

# COVID-19 AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD PROTECTION

The **Child  
Witness** Institute

# OBJECTIVES

- **To examine the impact of COVID-19 on society**
- **To assess the implications of COVID-19 for children**
- **To examine briefly the context of violence against children**
- **To investigate the impact of the following on children:**
  - **lockdown**
  - **school closure**
  - **online access**

# INTRODUCTION

- Rampant spread of COVID-19 across the world since end of 2019
- No continent has escaped the virus and almost no country
- Globally the recorded average mortality rate of COVID-19 has been estimated by the WHO to be around 3,4%
- Pointless to list numbers as infections and deaths increase daily

Declared a pandemic by  
WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION  
on March 11<sup>th</sup> 2020



# COVID-19 GLOBAL EMERGENCY

Impact on the entire world population

Severe economic implications for humanity

# INTRODUCTION

- Governments responded swiftly
- Vast majority of countries introduced safety measures
- Lockdowns implemented varied from lenient to more draconian
- People have been forced to remain at home and only allowed to leave for emergency reasons
- More than half of the world's population have been confined to their homes
- School and business closures, movement restrictions and isolation measures will have a profound impact on everyone, and even more so on those who are already vulnerable

# MEASURES INTRODUCED

- quarantine, self-isolation and lockdowns
- closure of international and internal travel
- bans on social gatherings, closure of bars and restaurants
- closing of schools
- suspension of public or religious gatherings
- reduction in transport
- very reduced retail services

# IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SOCIETY

Severe implications for humanity

Economic, social, health,  
environmental and technological  
impact

# IMPACT OF COVID-19

## ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SOCIETY

Global poverty will increase dramatically

49 million into extreme poverty and 100 million into poverty (World Bank)

Lockdown means no economic activities – no income

Devastating for informal sector and self-employed

Even employed will suffer salary cuts or retrenchments as businesses collapse

## ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SOCIETY

Governments have redirected funding

Acquisition of testing equipment,  
improving hospital facilities

Enforcing lockdown and retail  
restrictions

Introduction of social grants and food  
assistance

Finance redirected so less funding for  
social support and safeguarding

# SOCIAL IMPACT

- Lockdowns have restricted movements
- Schools closed
- Socialising not allowed
- Social (physical) distancing
- No religious gatherings
- No sport
- Tobacco and alcohol bans

# HEALTH IMPACT

- Illness and death
- Sanitising and hand washing
- Masks
- Physical distancing

## TECHNOLOGICAL IMPACT

- Increased usage
- Connect with family and friends
- Socialising not allowed
- Meetings held online
- Social events broadcast online
- Online schools
- Communication moved online

# IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 FOR CHILDREN

# IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 FOR CHILDREN

- The world has changed overnight
- This change will have serious implications for many children

## CALL FOR ACTION BY LEADERS

“A third of the global population is on COVID-19 lockdown, and school closures have impacted more than 1.5 billion children. Movement restrictions, loss of income, isolation, overcrowding and high levels of stress and anxiety are increasing the likelihood that children experience and observe physical, psychological and sexual abuse at home – particularly those children already living in violent or dysfunctional family situations. And while online communities have become central to maintain many children’s learning, support and play, it is also increasing their exposure to cyberbullying, risky online behaviour and sexual exploitation. The situation is aggravated by children’s lack of access to school friends, teachers, social workers and the safe space and services that schools provide. The most vulnerable children – including refugees, migrants, and children who are internally displaced, deprived of liberty, living without parental care, living on the street and in urban slums, with disabilities, and living in conflict-affected areas – are a particular concern. For many, growing economic vulnerability will increase the threat of child labour, child marriage and child trafficking.”

## INCREASED PROTECTION RISKS

- Parent dying, being ill, quarantined  
risk for violence, exploitation,  
neglect →
- Economic crisis → increased risk for  
violence, exploitation and neglect
- Measures implemented → increased  
isolation → greater risk of abuse

**WHY  
COVID-19 IS  
PARTICULAR  
LY  
ALARMING  
FOR  
CHILDREN**

- Lockdown places children at greater risk
- Exacerbated by parents' emotional and financial stress, responsibilities
- Children can't access support
- Homes are "potential pressure cookers of GBV"
- Greater access to online
- Poverty causes children to leave school and work

A recent analysis by UNFPA estimates that the closure of programmes due to COVID-19 may result in as many as 2 million additional cases of female genital mutilation and 13 million additional cases of child marriages

# INCREASED GBV

- Children either victims or witnesses
- Reports of GBV increased in many countries
- France: 30% increase in GBV reports
- Argentina: 25% increase
- Increased calls to helplines reported in USA, Canada, Australia and UK
- Violence described by UN Women as “shadow epidemic”

## HOW WILL COVID-19 IMPACT PARENTS

Death

Loss of employment or business

Increased debt

Increased stress

Confinement to home

Social isolation

No sport or entertainment

No alcohol or tobacco

## HOW WILL COVID-19 IMPACT CHILDREN

Hunger

Fear and trauma

Emotional abuse

Physical abuse

Sexual abuse

Neglect

Exploitation and child labour

Social isolation

# VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

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- 1 billion children experience some form of violence every year
- One child dies from violence every 5 minutes
- 90% abused by someone they know or trust
- 60% abused within own family

# STATISTICS FOR SUB- SAHARAN AFRICA

- $\frac{2}{3}$  children experience physical violence
- $\frac{1}{4}$  children experience emotional violence
- $\frac{1}{3}$  girls experience sexual violence
- Violence repeated
- Physical violence at hands of teachers and parents
- $\frac{1}{2}$  children exposed to domestic violence

# CHILDREN ABUSED IN AFRICA IN THE PAST YEAR

**$\frac{1}{2}$  will have suffered physical violence**

**$\frac{1}{10}$  will have suffered sexual violence**

**$\frac{1}{5}$  will have suffered emotional abuse**

**Most physical violence perpetrated by parents, families and teachers**

**Most sexual violence takes place at the home of the child or the perpetrator**

If the above is the norm for violence experienced by children, how will this be impacted by COVID-19?

# LOCKDOWN AT HOME

**Most dangerous place for children**

**Home greatest risk for safety and security**

**Immediate family most common perpetrators**

**Home not necessarily the safest place**

**91% of schools closed and children at home**

# LOCKDOWN AT HOME

**Danger exacerbated by increased stress, debt, confinement of parents**

**Risk increased by fact that children bored, frustrated and isolated**

**Rate of physical abuse will increase**

**Most sexual abuse takes place at home**

**Risk factors for sexual abuse increased by home isolation thus projected increase in rate of sexual abuse**

# LOCKDOWN AT HOME

Even traumatic for children from safe, well-adjusted families

Fears of family dying

Social distancing and separation from extended family

Disrupted routines and isolation

Stress about loss of employment and poverty

Children's sense of safety, security and normalcy challenged

# CLOSURE OF SCHOOLS

- 1,5 billion children affected by school closure
- 91% of the world children
- Although there is violence at schools, schools do offer a protective and nurturing place for many children
- Especially children who are most vulnerable and rely on school for food and mental and physical health
- Place for addressing violence and providing information
- Identification of abuse

# CLOSURE OF SCHOOLS

- Impact on social aspects of development
- Deprived of social interaction with peers and teachers
- Essential for well-being, protection and development of socio-emotional skills
- Abrupt withdrawal from friends, teachers and normal environments will have an impact

# ONLINE EXPLOITATION

**Greater use of Internet for school and social activities**

**Greater unsupervised access increases risk of exploitation**

# **COVID-19 EXACERBATES DRIVERS OF ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE**

**Isolation gives offenders greater opportunity to act on impulses**

**Economic hardship – increased live streaming**

**Children spend more time online**

**Exchange of self-generated material**

**Restrictions disrupting reporting services**

# **HIGHLY PROBABLE THAT ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE CASES WILL INCREASE**

**Web IQ (cyber security) recorded 200% increase in posts on known child sex abuse forums**

**India Child Protection Fund registered increase in online searches for child sexual abuse images**

**National Center for Missing and Exploited Children registered 106% increase in reports (983 734 reports in March 2019 and 2 027 520 in March 2020)**

**Hotlines and portals registering increase in reporting**

# KEY RISK FACTORS FOR CHILDREN ONLINE

## Increased emotional vulnerability

- **Abusers target vulnerable children online**
- **Childline UK had 900 sessions with children about COVID**
- **In interviews with children UK Children's Commissioner found 88% children stressed**
- **Worried about being isolated from family, fears for family and themselves**
- **Also more likely to share self-generated images due to isolation**

## Lack of caregiver supervision

- **Greater access to Internet**
- **Parents at work or working from home**

# KEY RISK FACTORS FOR CHILDREN ONLINE

## Offender risk factors

- Offenders more likely to act out when major life change
- COVID-19 could be trigger i.e. stress, job loss
- Lucy Faithfull Foundation have section on website for assisting those who have concerns about their sexual behaviour towards children – new users increased from 26% to 64% during lockdown
- Offenders have more time
- Boredom

# RESPONDING TO ONLINE ABUSE

- Isolation measures made it more difficult to process reports and respond
- Many tech companies and law enforcement required to work remotely – don't have tools to take down abusive material quickly and effectively
- Staff on helplines and hotlines have been reduced
- Law enforcement diverted from cyber crimes to enforcing lockdown measures

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

- Identifying abused children is difficult at the best of times
- Identifying abused children during lockdown will be much more challenging
- Adults who would normally notice abuse (extended family, teachers, social workers) don't have access

**As the crisis abates and lockdown restrictions are lifted, it is the education systems that will serve as the first port of call for identification of post-COVID-19 trauma and abuse amongst children and they will, therefore, be forced into the implementation of a response**

# OUTCOMES

- **At the end of this session, participants will:**
  - **recognise the impact of COVID-19 on society**
  - **understand the implications of COVID-19 for children**
  - **appreciate the context of violence against children**
  - **have knowledge of the impact of the following on children:**
    - **lockdown**
    - **school closure**
    - **online access**