



# THE DIMENSIONS OF RISKS FOR MIGRANT CHILDREN DURING AND AFTER COVID – 19 PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID - 19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on people all across the world. In many nations, the ever-changing socio-cultural dynamics have a direct or indirect impact on health-related concerns. In the context of Covid – 19, we should specifically mention about “Migrant Workers” because Migrant Workers are usually employed in unorganized sectors and are subject to exploitation. Lack of provision for minimum wages and working hours, poor working and living conditions, lack of basic services, and benefits, and informal employer–employee relationships are some examples. The children of migrants and migrating children remain invisible and are the most vulnerable during this pandemic. The Supreme Court asks States to furnish data on migrant children, their condition along with details of benefits extended to them during COVID – 19 pandemics. This study aims to examine the problems, challenges and various dimensions of risks of migrant children through a content analysis by using secondary sources with a special focus to the aspects of their health, education and the increasing risk of child labour. The study will also analyze the existing interventions and programs and put forward suggestions for the actions to be taken.

## Keywords

COVID– 19, Migrant Children, Child Health, Human Rights

## INTRODUCTION

People all over the world have been affected by the COVID - 19 pandemic. The ever-changing socio-cultural dynamics have a direct or indirect impact on health-related concerns in many countries. We should specifically mention "Migrant Workers" in the context of COVID – 19 because migrant workers are typically employed in unorganized sectors and are vulnerable to exploitation. Some examples include a lack of provision for minimum

wages and working hours, poor working and living conditions, a lack of basic services and benefits, and informal employer–employee relationships. In order to combat the COVID - 19 pandemic, significant threats are posed to the rule of law, the protection of human rights, the prevention of discrimination, the right to privacy or the protection of personal data, and the rights of socially vulnerable groups (Mitrović & Raosavljević, 2021). The children of migrants remain invisible and are the most vulnerable during this pandemic. The Supreme Court Orders States to provide data on migrant children, their conditions, and details of benefits provided to them during the COVID – 19 pandemics.

The purpose of this study is to examine the problems, challenges, and various dimensions of risk of migrant children through a content analysis using secondary sources, with a special emphasis on their health, education, and the increasing risk of child labour. The study will also examine existing interventions and programmes and make recommendations for future actions. The following articles, reports, and studies were used to gather data. The search terms included "migration," "migrant workers," and "COVID - 19 impact on children," with a focus on the UNICEF report and the Supreme Court's directions to the states on the PIL filed on migrant children in India during COVID -19. Google Scholar and Mendeley searches for related articles, and citations are provided.

### **COVID – 19 IMPACTS ON MIGRANTS IN INDIA**

Migration is the geographical movement of people across a specified boundary to establish a new permanent or semi-permanent residence. The reasons for migration are employment, business, education, family movement, marriage, natural calamities, etc. In modern times, migration has become an individual or a family enterprise rather than an organised movement. As per the available latest data on migration, the 2011 Census of India stated that 450.6 million migrants in 2011 (38% of the population) compared to the 310.5 million migrants in 2001, which was 31 per cent of the community (Census of India, 2011). When the total population grew by 18 per cent, *the number of migrants increased by 45 per cent between 2001 and 2011*. It is significant to note that 99 per cent of the total migration in 2011 was internal, and immigrants comprised 1 per cent (Iyer, 2020). It is obvious that the number of migrants increased by 45 percent during that decade. So, of course, the level of increase can be seen between 2011 and 2021.

Hundreds of workers carrying heavy backpacks and wailing children, walking on national highways, boarding tractors, and so on were pictured in the media during the lockdown period. Since March 25, India has been under a state of emergency that was supposed to last 21 days, or until April 14, 2020, but was later extended until May 3, then again until May 17, and finally until May 31. It was the largest human lockdown ever ordered on such short notice, with no planning or preparation. Naturally, the migrants panicked when the lockdown was announced and they attempted to contact and reach their families.

### **COVID – 19 IMPACTS ON MIGRANT CHILDREN**

Migrant and displaced children are among the world's most vulnerable populations. In 2019, approximately 33 million children lived outside of their country of birth, many of whom had been forcibly displaced across borders. At the end of 2018, over 31 million children were forced to flee their homes, either within their own country or abroad, as a result of violence and conflict. This includes approximately 13 million child refugees, approximately 1 million asylum-seeking children, and an estimated 17 million children internally displaced within their own countries. 3.7 million children are estimated to be living in refugee camps or collective centers. COVID-19 threatens to make their lives even more uncertain and dangerous. The difficulties of daily life around the world, 52% of migrant children are minors (You et al., 2020).

Many migrant workers have been reported to have died in road accidents in India while returning to their village homes, and as the global death toll from COVID-19 rises, a large number of children will be orphaned and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Orphaned children are especially vulnerable to child trafficking and other

forms of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation, forced begging, selling goods on the streets, child trafficking, child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and other forms of child labour.

Migrant children were affected the worst due to the nationwide lockdown as they were the most vulnerable. No assessment of the exact numbers of migrant children, infants, and pregnant or lactating migrant women and their needs. Protection of their fundamental rights during the pandemic is questionable. Denied access to health and proper nutrition, quality education and skills and knowledge they need to thrive and spend their lives in makeshift, unfriendly, unhygienic and testing conditions. The pandemic is having a discriminatory impact on migrant children and has aggravated their vulnerabilities. Migrant children will be denied their fundamental rights to education, health and nutrition if the matter is not heard and appropriate orders passed by the Court.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted grave weaknesses in many countries’ protections for children, including inadequate health care and social protection systems, overcrowded detention facilities, and the lack of emergency plans for large-scale school shutdowns” (*Jo Becker, Children’s Rights Advocacy Director at Human Rights Watch.*)

### **PUBLIC INTEREST LITIGATION (PIL) ON MIGRANT CHILDREN**

In the midst of the pandemic in 2021, the NGO Child Rights Trust and a Bengaluru resident filed a PIL seeking directions for the protection of fundamental rights of migrant children. "The unprecedented lockdown, ensuing migrant crisis, and subsequent effect on migrant children and their fundamental and human rights is conspicuous and an ongoing crisis," the petitioners stated (The Indian Express). The Economic Times reported that, “on April 13, 2021, the Supreme Court directed all states to provide data on migrant children, their conditions, and details of benefits provided to them during the COVID19 pandemic. Acting on a PIL seeking directions to state governments to protect their fundamental rights during the pandemic, a Bench led by Chief Justice of India SA Bobde asked all states to file affidavits. The petitioners contended that the lockdown has caused tremendous hardship for migrant children, and that no assessment of the exact number of migrant children, infants, and pregnant or lactating migrant women, as well as their needs, has been made to date” (Tribune).

According to the PIL, "despite the respondents' significant efforts to provide migrant workers with welfare measures, no report from the Central or State governments detailing relief measures extended to women and children who are stranded or in relief camps and quarantine centers at source districts has been issued." On March 8, the court issued a notice of appeal. The plea, which seeks the court's intervention, states that the pandemic has a "discriminatory impact on migrant children and has exacerbated their vulnerabilities," and that these children will be "denied their fundamental rights to education, health, and nutrition if the matter is not heard and appropriate orders are not passed" (The Indian Express).

### **COVID – 19 IMPACTS ON HEALTHCARE: AN OVERVIEW OF UNICEF REPORT**

“Over 8,80,000 children could die due to Covid-related issues in next 12 months; most deaths likely in India” (*UNICEF report based on a study conducted by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.*) *UNICEF drew attention to the strain put on the children of migrant workers in India, who were forced to head back to their homes in rural India — many, even on foot — after the nationwide lockdown was imposed.*

Many children from *poor and marginalized communities* are no longer getting the treatment they need for other illnesses when the state health facilities focused on mitigating the impact of the deadly virus. “Nearly 10,000 intervention cases were handled by CHILDLINE staff to reach the children in need of support. Of these 30 per cent were related *escalation in violence, child sexual abuse, child marriage and child labour*”. UNICEF has called on governments across South Asia to continue interventions to provide life-saving vaccinations in response to outbreaks of illnesses like measles, and cholera.

### ***Health at greater risk if they fall ill***

*Those who are living in overcrowded camps or informal reception centers, where basic COVID-19 prevention measures such as frequent handwashing and “social distancing” are nearly impossible (UNICEF). Vaccination for children under the age of five is critical to protect them from a variety of diseases. According to the national immunization schedule, every child receives vaccination for diseases such as tuberculosis, mumps, measles, rubella, diphtheria, hepatitis, tetanus, and others. However, during this lockdown period, it was difficult for parents to get to primary health centers and other locations for vaccination, causing children to suffer and increasing the risk of diseases that can be prevented by vaccination. Migrant children's movement will make it difficult to track their vaccination status. Furthermore, the lockdown may have an impact on migrant children's vaccinations (Khandale, 2021).*

### ***Financial distress may increase the risk of child labour***

*According to the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 a ‘child’ is a person who has not yet attained the age of 14 years. “Child labour has declined by 94 million since 2000, but job losses and rising poverty because of the lockdown and sickness is likely to force more children to seek exploitative and hazardous jobs as families use every available means to earn some money and survive” (Joint report by UNICEF and the International Labour Organization (ILO) released to mark the world day against child labour, June 12).*

### ***Impact on education***

The COVID-19 crisis will result in limited or no education for many children. The number of students dropping out of school is rising. For those who are continuing their education, the crisis has once again revealed vast disparities in emergency preparedness, internet access for children, and learning materials availability. The Times of India reported on 9<sup>th</sup> March, 2021 that, “the Supreme Court also ordered a response from all state governments on the PIL seeking the creation of an action plan to ensure that children of migrant workers attended school after a year of disruption caused by the pandemic. Senior advocate Jayna Kothari, appearing on behalf of an NGO called 'Child Rights Trust,' told a bench led by Chief Justice S A Bobde that since schools are slowly opening their doors to children for the start of the new academic session, the Central government should develop an action plan to ensure that children of migrant workers do not miss out on returning to school.”

## **SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Many of these migrants are compelled to bring their families with them to their place of relocation, despite the fact that they do not have as many social or community commitments to care for their families while they are away. They are considered outcasts and are neither valued nor equally viewed as an integral part of the community of their destination. Many migrants are illiterate and uneducated, come from disadvantaged communities, and work primarily in the informal or unorganized sector. They are abused during regular and overtime work, and this is influenced by the payment of salaries and other benefits, the assignment of jobs, and the terms of employment. They are not coordinated, and their labour standards are not secure (Sreejith & Sreejith, 2021).

The immediate actions to be taken in any such uncertainties, such as COVID - 19 pandemics, are as follows, with specific to the problems of migrant children.

- ***Identification of Orphaned Children:*** Efforts to identify children orphaned by COVID-19 and expanding networks and foster care.
- ***Healthcare:*** Minimizing disruptions in children’s access to essential and life-saving healthcare services.



- **Family Based Care:** Ensure suitable accommodation and sanitation for refugee, migrant, and internally displaced children.
- **Economic Provisions:** Cash transfers to help them meet basic needs without resorting to child labor or child marriage.
- **Education:** Prioritizing efforts to continue education for all children, using all available technology.

## CONCLUSION

There are numerous governmental and non-governmental projects and programmes for migrants. Nonetheless, many of these initiatives failed to properly coordinate for the welfare of migrant children as a result of the unexpected pandemic. To avoid such a situation in the future during such uncertain times, effective linkage work with migrant workers' agents, more government initiatives, effective coordination of the Departments of Women and Children, Health, Education, Labor Welfare, and so on should be ensured. The roles of Professional Social Workers and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are also strongly intertwined. Aside from that, more research and projects geared toward migrants should be promoted.

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