



## (Critical Review) The State of Children during Pandemic: An Alarming Situation for Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

*Coronavirus and pandemics have led to drastic and unexpected changes in the whole world. It has affected people's lives and their ways of living drastically. However, lockdowns and mobility restrictions were imposed to save lives and put underprivileged populations' lives at other risks, such as violence and abuse. This paper attempts to describe the situation of children during this epidemic of covid-19. Evidence and research proved that emergencies are significantly related to increased violence levels, especially against children. Several problems from which children suffered during pandemic and lockdown have been discussed, such as excessive screen use, domestic child abuse, witnessing domestic violence, and more. Furthermore, this paper also suggests essential recommendations for the government and public as they must cooperate with the government in such high alert times.*

### INTRODUCTION

Emergencies such as pandemics and natural disasters in any country or continent can lead to several fatal problems for the individuals who survived, such as property and possessions destruction, deaths of loved ones, poverty and hunger, unemployment, financial and economic crises, and more. 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, and more. Usually, in pandemics and crises, every society's marginalized segments get affected the most in low-income countries such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and more. These marginalized segments are mainly Women, the 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 around the world. These strict restrictions and guidelines for children and adolescents have impacted their mental health by confining them into their domestic abuse houses, further putting them at greater risk.

The recent spread of the deadly virus called Coronavirus or Covid-19 has changed every individual's course of life worldwide. Covid-19 is a novel virus that spreads from Wuhan, China, worldwide, causing the loss of lives in the more significant number ever seen after World War. Due to the coronavirus, 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 adopting different measures and precautions to ensure its citizens' safety. Even government and private offices, hotels, malls, markets, universities, colleges, and schools are closed globally to control the current situation. In contrast, this coronavirus pandemic has significantly affected the children by disturbing their normal development and routine lives, which will eventually affect their mental health.

### **VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND ITS EFFECTS**

WHO has defines child abuse as physical, emotional, sexual, neglect, or exploitation that may cause harm or hurt the child's health and survival. Moreover, these acts are intended in nature ([World Health Organization, 1999](#)). Evidence and research proved that emergencies are significantly related to increased violence levels, 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 violence against children into account as it can damage several future generations. 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, low self-esteem, and more.

Worldwide, children up to 18 years of age are considered the most vulnerable because they become victims of abuse and neglect they face from their own families or the people they know or trust. It can be seen in children, especially those with special needs, disabilities, having different sexual orientations, minorities, and who have to play adult roles. The situation is worst for the children living on the streets, which are underprivileged and have no rights, place to stay, labor, and slavery ([Unicef, 2020](#)). In its latest report, [World Health Organization \(2020\)](#) revealed an increase in the violence and abuse against adolescent girls and women due to lockdown, which further increases tension regarding financial, health, and security concerns at homes. ([Peterman et al., 2020](#)) reported that the situation created due to the pandemic globally causes fear of uncertainty and anxiety among individuals, which eventually worsens 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 socio-economic families, and living with a large number of people put them at higher risk ([Marques et al., 2020](#)).

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 ([Gilbert et al., 2009](#); [Mills, 2004](#); [Brown et al., 1999](#)). Apart from this, many researchers have found a significant relationship between child abuse and mental health problems, including anxiety disorders, depression and drug abuse in adolescence, and eating disorders ([Brown et al., 1999](#); [Gilbert et al., 2009](#)). Child abuse and child neglect can also cultivate aggression in adolescents ([Gilbert et al., 2009](#)). Another major problem faced by children suffering from abuse and neglect is "homelessness" ([Edidin et al., 2012](#)).

### **COVID-19 AND STATE OF THE CHILDREN**

Coronavirus and lockdown have confined people in their homes. Ultimately the current pandemic has forced us to alter our lifestyle drastically. Children were not used to online schooling, mainly Pakistani students, which consequently hampered their learning. However, the effects of covid-19 are not just restricted to the academic domain. Almost every aspect of life has been affected due to lockdown. Another issue to deal with is the increased use of digital technology and screen time as lockdown forces everyone to stay at home, which eventually end up children using technology more and more. While using the internet, some children tend to experience cyberbullying, online gambling, inappropriate material, suggestive advertisements, and things that promote unhealthy food ([UNICEF, 2020](#)).

[Brazendale et al. \(2017\)](#) reported that children during breaks, weekends, and vacations are less physically active. A study conducted in China examined the effect of covid-19 on children's "physical activity" as it is closely related to bodily and mental well-being. The findings revealed a considerable decrease in children's physical activity, while a dramatic increase was found in time spent on television/mobile phones ([Xiang et al., 2020](#)). Apart from this, children with disabilities face additional

problems compared to normal children, such as. The study conducted by [Cacioppo et al., \(2020\)](#) found that lack of interaction due to lockdown has affected not just children with disabilities' self-esteem. However, it may cause them to restrict their communication ability. Even the survey with parents revealed that they were stressed because of disruption in their physically disabled rehabilitation services. Moreover, helplessness and mental load were 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 ([Sprang et al., 2013](#)). A research study was conducted in China in 2020, showing that children aged 3-18 show signs of common psychological, social, and behavioral problems such as crying spells, distraction, prickliness, fear of uncertainty, and many questions about the virus. Also, being separated from the immediate family and companions during the quarantine worsens their mental health ([Brooks et al., 2020](#); [Jiao et al., 2020](#)). It makes them vulnerable to Post-traumatic stress disorder, psychiatric illness, anxiety and panic attacks, and even suicide attempts ([Liu et al., 2020](#)).

[Orgilés et al. \(2020\)](#) conducted research examining quarantine's emotional impact 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 the Covid-19 epidemic, 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 children's mental health, leading to violence and maltreatment. These issues need to be addressed beforehand to avoid negative societal, mental, and other health issues among children ([Danese et al., 2020](#); [Golberstein et al., 2020](#)).

During the epidemic, children's behavioral and emotional changes can be seen because of drastic changes in daily life routines. Children show emotional distress by showing excessive crying spells, sadness, anger outbursts and anxiety, and more. Emotional support from family members and extended families can help the children, adolescents, and adults go through hard times and adjust, which helps them return to their previous functioning level. During the lockdown, the children are kept in controlled environments and places that do not 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 the existing environment and conditions are very much different from the previous family status, they provide to their children.

Children and individuals need to cope with the current significant changing lifestyles such as home confinement, self-isolation, and physical distancing, making it challenging to meet the basic physical and emotional needs. There has been an increasing trend in unemployment, poverty, mental health, substance use, neglect and maltreatment, partner violence, and more due to the current situation. Children and the elderly face the difficulty of receiving critical and community support during the pandemic due to travel 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 systems 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 ([Samhsa, 2020](#); [Jacobson, 2020](#)).

Another primary concern is Domestic Violence towards children. Some UK experts have reported a sharp increase in "Domestic child abuse" during the coronavirus's peak duration. They also underlined that many victims of domestic child abuse belonged to lower class families. It may be because the psychological state, alcohol abuse, and socio-economic state are interrelated to each other ([BMJ \(2020\)](#)). Some of the problems need the utmost attention of parents and caregivers. Firstly, we know that in most cases, the offenders of child sexual abuse are known people and sometimes family relations. When it is a pandemic and people are locked in their homes due to lockdown, this may put the children at higher risk of getting sexually abused by their relatives. Moreover, children are usually sent to relatives and

family friends, particularly in Pakistan, if parents suffer from infections or disease, which is another high alert factor.

According to UNESCO, when an unexpected pandemic occurs, it usually increases the societal issues and financial burden. Also, people generally face mobility restrictions as well. These stresses may lead to a dramatic rise in domestic violence, particularly domestic abuse against women. [UNICEF's \(2020\)](#) report has verified that masses of them restricted to stay with abusers due to lockdown, which 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. It not only creates a stressful situation for women but children as well. Seeing mother or female family members in a miserable condition may lead to many long-term 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 ([Kilpatrick et al., 1997](#)). Even children may suffer from post-traumatic stress response to witnessing violent acts ([Delima et al., 2011](#)). In addition to this, many studies have revealed that the children who witness domestic abuse towards their mothers or caregivers may develop several problems such as increased aggression, isolation, low frustration tolerance, eating disorders, drug abuse, low academic performance, depression, difficulties in language development, and more. ([McGee, 2000](#); [Holt, 2015](#)).

Child abuse, neglect, and aggressiveness are among the arising problematic behaviors during the pandemic, have parental stress is a significant predictor of these behaviors ([CDC, 2020](#); [Buheji et al., 2020](#)). Child protection agencies, social workers, and NGOs face difficulties reaching out to the children during the pandemic, making them easy victims of abuse and violence. During the lockdown, the school teachers and others cannot witness the marks of abuse and report to higher authorities ([Samhsa, 2020](#)). One of the most found maintaining factors of violence against children and women in families is economic wreckage due to Covid-19 globally. It generates a wave of widespread uncertainty, panic, and stress leading to an 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 a high chance of PTSD ([CDC, 2020](#); [Sprang et al., 2013](#); [Taha et al., 2014](#)).  
Development of Children's during Emergency Situations

During the development phase, children need a safer environment to grow to their full potential in physical, mental, academic, and social aspects. A safe environment ensures the healthy development and effective learning of the children ([Clapper, 2010](#)). Whenever any crisis or pandemics occurs, children's development and growth get affected by several different variables such as fear of the unknown and being confined, anxiety, panic, stress and aggression outbursts, and more. Due to lock down in almost every country, children are forced to stay at home, making them vulnerable to violence, neglect, and abuse in their own homes, especially in low-income countries. In low-income countries such as Pakistan, pandemics and emergencies cause many problems nationwide but having strict lockdown and quarantine has disrupted the normal development of a healthy child and children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Pakistan has to face many challenges such as child labor, withdrawal of education, early child marriage, unemployment, the burden of feeding a whole family, and more. According to UNICEF, 99% of the children face "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 ([UNICEF, 2020](#)).

### **CHILDREN'S EDUCATION DURING THE PANDEMIC**

Due to the spread of a novel virus called Covid-19, educational and recreational institutes are closed worldwide for an indefinite period. Due to educational institutes' closure, online and digital education is spreading worldwide to save children from educational loss. Countries from the developed world have easy access to the digital world and technologies that can help the teachers and students adapt to the online education system. However, third world countries such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka face many problems in the education masses as online education was not typical before the Covid-19 in Pakistan. In developing countries, like Pakistan, many people and families do not have modern digital technologies like android mobile phones, laptops, and internet access to provide online education ([Ichou, 2014](#)).



Many of them reported an entirely new experience for them as shifting from traditional to e-learning has its challenges as it is not joint in Pakistan to move from in-person delivery to the lecture's digital delivery. One of the most challenging factors is having no formal training to conduct classes and learn through digital technology and keep engaging them equally. They face difficulties in online assessment, surveys, quizzes, and mini assignments, especially those who require human interaction, such as in medical, psychology, and more ([Farooq et al., 2020](#)).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To efficiently deal with the crisis, states and the public need to understand that covid-19's effects are different for men, women, old age, and children. More effective and solution-oriented policies can be composed ([World Health Organization, 2020](#)).

### ***Suggestions for Government***

1. The government needs to incorporate gender experts as well as child therapists while developing interventions.
2. Increase the financial and technical capacity of women and children shelters.
3. Helplines should be active all the time, particularly during unexpected and pandemic situations.
4. Interdepartmental coordination should be strengthening among the women's department, the human rights department, Child rights-based organizations, and more.
5. Training should be given to teachers and educational staff in order to provide help to children.
6. There should be a proper National plan of Action for violence and abuse, especially during pandemics and emergencies.
7. The government must invest in Early Childhood Development interventions to better support future generations
8. Child-friendly spaces should be created for children in order to promote their physical as well as mental health.
9. Good parenting programs should be aired on television, particularly regarding "dealing with children during emergencies."
10. Initiate counseling and psychosocial support programs in schools and other educational institutes for children as well as teachers.
11. Police should be trained to efficiently deal with domestic violence and abuse cases (UNICEF, 2020).
12. An adequate budget should be allocated for Child Protection centers.

### ***Suggestions for Community***

1. Communities should be encouraged to work together for vulnerable groups in society, such as orphans, disable children, orphans, and homeless children.
2. Parents should train their children how to protect themselves in difficult and risky situations.
3. Communities must promote healthy coping strategies to prevent covid-19.
4. Moreover, People can also help abused children by giving them social support.
5. Religious leaders can significantly end stigmatization attached to victims of child abuse and domestic violence.
6. Parents should also educate their children regarding the right touch, sinister, and secret touch. In addition to education-related to internet safety, cyberbullying should be given to children as they spend a lot of their time on screens during the lockdown.
7. Provide resources to families on meaningful, age-appropriate ways to spend time with and talk to children during the pandemic.
8. Spend quality time with children. Even short periods of playing, reading, going outdoors, and talking can bolster children's sense of safety and security during uncertain or scary times.

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