

CHILD PROTECTION RISKS DURING COVID-19

Children throughout the world face heightened risks to their safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. For 465,000 Rohingya children living in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, the risks are even higher.

Prior to the pandemic, serious child protection risks were present in the Rohingya refugee camps, including violence, child labour, child marriage, exploitation and abuse.

With services scaled back and a reduced humanitarian footprint to prevent the spread of COVID-19, children are experiencing unintended and adverse effects with protection risks now heightened.

Many support structures for children are now closed including Child Friendly Spaces and Multi-purpose Child and Adolescent Centres, making it harder for children to report children protection issues and receive the necessary support and care.

The Child Protection Sub Sector (CPSS) receives weekly updates from all 34 refugee camps from Child Protection Focal Points, indicating an increase in child protection risks.

IMPACT OF COVID-19



Increased Violence Against Children

There are increased reports of violence against children in the refugee camps, with children witnessing or experiencing violence in the home due to heightened stress, reduced resources and lack of support services. This can have enormous negative impacts on children's mental health and well-being. Children particularly girls, face greater risk of sexual and gender-based violence, including rape and domestic abuse due to limited oversight and reduced avenues to report during COVID-19.



Increased Dangers and Injuries

Parents and caregivers face increased challenges to supervise children, with education and child protection facilities now closed, and additional pressure to look after whole families, including the elderly and sick. Consequently, there are increased numbers of children who have strayed from home and experienced harmful accidents and injuries resulting from road accidents, drownings and accidents at construction sites.

Increased Child Marriage

Loss of household income, limited education opportunities and reduced protection mechanisms increase the risk of child marriage during COVID-19. Some community members are taking advantage of vulnerable

"Now all learning centres, friendly spaces and many social supports are closed and also many services are limited because of COVID-19. That's why there are some bad things are happening like violence by caregivers and children are getting engaged in work."

- A Community Based Child Protection Committee (CBCPC) member, male, 45 years old.

"There is an increase of early marriage which is worrying me."

- Community volunteer, male, 20 years old.

Increased Child Labour

As many families are being pushed into extreme poverty and hunger by COVID-19, parents are increasingly unable to feed their families. There has been an increase in child labour in the camps, for example, with children engaged in casual work to earn money for their families or completing other tasks such as collecting food and gas at distribution points on behalf of their families.

“Some caregivers force their children to go to work to earn for the family. In addition, some children are willingly involved in different types of work for their own pocket money”

- A CBCPC female member who is 45 years old.



Increased risk of Trafficking

Conditions in the camps are ripe for the trafficking and smuggling of children and adolescents, many of whom are desperate to escape the harsh conditions. Dangerous travel and exploitation is an increasing concern. There are numerous anecdotal reports of children travelling to Malaysia to get married, as well as young boys being recruited for domestic labour in Cox's Bazar and other districts.



Increased risk of Exploitation and Abuse

Recently there has been an increase in the number of children and adolescents in conflict with the law. Without adequate protection mechanisms, children can be easily exploited by criminals and gangs.



Lack of information

Children are scared and struggling to access the information on COVID-19 they need. The information that is available is not age-appropriate and understandable, especially for younger children. With child protection facilities and education centres now closed it is also more difficult to reach children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Recognize child protection as an essential lifesaving activity.**
Child protection workers need greater access to the camps to monitor, report and mitigate child protection risks which can have profound and lifelong impacts for children, adolescents and communities. Case management, alternative care, and psychosocial support should be permitted, with respect to COVID-19 prevention guidelines. Continuity of care for children must be ensured.
- **Ensure information on COVID-19 is accessible and understandable to all children and adolescents.**
Information should be translated into local Rohingya language. Key messages should be targeted and contextualized for children and adolescents, including the risks of domestic violence and child marriage, and disseminated widely.
- **Ensure access to urgent medical care and protection for sick children and their families.**
- **Expand social protection services, including food distributions to cover all vulnerable households.**
- **Ensure that funding for COVID-19 response includes measures for children so agencies can meet children's needs rapidly, safely and holistically.**
- **Ensure reporting of all cases of violence, abuse or exploitation of children.**
- **Promote and support positive parenting methods.**
- **Support community led, bottom up approaches to Child Protection** through a range of methods. This requires a reallocation of resources as well as more focus on capacity development for innovation and research.
- **Ensure resources are available for national governments and humanitarian actors to fully implement COVID-19 responses**, recognizing gaps in Child Protection funding in past humanitarian crises and the negative consequences for vulnerable children.



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