risk.

Recent spread of the deadly virus called as Coronavirus or Covid-19, has changed the course of lives of every individual all around the world. Covid-19 is a novel virus which spreads from Wuhan, China to all around the world causing the loss of lives in the greater number ever seen after World War. Due to the corona virus living conditions of every individual have changed a lot globally by having stringent lockdowns in the cities and countries forcing people to stay in their homes, causing families to live apart and away from their loved ones, causing difficulties for patients and elderly population, especially for children and disabled individuals. WHO and Governments are trying their best to control this fatal virus from spreading by enforcing severe lockdown, high alerts and by adopting different measures and precautions ensuring the safety of its citizens. Even government and private offices, hotels, malls, markets, universities, colleges and schools are closed globally to control the current situation whereas this coronavirus pandemic has greatly affect the children in particular by disturbing their normal development and routine lives which will eventually effect their mental health.

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND ITS EFFECTS

WHO has defined child abuse as the physical, emotional, sexual, neglect or exploitation which may cause harm or hurt the child's health and its survival? Moreover these acts are intended in nature [1]. Evidence and researches proved that emergency situations are significantly related to increased level of

violence especially against children. Even during the Ebola pandemic in West Africa, sexual violence against young girls such as rape and sexual assault occurred at a higher rate. Therefore, governments must take the violence against children into account as it can damage several future generations as well. Violence against children may lead to many mental, physical and social problems such as social isolation, traumas, depression, relationship difficulties, suicide ideation, nightmares, non-suicidal self-injuries, heart diseases, obesity, poor self-esteem etc.

Worldwide, the children up to 18 years of age are considered the most vulnerable, because they become the victim of abuse and neglect they face from their own families or the people they know or trust. This can be seen in children especially the ones with special needs, disabilities, having different sexual orientation, minorities and who have to play the role of adult as well. The situation is worst for the children living on streets, which are underprivileged and have no rights, place to stay, doing labor and is in slavery [2-4].

The World Health Organization [5] in its latest report revealed that there is an increase in the violence and abuse against adolescent's girls and women due to lock down which further increases tension regarding financial, health and security concerns at homes. [6] reported that the situation created due to the pandemic globally causes fear of uncertainty and anxiety among individuals which eventually worsen the form of violence and abuse women and children have to face in their houses. He further explained nine reasons that increase or worsen violence during pandemics against children, girls and women, which are financial instability, non-executable escape plans, quarantine, social distancing/isolation, low socioeconomic families and living with large number of people put them at higher risk [7].

Child abuse and Neglect can have adverse effects on almost every aspect of a child's development (physical, psychological, emotional and even social). Many studies have reported a significant association between child neglect and poor educational performance [8-10]. Apart from this, many researchers have found considerable relationship between child abuse and mental health problems including anxiety disorders, depression and drug abuse in adolescence and eating disorders [8,11]. Child abuse and child neglect can also cultivate aggression in adolescents [8]. Another major problem faced by children suffering from abuse and neglect is "homelessness" [12].

COVID-19 AND STATE OF THE CHILDREN

Coronavirus and lockdown has confined people in their homes. Ultimately the current pandemic has forced us to alter our life style drastically. Children

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were not used to online schooling particularly Pakistani students which consequently hampered their learning. But the effects of covid-19 are not just restricted to academic domain; almost every aspect of life has been affected due to lockdown.

Another issue to deal with is increase use of digital technology and screen time as lockdown forces everyone to stay at home at all times which eventually end up children using technology more and more. While using internet some children tend to experience cyber bullying, online gambling, inappropriate material, suggestive advertisements and things that promote use of unhealthy food [3,4].

As Brazendale K et al. reported that children during breaks, weekends and vacations are likely to be less physically active [13]. A study conducted in China examined the effect of covid-19 on children's "physical activity" as it is closely related to bodily as well as mental wellbeing. The findings revealed a huge decrease in terms of physical activity among children while a dramatic increase was found in time spent on television/mobile phones [14]. Apart from this, children with disabilities face additional problems as compared to normal children such as study conducted by [15] found that lack of interaction due to lock down has affected not just the self-esteem of children with disabilities but it may cause them to restrict their communication ability. Even the survey with parents revealed that they were stressed because of disruption in rehabilitation services for their children who are physically disable. Moreover helplessness and mental load was reported by these parents.

Children are at utmost risk from affecting the direct and indirect risks of Covid-19. They may experience fears, unpredictability, panic, stress, anxiety, excessive worries, mood swings, physical and social isolation due to prolonged absence from educational institutes [16]. A research study was conducted in China in 2020, showing that children age group 3-18 years show signs of common psychological, social and behavioral problems such as crying spells, distraction, prickliness, fear of uncertainty and have a lot of questions regarding the virus. Also, being separated from the immediate family and from companions during the quarantine worsens their mental health [17,18]. This makes them vulnerable towards Post-traumatic stress disorder, psychiatric illness, anxiety and panic attacks and even suicide attempts [19].

Orgilés M et al. [20] conducted a research examining the emotional impact of quarantine on children and adolescents aged 3 to 18 years affected by Covid-19 in Italy and Spain. While parents reported the most common symptoms they found in their children were difficulty concentrating (76.6%), dullness (52%), irritability (39%), impatience (38.8%), uneasiness (38%), loneliness (31.3%), agitation (30.4%), and worries (30.1%).

There are also reported to have indirect effects of Covid-19 epidemic which are increasing mental health issues among the most vulnerable population such as children, adolescents and women due to social distancing, social isolation and public disasters. Financial downfall causes unemployment on a larger scale which eventually affects the mental health of children leading to violence and maltreatment among them. These issues needs to be addressed beforehand to avoid negative societal, mental and other health issues among children [21,22].

During the epidemic, changes on behavioral and emotional level can be seen in children because of drastic change in daily live routines. Children shows sign of emotional distress by showing excessive crying spells, sadness, anger outbursts and anxiety etc. Emotional support from family members and extended families can help the children, adolescents and adults going through hard times and in their adjustment, which helps them to return to their previous level of functioning.

During the lockdown, the children are kept in controlled environment and places which doesn't allow them to explore the things they usually do which can cause damage to their healthy growth, child mental development and affective-social aspects as well. As the existing environment and conditions are very much different from the previous family status, they used to provide to their children's.

Children and individuals need to cope with the current major changing lifestyles such as home confinement, self-isolation and physical distancing which makes it difficult to meet the basic physical and emotional needs at times. There seen an increasing trend in unemployment, poverty, mental health, substance use, neglect and maltreatment, partner violence etc. due to

current situation. Children and elderly face the difficulty of receiving critical and community support during the pandemic due to traveling restrictions and limited direct contact.

Covid-19 has raised different mental health issues or complaints globally such as facing fears, anxiety, panic and uncertainty in different countries and populations, especially for children's and their parents, as they may be isolated or get separated from their support system such as extended families, child care centers, educational institutes, religious places and other healthy activities' and other minorities group who could be at risk of violence and other challenges [23,24].

Another major concern is Domestic Violence towards children. Some UK experts have reported a sharp increase in "Domestic child abuse" during the peak duration of coronavirus. They also underlined that many victims of domestic child abuse belonged to lower class families. It may be due to the fact that psychological state, alcohol abuse and socio-economic state are interrelated to each other [25].

Some of the problems need utmost attention of parents and caregivers. Firstly, we know that in most of the cases, the offenders of child sexual abuse are known people and even sometimes family relations. Now, when it is pandemic and people are locked in their homes due to lock down, this may put the children at higher risk of getting sexually abused from their relatives. Moreover children are usually sent to relatives and family friends particularly in Pakistan if parents are suffering from infections or disease which is another high alert factor.

According to UNDCO, when unexpected pandemic occurs, it usually increases the societal issues and financial burden. In addition this, people generally face mobility restrictions as well. These stresses may lead to a dramatic rise in domestic violence particularly domestic abuse against women. A report published by UN (2020), Women has verified that masses of them are restricted to stay with their abusers due to lock down which has also limited their chance to file a report and ask for help. Even in China where the outbreak of coronavirus occurred, reported that domestic abuse cases increased threefold during the peak period of covid-19 cases. This not only create stressful situation for women but for children as well. Seeing your mother or female family members in a miserable condition may leads to many long terms effects on a child's mental health. With the advancement in research, it has been proved that witnessing domestic violence as a child may create adjustment and behavioral problems for them [26]. Even children may suffer from post-traumatic stress in response to witnessing violent acts [27]. In addition to this, many studies have revealed that the children who witness domestic abuse towards their mothers or caregivers may develop a number of problems such as increased aggression, isolation, low frustration tolerance, eating disorders, drug abuse, low academic performance, depression, difficulties in language development etc. [28].

Child abuse, neglect and aggressiveness is one of the arising problematic behaviors during the pandemic have parental stress as a major predictors of these behaviors [29-31]. Child protection agencies, social workers and NGOs face difficulties reaching out to the children during the pandemic, which makes them an easy victim of abuse and violence. During lockdown, the school teachers and others are also not able to witness the marks of abuse on them and report to higher authorities [23].

One of the most found maintaining factor of violence against children and women in families is economic wreckage due to Covid-19 globally. It generates the wave of widespread uncertainty, panic and stress leading to adverse effect on the mental and physical health of the families causing increased chronic diseases, substance use, depression, panic attacks, physical abuse and violence, unsafe sexual behaviors and having high chance of PTSD [16,29,32].

DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S DURING EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

Children during the phase of development need a safer environment in which they can grow to their full potential in terms of physical, mental, academic and social aspects. A safe environment ensures the healthy development and effective learning of the children [33]. Whenever any crisis situation or pandemics occurs, the development and growth of children get affected from several different variables such as having fear of the unknown

and being confined, anxiety, panic, stress and aggression outburst's etc. Due to lock down in almost every country children are forced to stay at homes at all times which make them vulnerable towards violence, neglect and abuse in their own homes especially in low income countries. In low income countries such as Pakistan, pandemic and emergency situations cause a lot of problem nationwide but having strict lockdown and quarantine has disrupted the normal development of a healthy child and children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have to face many challenges such as child labor, withdrawal of education, early child marriage, unemployment, burden of feeding a whole family etc. According to UNICEF, 99% of the children face some form of "pandemic related movement restrictions" globally. Out of these 99%, 60% are those children who belong to the countries where full or partial lockdowns are often imposed [3,4].

RECOMMENDATIONS

To efficiently deal with crisis situation, states and public need to understand that covid-19's effects are different for men, women, old age and children. Through this understanding and critical thinking, more effective and solution oriented policies can be composed.

CONCLUSIONS

Suggestions for Government

- Government need to incorporate gender experts as well as child therapist while developing interventions.
- Increase the financial and technical capacity of women and children shelters.
- Help lines should be active all the time particularly during unexpected and pandemic situations.
- Interdepartmental coordination should be strengthening among women department, human rights department, Child rights based organizations etc.
- Trainings should be given to teachers and educational staff in order to provide help to children.
- There should be a proper National plan of Action for violence and abuse, especially during pandemics and in emergency situations.
- Government must invest in Early Childhood Development interventions to better support the future generations
- Child friendly spaces should be created for children in order to promote their physical as well as mental health.
- Programs related to good parenting should be aired on television particularly regarding "dealing with children during emergency situations".
- Initiate counseling and psychosocial support programs in schools and other educational institutes for children as well as teachers.
- Police should be trained to efficiently deal with domestic violence and abuse cases.
- Adequate budget should be allocated for Child Protection centers.

Suggestions for Community

- Communities should be encouraged to work together for vulnerable groups in society such as orphans, disable children, orphans and homeless children.
- Parents should train their children how to protect themselves in difficult and risky situations.
- Communities must promote healthy coping strategies to prevent covid-19.
- Moreover People can also help abused children by giving them social support.
- Religious leaders can play a significant role in ending stigmatization attached with victims of child abuse and domestic violence.
- Parents should also educate their children regarding good touch, bad and secret touch. In addition to this, education related to internet safety and cyber bullying should be given to children as they are spending a lot

of their time on screens during lock down.

- Provide resources to families on meaningful, age-appropriate ways to spend time with and talk to children during the pandemic.
- Spend quality time with children. Even short periods of time playing, reading, going outdoors, and talking can bolster children's sense of safety and security during uncertain or scary times.

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