



The burden of COVID-19 pandemic on child labour in Afghanistan

Abubakr Yosufi¹, Kirandeesh Kaur²

¹Dentistry faculty, Kabul University of Medical Science, Kabul, Afghanistan.

²Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, United States.

Keywords: *Pandemic, Child labour, Conflicts, Education, Poverty.*

Introduction

As the result of prolong extreme poverty, Afghanistan is among the worst countries for the child labour in the world (1). It's been nearly two decades that child labour was substantially declining in south Asia (2). Regardless of the process slowdown since 2016, Asia, the Pacific and Latin America have witnessed steady progress since 2008 (2).

However in Afghanistan the process to eliminate the child labour in all forms has been slower. Albeit having gaps and instability, significant strides made and continued to promote children's right and implement the laws and strategies for children protection, especially those at risk (6).

After the promulgation of constitution of the country, laws improved for the welfare of the children in advance. Also the government ratified all prominent international conventions concerning child labour such as ILO Conventions on minimum age and worst forms of child labour, UN CR Conventions, Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons and has been committed for its implementation (7).

But with the emergence of Covid-19 On February 2020 in Afghanistan, the overall

circumstances changed. The child labour cases are up scaling again colossally and all the efforts are at risk (1).

The health and education implications of child labour

In a country like Afghanistan where the authorities are already overwhelmed with the internal conflicts, sinking economy and covid-19 pandemic (10), we can assume how worrisome the situation of child labour could be. They are usually exposed to hazardous works that they have no capacity to bear (7).

They do a variety of jobs, ranging from light works to extremely hazardous works. Such as working in farms, carpet-weaving companies, child retailing, domestic works, malpractices like Bacha Bazi and so on (9). In almost all cases they are forced to at least one form of hazardous factors such as exposing to chemicals and extreme heat, lifting heavy loads with awkward positions of body, breathing toxic chemicals and ores, hours of tireless work and injuries (2).

In result these works will directly affect their physical health. They may develop problems such as heart diseases, respiratory diseases, body developmental diseases, neuralgias, malnutrition and

even injuries that may result in disabilities and death as well (3).

Furthermore child labour also affects the mental health of the children. Studies demonstrated a lower psychosocial performance and coping efficacy in child labour (3). Some children are engaged in worst forms of child labour such as Bacha Bazi in which children are sexually abused. This can also have severe impacts on children's mental health and is responsible for psychiatric diseases like depression, PTSD and substance abuse (9).

Additionally child labour can highly interfere with child's education. According to a survey only 35% of child workers go to school in Afghanistan. In many cases, they fail to attend the school. Given the long hours of work, pressure and the stress caused by the labour, low quality education, leave children no other choice but to stop going to school. Even those who attend school cannot achieve good grades and surpass upper grades and eventually dropped out of the school (7).

Factors inducing child labour

Poverty is the driving factor for the child labour (5). Families cope their children as a source of income when the primary wage gatherer cannot earn enough (8). Some children have indebted fathers, some addicted and some lost their caregivers in ongoing internal conflicts. Some families also expect their children to earn money after a certain age (7). Additionally lack of access to education and informalities are also prominent factors responsible for the increase in child labour (2). Nevertheless the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic colossaly escalated the situation to a next level. It put too much pressure to the Afghan families and made them vulnerable like never before (1). As the result of pandemic schools closed (1), food insecurity raised (1), huge number of returnees return back to Afghanistan (8), 48% of the families lost their jobs (1), 50% of the families couldn't gather enough food, 92% of people indebted (8) and 50% of the families forced to take heart breaking decision to send their children to work at any cost (1). Some children entered the work force

for the first time, under inappropriate and worsening condition caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (1).

The tragedy is that child labour itself in long term, perpetuates its vicious cycle to last generations if not stopped, by affecting the intellectual, physical and socio-economic development of children and causing inability to pursue their education. According to Human Rights Watch, Even after the situation eased, child labour are more likely to continue to work. Subsequently they may not get decent jobs, increase their confrontation with the law and increase the poverty which is the root factor responsible for the child labour (4).

Conclusion

The ever-growing internal conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic have been a tipping factor for further escalation of child labour condition and rising cases in Afghanistan. According to a report by World Vision Afghanistan, the pandemic pushed 50 percent of families to send their children to work. From this we can assume how severe the circumstances become for children. It directly puts year's achievements at risk. So in broader aspect the government of Afghanistan and global organization should abruptly address the child labour by larger investments, introduction of new rules and measures and their implementation to decrease the burden from the youngsters and save the achievements gained throughout decades. And we as individuals should inform the parents about the basic rights of their children, importance of their education and about implications child labour could result.

References

1. *50% of families in Afghanistan forced to send their children to work during COVID-19 pandemic* [Internet]. Wvi.org. 2020 [cited 1 July 2021]. Available from: <https://www.wvi.org/newsroom/afghanistan/50-families-afghanistan-forced-send-their-children-work-during-covid-19>
2. *Child Labour: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward* [Internet]. Ilo.org. 2021 [cited 1 July 2021]. Available from:

https://www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS_797515/lang--en/index.htm

3. Ibrahim A, Abdalla SM, Jafer M, Abdelgadir J, De Vries N. Child labor and health: a systematic literature review of the impacts of child labor on child's health in low-and middle-income countries. *Journal of Public Health*. 2019 Mar 1;41(1):18-26.
4. Idris I. Impact of COVID-19 on child labour in South Asia.
5. Training manual on child labour in Afghanistan [Internet]. Ilo.org. 2019 [cited 2 July 2021]. Available from: https://www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS_667934/lang--en/index.htm
6. Afghanistan - National child labour strategy and action plan 2018-2030 [Internet]. Ilo.org. 2019 [cited 2 July 2021]. Available from: https://www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS_666015/lang--en/index.htm
7. Refworld | An Overview on Situation of Child Labour in Afghanistan Research Report [Internet]. Refworld. 2006 [cited 3 July 2021]. Available from: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/471f4a560.html>
8. BREAKING POINT: COVID-19 and the Child Protection Crisis in Afghanistan [Internet]. Wvi.org. 2020 [cited 2 July 2021]. Available from: <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/Breaking%20Point-%20COVID-19%20and%20the%20Child%20Protection%20Crisis%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf>
9. Murat YÜ, Karabekiroğlu K, Yildirim Z, Şahin S, Sapmaz D, Babadaği Z, Turla A, Aydın B. The psychiatric consequences of child and adolescent sexual abuse. *Nöro Psikiyatri Arşivi*. 2015 Dec;52(4):393.
10. Lucero-Prisno DE, Essar MY, Ahmadi A, Lin X, Adebisi YA. Conflict and COVID-19: a double burden for Afghanistan's healthcare system. *Conflict and health*. 2020 Dec;14(1):1-3.