



COVID-19 and Preventing Child Trafficking – A Need for Collaborative Attitudes between Public Health and Educational Professionals in Supporting Vulnerable Children

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Authors RN, MK, PB designed the study, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the protocol and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Authors PB and RN managed the analyses of the study. Authors RN and MK managed the literature searches. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to describe the need for collaborative attitudes between public health and educational professionals in supporting vulnerable children during COVID-19 pandemic. Trafficking is more common in socioeconomically underprivileged communities. COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerability of children across the world – in terms of resource availability, educational access, and safety. Child trafficking victims are recruited, harboured, or transferred for the purpose of exploitation. This alarming problem exists in all nations. Current social systems are not equipped to adequately manage our increasingly globalized world and are failing the world's vulnerable children. Child protective service providers, medical/mental health support, as well as teachers and

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educational organizations are becoming more inaccessible due to poor funding and understaffing. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has recently reported increased risk for children and current victims during this pandemic. This paper suggests the critical role teachers and doctors can play in recognizing and blocking child trafficking and supporting victims. For these reasons, greater funding and resources for healthcare professionals and educators is necessary for training and implementation.

Keywords: Child trafficking; COVID 19; globalization; public health.

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerability of children across the world – in terms of resource availability, educational access, and safety. Studies have widely reported that familial stress, abuse, and violence have escalated globally upon implementations of lockdowns and public health quarantining measures [2]. Especially vulnerable paediatric populations include migrants [10], the homeless, and those battling substance abuse disorders, who can be easily lured or trapped by child traffickers [1].

These child trafficking victims are recruited, harboured, or transferred for the purpose of exploitation. This alarming problem exists in all nations. Traffickers utilize children for forced labour, illegal adoptions, underage marriage, prostitution, soliciting, and most gruesomely, organ trafficking. In fact, shockingly, child prostitution is the third most lucrative global trade practice [12].

It is the responsibility of governments to establish child protective services. Studies from the European Union demonstrate that these protective services are required in origin, transit, and host nations in order to control and even restrict the conditions that may encourage child trafficking. However, current social systems are not equipped to adequately manage our increasingly globalized world and are failing the world's vulnerable children [13].

The three most formative relationships for young children are with parents, doctors, and teachers. This opinion piece suggests the critical role of doctors and teachers in recognizing and blocking child trafficking, as well as handling the physical and mental health consequences of trafficking victims. A synergistic attitude between these professions can strengthen systems already in place to protect children.

1.1 Inaccessibility of Agencies Supporting Vulnerable Children

As child trafficking claims millions of victims, it is important to identify where children can go for

help. Child protective service providers, medical/mental health support, as well as teachers and educational organizations are becoming more inaccessible due to poor funding and understaffing. The negative consequences of limited access to these resources have been well documented, and lead to greater risk for these children to run away from homes or be lured by perpetrators into risky situations [3].

1.2 Child Trafficking In COVID-19

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has recently reported increased risk for children and current victims during this pandemic. The connection between infectious disease and child trafficking is multifaceted.

First, government agencies related to law enforcement and social services are being redirected to COVID-19 related emergencies. Hence, organized crime has more freedom to operate and more children are indoctrinated into this crime. Second, due to travel restrictions and closed borders, escaped/rescued victims are unable to return home, exposing them to their traffickers and increasing their risk of being re-victimized. The fear that accompanies proximity to their abuser only exacerbates trauma for these victims. Third, children whose families are experiencing poverty due to this pandemic are more likely to be forced onto the streets to find food or money, thereby exposing them to trafficking. Fourth, school shutdowns also increase the amount of time children are exposed in public without adult supervision and can thus be kidnapped silently. School shutdowns also mean that children who receive shelter or food from the educational facility will no longer do so, making them more likely to even unknowingly approach traffickers who offer these resources.

1.3 Control Mechanisms by Offenders

Traffickers control and constantly observe their victims. As a result, even if victims have access

to the internet/social media, their ability to call for help is restricted. For some victims, schools, libraries, and religious centres were a means of avoiding abusive situations, but now, with social distancing measures, these are also unavailable [6].

1.4 Evolving Newer Strategies in Schools and Educational Bodies

Child trafficking is often a taboo subject and rarely discussed in schools. A study from South Africa demonstrated that school curricula did not cover child trafficking when discussing other safety measures for children [9]. Young minds are vulnerable to being lured into traps set by traffickers. Empowering these children via education is a powerful instrument that can be used to effectively combat this issue. One possible method is through regular awareness programs following the four layered strategy (The 4 P's) – Preach, Prevent, Protect, Prosecute.

Preach – Educate and foster awareness among adults and children about child trafficking.

Prevent & Protect – Create your own team of staff members and middle level/senior students to act as marshals for the school and work on identifying potentially dangerous situations, then bring the team to the notice of the concerned authorities in school.

1.5 Prosecution

Prosecute – The Indian government has maintained law enforcement methods to combat trafficking. According to Section 370 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the Indian government criminalises sex trafficking, slavery, and servitude, providing penalties that can range from seven years to life imprisonment. In February 2018, the parliament approved the Trafficking in Person Bill and the ministry created an anti-trafficking investigative agency.

2. METHODS FOR EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

1 - Lessons on child trafficking in Social Sciences can be made mandatory for children across all grades from upper primary to higher secondary levels for developing a sense of empathy for trafficking victims while simultaneously making them more cautious of possible perpetrators

around them. This method can create awareness without the appearance of giving instruction.

2 - Teachers must be trained to recognize warning signs. As they are involved in daily class activities and are cognizant of the children's backgrounds, they can identify 'high risk' students who many fall prey to trafficking. Online classes during COVID-19 offer an even better opportunity for teachers to gain insight into their students' home environments. Simple clues like their inability to attend online class regularly, failed cooperation with parents in the teaching-learning process, failing grades, and sudden changes in behaviour can be spotted by a vigilant teacher. These children may then be referred to the school counsellor who can aid in the next steps with child protective services.

2.1 Laws Protecting Rights of Children

1 – Tracking of trafficking cases should be swift. For example, in India, the state of Assam has launched Northeast India's first-ever mobile app to register complaints of child abuse online. It is called 'Sishu Suraksha' – i.e., protection of children. The Android and iOS friendly app enables users from across the state to lodge a complaint – making it easier for law enforcement to track victims in remote areas further closed off by COVID-19. This app also makes reporting instantaneous. In most cases, by the time trafficking is reported, it is too late. Schools can utilize this app as well to obtain information and share it with parents.

2 - POCSO: The Indian government passed The Protection of Children against Sexual Offences in 2012 (POCSO) to safeguard the interests of children. This legal procedure adopts child-friendly mechanisms of reporting as well as speedy trials. It is mandatory for all schools to train and educate staff members about POCSO and maintain a POCSO committee composed of the school principal, teachers, parents, and legal advisors. Younger children are taught about 'Good Touch and Bad Touch' and older students are made aware of the legal routes and implications of POCSO.

2.2 Skills and Confidence Building

Trafficking is more common in socioeconomically underprivileged communities. The best way a school can aid in these areas is by conducting a skill development program alongside its basic education curricula for children. While education

makes them aware of their rights and prevents them from falling prey to trafficking, skill development will provide a source of living wage that makes them economically independent – making them less likely to fall into child marriage, begging, and other income sources that may lead to child trafficking.

2.3 Strategies in the Public Health Sector

In India, many law enforcement officials equate trafficking with prostitution, without understanding the implications of this ignorance [14]. This lack of sensitivity is helpful neither to the child nor the parents, but instead builds stigmas around victims of this crime against such vulnerable populations. In fact, the media will be hesitant to report on it and parents may even fail to acknowledge or report this violation against their child in fear of social isolation and discrimination.

To counteract this stigmatization, public health campaigns destigmatizing victims should be available in multiple languages and diffused through various communication channels and networks of IMWs.

Additionally, doctors are key in all stages for these victims – whether it be in anxieties, illnesses, or trauma stemming from their abuse [4]. Therefore, healthcare providers have the opportunity to identify and support these victims by early recognition and connect with government agencies, NGOs, or local legal bodies that aim to protect child rights [5].

Data collection – Due to the hidden nature of this crime, data collection is difficult – what the UN calls the “hidden figure of crime.” The resulting inaccurate statistics lead to challenges for policy makers. Besides this, funding against child trafficking has also been a major challenge. Increasing investments in opportunities for integration between education and healthcare can create greater awareness, advocacy, and support for victims – and prevent trafficking from even occurring.

3. CONCLUSION

1. This paper suggests the critical role teachers and doctors can play in recognizing and blocking child trafficking and supporting victims. For these reasons, greater funding and resources for healthcare professionals and educators is necessary for training and implementation.

2. Accurate and quick reporting measures are vital to catching traffickers and preventing kidnappings.
3. Psychosocial rehabilitation techniques rely on destigmatization of trafficking victims. By removing the taboo, children are further supported by schools and clinics.
4. Commitment from policy makers to increase awareness and devise guidelines and preventative programs is needed to curb this abuse.

CONSENT

It is not applicable.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

It is not applicable.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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