

# **COVID- 19 AND THE EMERGING THREATS TO CHILD PROTECTION, HEALTH AND EDUCATION**

**Around the world, the present and future of our children is at grave risk. The Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation (KSCF) calls on Governments, Businesses, Civil Society Organisations, Communities and Parents to prioritise the protection of the world's most vulnerable children in the global response to COVID-19.**

The world is home to over 2.29 billion children, and 448 million (19.5%) of the children live in India<sup>1</sup>. The ongoing nationwide lockdown in India to curb the spread of COVID-19 has placed our children in an unprecedented situation of extreme vulnerability. On the 4th of April 2020, our Founder and Nobel Peace Laureate Kailash Satyarthi raised the alarm for governments and communities to respond with urgency to this looming danger to the protection, health and education of most vulnerable children of the world.

KSCF is reaching out to those most affected by the crisis by helping them meet the immediate needs of food, clothing and other essential needs. While doing so, we are also helping develop a way forward for governments, international agencies, businesses and communities to ensure that children everywhere are free, safe and educated amidst this crisis, and beyond.

## **COVID-19 AND THE LOSS OF CHILDHOOD: INCREASED RISK TO CHILDREN'S PROTECTION, HEALTH AND EDUCATION**

International commitments to protect the rights of children to protection, health and education are at stake in light of COVID-19 and the ongoing lockdown. The achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2015 (SDGs) face a very real risk of derailment as the set of challenges against which they were developed and accepted were very different from the set of challenges that we face today as an international community. Goal 8.7 for the elimination of child labour including child trafficking and child pornography, whose deadline for achievement was set at 2025, will be the first casualty. If the earliest committed goal remains unfulfilled, the prospect of the achievement of the

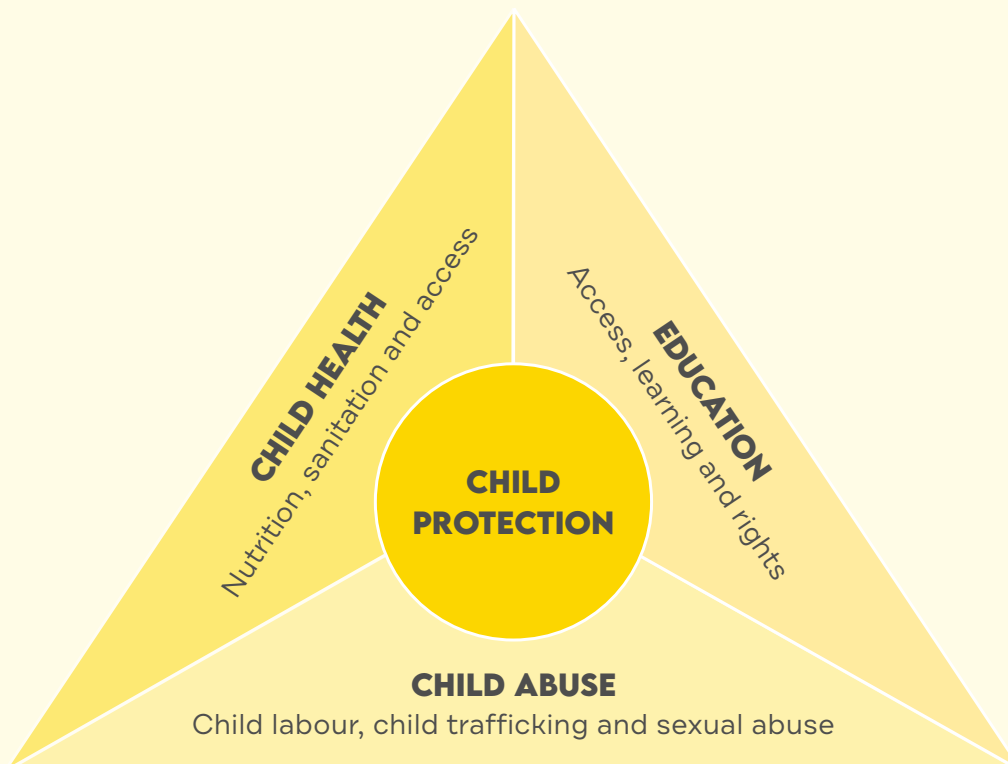
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1. The State of the World's Children 2017, UNICEF.

SDGs as a whole is bleak. It is therefore clear that disregarding children's rights amidst the deteriorating economic condition of countries, halted development efforts and shifting priorities of global resources may prove fatal to the cause of development and sustainability everywhere.

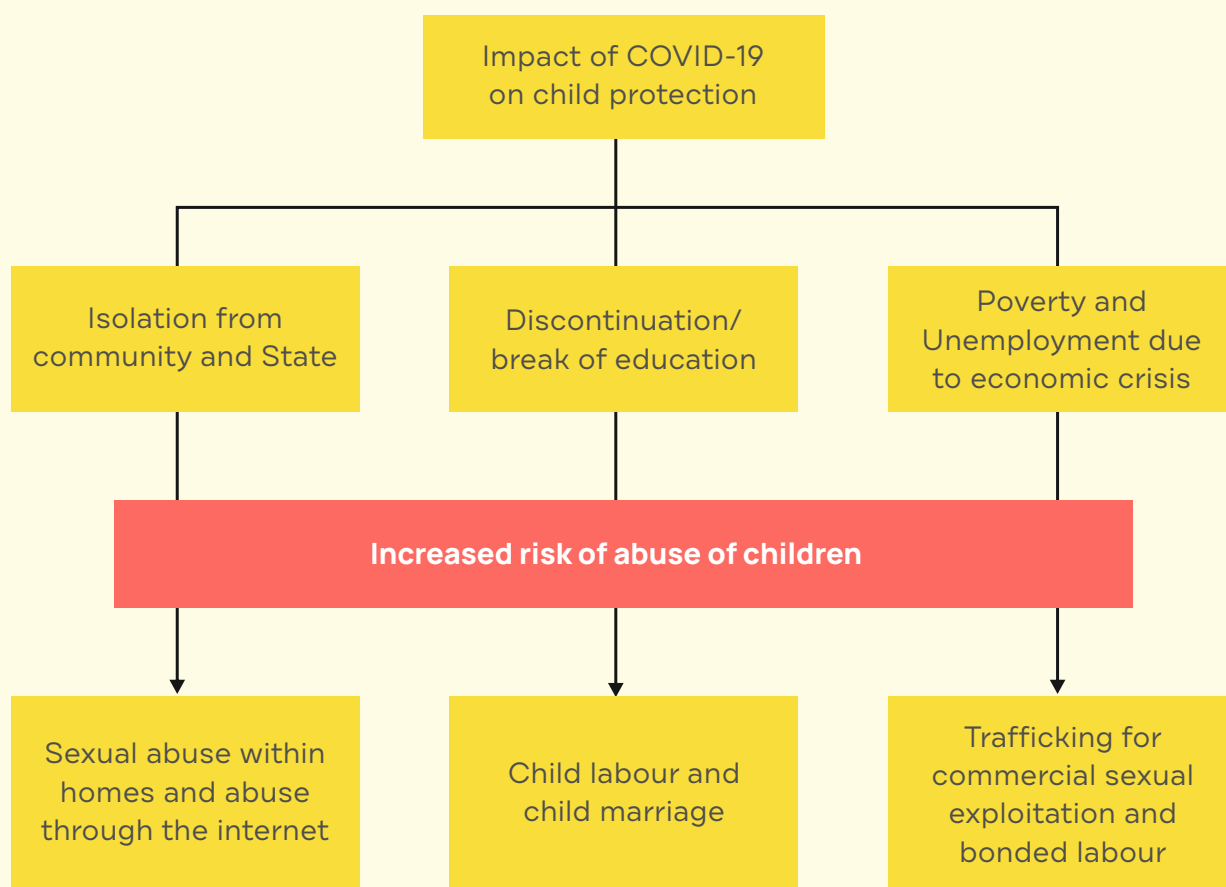
As most countries struggle to meet immediate survival needs, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has knowingly or unknowingly been compromised. Article 24 of the UNCRC that upholds the right of every child the highest attainable quality of healthcare, Article 26 that recognises the right to social security, and Article 34 that mandates States Parties to undertake efforts to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse are but a few of the UNCRC tenets that are unfulfilled in these times. State parties are bound by this international commitment to take decisions that prioritise the best interest of the child in all circumstances. This commitment must be reinforced in times when children's vulnerabilities are at their highest.

**FIG.1. KSCF'S MODEL FOR A FREE, SAFE AND EDUCATED CHILDHOOD**



Children are in the midst of a crisis. The impact on the physical, mental and emotional health of children in isolation is a matter of grave concern. Extreme hunger is a looming reality in large parts of our world. Governments, aid agencies and medical experts are gearing up to minimise its effect on the immunity, nutrition and development of children everywhere. The pandemic has also, however, led to an economic and humanitarian crisis by halting most economic activity. This has disproportionately affected the poorest populations, resulting in a very real threat to the survival of their children post COVID-19. Learning and development has come to a standstill jeopardising not only the future of children, but their immediate present by exacerbating existing risks of child labour, child marriage, child sexual abuse at home including, trafficking for the purpose of prostitution or forced labour, and a mounting demand for online child sexual abuse everywhere. These risks are only increasing with time and are expected to surge post the period of lockdown.

**FIG.2. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILD PROTECTION IN INDIA:  
LINKAGES WITH ONGOING DISRUPTIONS IN HEALTH AND EDUCATION**



**(i) Isolation from the community and State leading to increased abuse within homes and abuse over the internet:**

Millions of children are currently trapped inside their homes, often with their abusers. Government data in India suggests that over 93% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by those known to the child. With no access to school, community, or State support, they are more vulnerable to abuse than ever before. Children employed as domestic labour in homes are trapped and may be facing extreme forms of physical and sexual abuse with no means of seeking help. In these situations, the possibility of the abuse getting reported is low, and the impunity against abuse is high.

Prolonged periods of isolation have also left children at the disposal of predators online. Globally there has been an increase in the consumption of pornography, as reported by Pornhub, the largest pornography platform in the world. This trend is also reflected in India, which recorded a 95% spike in activity on the day of the lockdown. Data from online data monitoring websites reveals that search for keywords around child pornography will see a further spike in the coming weeks. The high demand for CSAM also fuels an increased risk of child trafficking for the creation of CSAM and thus perpetuates the offline commercial sexual exploitation of children as well.

In addition, the increased demand for CSAM also signals the increased vulnerability of children to online sexual predators. As children spend more time online during the lockdown, they are often unsupervised. International agencies like Europol, the United Nations and ECPAT are reporting that pedophiles and child pornography addicts have increased activity to target children online to 'groom' them - befriending them on social media, building an emotional connection and luring them to perform sexual activities through photos and videos.

**(ii) Discontinuation of education leading to increase in child labour and child marriage:**

In an attempt to survive the economic slowdown, businesses across the world will deploy extensive measures to produce at scale at minimal cost. Children of unemployed and debt-ridden families will act as the ideal labour force for such production. Forced to add a pair of working hands to the family's survival on one

hand, their desperation and ignorance is vulnerable to be exploited by manufacturers on the other. A majority of them will work in unregistered manufacturing units in an attempt to subvert inspections and operate under the radar. The global community will be forced to pay attention to supply chains and seek regulation and accountability.

The consequences of the forced discontinuation of school are likely to have serious consequences, especially on the protection of young girls. The denial of mid-day meals from schools aggravated the economic loss of the parents to feed the child an extra meal every day. In a society already tilted against her education, underage marriage of the girl may become a more economically viable option for parents who are uncertain about her future.

**(iii) Poverty and unemployment leading to increase in trafficking for prostitution, bonded labour and demand for child sexual abuse material:**

Innumerable families engaged in unorganised work have been thrown out of the fragile security of the sector, and are now facing an indefinite period of hunger, uncertainty and deprivation. With parents no longer in a position to take care of their children, traffickers are on the prowl to take advantage of this heightened state of desperation. As we speak, traffickers are on the ground preparing, and identifying families with no means of subsistence, children who have dropped out of school due to continued periods of closure, and girls whose parents can be deceived into marrying or selling them off for marriage or commercial sexual exploitation.

The inability of the already poor to repay existing debt, and the acquisition of further debt will perpetuate intergenerational bondage and slavery for decades. This decade will witness the largest number of children out of schools and increased numbers in forced labour and prostitution. The existing moneylending and bank services do not provide for adequate zero-interest long-term loans that can sustain families through the lockdown. Disproportionate power in the hands of unregulated moneylenders will enslave families, including children, to work wageless for decades, to repay the debt of a few thousands of rupees.

## **KSCF'S FIVE-PRONGED PROTECTION STRATEGY FOR CHILDREN DURING COVID-19**

KSCF is focusing its efforts in India to mitigate these risks by working directly with marginalized communities in India and supporting the government to develop forward-looking COVID-19 response mechanism.

### **1. Prevention of abuse and exploitation of children through immediate relief to families in distress:**

The immediate threat of falling prey to debt and exploitation is subverted by ensuring that the survival needs of families are met. This will reduce vulnerability to trafficking and bondage of children of migrant families and families of unorganised workers. Large settlements in cramped urban slums present a high susceptibility to the spread of infection due to limited possibility of social distancing. Our ongoing programmes allow us to closely monitor their needs and respond to them promptly. Ensuring that immediate needs are met equips communities to overcome economic and social vulnerabilities of children to exploitation in the future.

KSCF is presently assisting over 25,000 families (1.25 lakh people), including over 72,000 children in Child Friendly Villages in Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Karnataka to monitor and respond to cases of infection, along with assistance for daily essentials. KSCF is facilitating access to COVID-19 relief packages to the most needy and vulnerable communities to ensure their survival, and for prevention of debt. 5000 families of the mica belt are being provided with relief through food grain supply to ensure food security during the lockdown period. We are working with 7000 households with over 15,000 children in slum settlements of Delhi to directly support them in this hour of need.

As of 15th April 2020, KSCF's sister organisation Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA), also founded by Peace Laureate Kailash Satyarthi, provided more than 30,000 migrant workers and daily wage earners with cooked meals, milk and dry ration in 10 states of India. This includes 400 families belonging to 10 Banjara communities (nomadic communities) of Rajasthan. 4200 masks and soaps were provided in addition to food assistance. From the beginning of the lockdown, BBA is also running a community kitchen that serves 300 meals on a daily basis to migrant workers and daily wage earners in Delhi. Rescued child labourers in Bal Ashram, a

sister organisation's long-term rehabilitation homes for rescued child labourers in Rajasthan have made 3000 face masks that have been circulated amongst health workers, sanitation workers, police officers, and communities.

## **2. Preparedness and awareness generation to counter the imminent increase in online and offline abuse of children:**

On April 4th, KSCF raised the alarm against the imminent increase of child sexual abuse through online platforms, as well as child abuse within homes, as a result of the global lockdown. Kailash Satyarthi, Founder of KSCF and 2014 Nobel Peace Laureate launched the campaign to draw immediate attention to the heightened dangers of child sexual abuse and trafficking due to the outbreak of COVID-19 across the world. The online campaign is targeted at helping families and parents protect their children from abuse in the digital space and from abuse within the home, during the lockdown period. We partnered with more than 100 civil society organizations across the country to generate awareness around child abuse in homes, and to facilitate access to support services. KSCF is amplifying efforts for to generate greater awareness about the risks of child abuse in order to empower children, parents and communities to prevent it.

With education resuming in parts of India through digital platforms, KSCF is utilising this opportunity to reach children isolated in homes and to raise awareness around the threats of online and offline sexual abuse. We have developed an online lesson on child sexual abuse to be taught by schools across the country as part of the digital classroom. This will empower children to identify and increase reporting of any incident of sexual abuse in homes.

## **3. Enforcement of law and capacity building for ensuring access to justice for children:**

The capacity of institutions and law enforcement officers needs to be built to meet the imminent increase in child protection and its emerging challenges. Child protection systems are likely to be fraught with an increase in various forms of child abuse, and KSCF has set up an early response programme for capacity building.

Through its early response programme, KSCF has begun training government

functionaries, law enforcement officers and caregivers through digital platforms in five states of India i.e. Kerala, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Assam. These sessions include building knowledge of the law, child-friendly approaches in law enforcement, and problem solving. We will be expanding our efforts into other states in the coming weeks.

KSCF also foresees the extensive use of transport systems for trafficking immediately after the lockdown is lifted. The railways are the most widely used transport system in India, misused as the lifeline of trafficking across India. Large numbers of children are trafficked from source to destinations areas in India using railways services. KSCF is supporting the Government of India in taking preventive and vigilant action against the use of trains to traffic children from rural areas, once the lockdown is lifted.

#### **4. Research and data collection for data-driven decision making:**

The heightened economic vulnerability will lead to large-scale trafficking of children, especially after the lockdown is lifted. Data from rescue operations collected by our partners exposes the most prominent trafficking hotspots in India. KSCF is using this data to analyse trends of trafficking over the past 15 years, and predict emerging hotspots post COVID-19. This will be used to drive targeted anti-trafficking interventions in India, including the creation of a heat map to preempt and prevent trafficking.

#### **5. Increased resource allocation for children from governments and business:**

Efforts for protecting children post COVID-19 can only be sustained through adequate resources and their effective allocation and expenditure. Governments must dedicate greater financial resources to State efforts for child protection, and must ensure their transparent, timely and smooth expenditure. KSCF has consistently engaged and urged the Government of India to release compensation amounts for rescued child labourers, bonded labourers and victims of trafficking in order to prevent their re-trafficking. By helping build capacities and ensuring access to justice to children in need of care and protection within existing Government programmes, KSCF provides an impetus to Governments to increase the share of children in the National Budget.



KSCF believes that Corporate Social Responsibility must also translate private investment into creating safer communities for our children. We are actively engaging business through meaningful relationships with the organisation and its work to transform investment into real impact. We are also running online fundraising exercises through platforms such as Ketto and social media platforms to raise funds for immediate preventive action against trafficking.

An understanding of the predicament of children in India provides an insight into the threat faced by children in other parts of the world. Countries with high vulnerability of children to economic exploitation due to extreme poverty, largely in the global south, are bound to face increases in such crimes. In this context, the responsibility of the international community, aid agencies, and businesses to come forward to mitigate risks of exploitation gains greater significance.

## **THE NEED FOR GLOBAL INVESTMENT IN A SAFER TOMORROW FOR CHILDREN ACROSS THE WORLD**

KSCF recognises the universality of the increased risk of violence, exploitation and abuse of children during and in the aftermath of the pandemic and calls on governments to integrate the protection of children as an integral element of its response mechanisms, to make sure that no child is left behind in our united fight. Protection, health and education must reach the doorstep of every child, especially in times of a crisis. The ongoing global health crisis forces us to re-examine our fundamental understanding of ensuring the protection of children which must guide us in shifting our response to meet the emerging and ongoing needs of children. The rights of children should not be denied during crises but instead be safeguarded with amplified efforts and absolute accountability.

The ongoing relief-work in different parts of the world faces the risk of losing meaning in the absence of a sustainable framework of social and legal protections. There is a need to link immediate relief efforts to long-term efforts to create a robust safety net around every child as a means to curb the rise of child abuse and trafficking. Geographies that are traditionally source and transit areas of trafficking across the world require greater

resource allocation to ensure economic security, food security, social security, education, and strong legal protections. Destinations of trafficking require building capacity of law enforcers and caregivers and increasing deterrence through the rule of law.

These actions call for greater prioritisation of child protection in policy decisions and budgetary allocations by all countries. The international community must come together today, and agree upon an international restoration policy and action plan post COVID-19 with a focus on the protection, health and education of children everywhere. This will also require a significant increase in budgetary allocations and expenditure of countries and international aid agencies on one hand, and a greater investment of businesses through resources and responsible action.

KSCF emphasizes the necessity to channel global resources towards preventing a humanitarian crisis of child abuse and trafficking during COVID-19 and in its aftermath. Together, with the international community and local partners, we can ensure that no child is left behind in our combined fight against the pandemic. We owe our children a safe today, and a safer tomorrow.