# COVID-19 and violence against children

by Mercy Chipo Jumo, Karen Flanagan and Sophie Shugg

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The COVID-19 pandemic poses a serious global threat to children's safety (World Vision)

Lockdowns across the world have pushed people into the privacy of their homes, unintentionally closing the shutters on violence against children. Children and young people are facing unprecedented threats to their childhoods and futures as a result of COVID-19. For many children, home is not a safe place – because it never was, or because it has become unsafe from the stresses resulting from COVID-19. Children living in crowded conditions in slums or refugee camps face increased tensions. The media reports an increase in domestic violence during lockdown. This is a cause for concern given the intrinsic interlinkages between violence against women and violence against children.

The coronavirus pandemic poses a serious global threat to children's safety, accentuating existing vulnerabilities and creating new ones as quarantine measures isolate families, and economic and social pressures take a toll. Children, especially vulnerable, face increased risks of psychological distress, violence, neglect, and social exclusion during the lockdowns and in the new normal of social distancing.

According to the World Health Organisation up to 1 billion children experience violence every year with long-lasting and costly emotional, social and economic consequences. An additional 85 million children are in immediate danger of physical, sexual and emotional violence due to COVID-19. As the economic impact of COVID-19 is felt, the UN predicts there could be an extra 13 million child marriages by 2030. Europol reports an increase in people trying to access child pornography since the lockdown and India has seen a 95% rise in traffic searching for child sexual abuse content. ECPAT reported Brazilian authorities investigating the attempt to establish a 'delivery' or 'drive thru' service for sexual exploitation of children.

Child protection organisations report growing demand for their services. Kids Helpline (Australia) fielded "26,500 calls – about one a minute – in the first three weeks of April". Similarly, a national impact assessment conducted in Bangladesh in April noted a:

- 42% increase in beatings by parents or guardians;
- 40% increase in calls to the child helpline; and
- 50% of interviewees reporting the safety and security of girls as an issue in the lockdown.

Girls and boys experience violence differently, facing different risks to different forms of violence. Unequal gender power relations and discrimination drive high levels of violence against girls. Girls are "suffering multiple layers of burden starting from difficulty studying at home, more house chores, and are becoming more vulnerable to gender and domestic violence." Some parents have resorted to negative coping mechanisms such as marrying off girl children as a result of the economic fallout caused by COVID-19. Authorities in Ethiopia stopped 540 child marriages in Ethiopia in the first two months of the lockdowns.

Restricted movement during lockdown makes it difficult for survivors to report abuse and seek help and for service providers to respond efficiently. Online services are not always available and accessible to all children and families that need it most.

Violence against children has always been seriously underfunded. For example, the total cost of violence against children in the Asia-Pacific region amounts to US$160 billion or 2% of regional GDP. Although the region receives a significant proportion of Australian aid only 2.5% is committed to ending violence against children in the Pacific and Timor-Leste. The global economic and financial erosion caused by COVID-19 does not augur well for the cause as austerity measures kick in. However, it is more critical than ever to advocate for adequate resourcing for the aspirations of SDG 16.2 so that vulnerable children experiencing violence are not left behind. Although the COVID-19 discussion, including the pandemic's effect on children, is predominantly adult-focused and led there are new encouraging narratives emerging from children and young people using social media to lead awareness and protection messages in their communities.

We argue that all COVID-19 response plans must include a strong age, gender, disability and inclusion analysis and ensure that girls and boys are consulted to help to inform policy so that their unique needs are considered. In relation to the Pacific, the call is for major donors to establish a policy platform for responding to ending violence against children and for the Australian government to increase funding by at least 1.5% of regional ODA. The funding could be split into $55 million over three years to support child protection programmes during and after Partnerships for recovery: Australia's COVID-19 development response. It is vital to end violence against children to prevent harm, rather than to repair the adults they become after being victims of physical and psychological abuse.

*This post is part of the #COVID-19 and international development series.*

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Link: https://devpolicy.org/covid-19-and-violence-against-children-20200902-2/