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CHILD RIGHTS NOW!

Ending Violence against Children and COVID-19

"As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads across the globe, we are seeing an alarming pattern. The poorest and most vulnerable members of society are being hardest hit, both by the pandemic and the response. I am especially concerned about the well-being of the world's children. Thankfully, children have so far been largely spared from the most severe symptoms of the disease. But their lives are being totally upended. I appeal to families everywhere, and leaders at all levels: protect our children."

Statement by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres on the Impact of COVID-19 on Children

ChildFund Alliance   PLAN INTERNATIONAL   Save the Children   SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES INTERNATIONAL   Terre des Hommes International Federation   World Vision

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the greatest shocks to global stability since World War II. Before the pandemic, more than half of all children worldwide lived in daily exposure to different forms of violence. The measures to contain and respond to the pandemic have further increased the risks of physical, sexual and emotional violence against girls, boys and children with different gender identities.

While risks have increased, the capacity of formal and informal child protection systems to respond have been limited. The services to prevent, report, respond, care and support have been restricted due to the current emergency or moved to remote support.

Joining Forces, as a coalition of six child rights organisations, calls for child protection to be prioritised in the response to COVID-19. A child protection approach that places children at the centre – upholding child rights principles, reaching the most vulnerable and with adequate funding – is essential for all children, girls and boys, to be able to access and receive the support and services they need in these difficult times.

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The impact of COVID-19 outbreak on violence against children

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the greatest shocks to global stability since World War II. Many countries have put in place measures to control movements; about 60% of all children worldwide now live in countries where a full or partial lockdown is in place.[i] While children's health appears to be less directly impacted by COVID-19, the outbreak and the measures put in place to contain it will deeply affect the environment in which children grow and develop. Existing inequalities and vulnerabilities become exacerbated in a crisis – exposing children to increased violence. We have seen this in other pandemics and humanitarian emergencies, and we are seeing it daily in relation to COVID-19. The way governments respond to this risk will affect not only the rights and well-being of millions of children across the world but also future generations and the stability of their nations in the years to come.

While efforts are increasing across the world to implement response measures to curb contagion and care for those infected, the Joining Forces[ii] initiative calls on governments to immediately include specific measures to protect girls, boys and children with different gender identities from violence in all its forms within COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.

Before the pandemic, more than half of all children worldwide lived in daily exposure to different forms of violence.[iii] The measures to contain and respond to the pandemic have further increased the risks of physical, sexual and emotional violence against girls and boys. Failing to prevent and effectively respond to violence against children can have life-long impacts on children's health and well-being, educational attainment and development.[iv] It limits girls' and boys' ability to fulfil their potential and increases the likelihood that they will be perpetrators or victims of violence as adults, thus allowing cycles of violence, poverty, and inequality to continue.[v]

Violence against children already costs the world's economies US$7 trillion annually.[vi] Failing to prevent further escalation of violence due to the COVID-19 outbreak will only increase the costs for communities and countries in the years to come.

Joining Forces is a global alliance of six leading child rights organisations working in coalition to prevent and respond to violence against children across 70 countries[1]. This brief draws on our frontline experience to show the importance of child protection interventions in transforming lives

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1 These six organisations are ChildFund, Plan International, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages, Terre des Hommes and World Vision

of children and their communities. It outlines the emerging key child protection risks that girls and boys are facing and the proactive measures all stakeholders – including governments, donors, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – must urgently take to ensure children are protected from the impacts of COVID-19.

Emerging Risks and Trends

> "[I am most worried] that my mum and stepdad keep hitting me at home."
> **Girl, Bolivia[vii]**

As the pandemic has spread across the globe, we have seen an increase in violence against children in a variety of contexts. Quarantine measures limiting movement of people and leading to the closure of public services are exposing children, especially girls, to increased risks of violence. A recent World Vision report has estimated that as a result of three months of global lockdowns, up to 85 million more children may be at risk of physical, sexual and emotional violence than before the outbreak.[viii]

Increase in violence at home

> "We believed that home is a safe place, but it's actually an unsafe place for us girls."
> **Girl, Guatemala[ix]**

© Educo, member of ChildFund Alliance

More than one billion children are out of the education system and confined at home with carers who are experiencing one or various forms of duress (e.g. unemployment, depression, work-from-home pressure, anxiety). For many children, home was not a safe environment to begin with; for others, the increase in stress on caregivers and close confinement in overcrowded lodgings also means new risks of violence. Girls and boys already experiencing violence at home, as well as those more vulnerable to violence such as children with disabilities and LGBTIQ children, are at increased risk.

Since the pandemic started and quarantine measures have been put in place, calls to hotlines for domestic violence have substantially increased between 20% and 150% in some countries.[x] As violence against children often happens at home and alongside violence against women, these data indicate an increase in child abuse.[xi] These accounts are substantiated by data from other sources. For example, recent data from India shows a 30% increase in calls to child helplines related to violence, while a national assessment from Bangladesh indicated a 40% increase in calls.[xii] Exposure to physical and sexual violence at home, as well as witnessing intimate partner violence, perpetuates intergenerational cycles of violence. Girls experiencing violence at home are more likely to become victims of intimate partner violence.

COVID-19 is also making it increasingly difficult for children to access support networks, such as fleeing a violent situation, confiding in a friend, reporting the incidence of violence or seeking help from a teacher or other community members.[xiii] This is why in some countries or some regions, such as in the US and Canada, a decrease in official reporting on child abuse has been noted.

Violence at home can also result in family breakdown and separation, increasing the need to provide alternative care for children. For children already in the alternative care system, the risk of violence, abandonment and neglect has also increased substantially. Some foster families are rejecting children in their care due to health concerns and support from social workers is diminishing due to the restrictions in movement. Additionally, different care facilities are closing in an unplanned way, leaving children in the street

or returning them back to families from which they were removed due to neglect, violence and abuse.[xiv]

Increase in violence online

Movement restrictions and closure of schools also mean that children are spending more time online, thus increasing their exposure to online bullying, pornography, sexual violence and exploitation. Perpetrators are taking advantage of children spending more unsupervised time online and are seeking to groom and exploit children through sexual coercion and sextortion. Girls are particularly vulnerable, accounting for 90% of those featured in online child abuse materials.[xv] The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in the United States has experienced a 106% increase in global reports of suspected child sexual exploitation compared with March 2019.[xvi] In India, there has been a 95% rise in traffic searching for child sexual abuse content, and Europol has also noted an increase in demand for child pornography.[xvii]

Increase in gender-based violence and harmful coping mechanisms

> *"There are many girls who are being violated physically and psychologically. And this information is not coming out; they only talk about the COVID, but they don't talk about the cases of violence."*
> **Peru, 15-year-old girl[xviii]**

Decreased access to services and social networks, as well as increased stress caused by the outbreak are exacerbating existing gender inequalities[xix]. In their latest report, UNFPA has predicted an increase of 20% in incidents of gender-based violence.[xx] They also noted that disruptions in access to health services and prevention programmes could lead to two million more girls falling victim to Female Genital Mutilation and 7 million unintended pregnancies, many of which may happen to adolescent girls. There are

vital lessons to be learned from post-pandemic contexts; after the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, teenage pregnancies increased by up to 65%. This trend was caused by an increase in sexual exploitation in exchange for food or money brought on by poverty; an inability to prevent unintended and/or unwanted pregnancies due to the collapse of reproductive health services, and; disruption to education leaving many girls out of school.[xxi] We are increasingly seeing similar scenarios unfolding in the COVID 19 outbreak. This will have a significant impact on girls' lives right now and well-into their adulthood, as well as impacting their future children. Their health, well-being and livelihoods will be affected, and many will never return to school.

For many families, growing economic vulnerability will increase the threat of child labour, child marriage and child trafficking. UNFPA has already predicted that 13 million additional more girls will be pushed into child marriage over the next 10 years.[xxii] Our experiences from previous catastrophes show that most of these marriages will happen in the first two years of crisis, putting 4 million girls at immediate risk.[xxiii] We also know from the Ebola outbreak that loss of livelihood, unemployment, business shutdowns, combined with school closures and lack of social protection systems can increase incidences of child labour and trafficking.[xxiv]

The most vulnerable children will likely be at the greatest risk and in the greatest need for protection. Such groups include children who are: refugees, migrants, internally displaced, conflict-affected, deprived of liberty, living without parental care, living on the street or in urban slums, living in situations of neglect, abuse, and exploitation, as well as those with disabilities.

Whether children are direct victims of violence and harmful practices or have witnessed domestic violence, the impact on individual child well-being and on society is long-lasting, Evidence shows that violence against children has an enormous impact on the health and education of individual children as well as their emotional and behavioural development.[xv] The

COVID-19 places millions of children at risk of violence in fragile & displacement contexts

Globally, an estimated <u>800 million children live in fragile and conflict-affected areas</u> and one in 10 live in extremely fragile contexts. In addition, <u>40 million children are currently forcibly displaced by conflict.</u> These children live in precarious conditions, including large over-crowded camps or densely populated urban settings with limited or no access to basic services including basic healthcare.

They are already at risk of or experiencing different forms of violence and exploitation, including physical, sexual and gender-based violence. These at-risk children are often out of school and pushed into child marriage and child labour. Many are dealing with significant mental and psycho-social health challenges and trauma.

The impact of COVID-19 is likely to be disastrous and unprecedented for these children, as a result of the interruption or total breakdown of already stretched or limited formal and informal child protection systems and other essential services, including formal and informal education. Even where national services (such as healthcare and education) are available and functioning, access can be severely limited owing to a number of factors, including cost and bureaucratic/status barriers and lack of information, social capital/networks and referral systems.

personal costs lead to loss of social capital and forgone human development, as well as the huge economic impact, costing societies 2-5% of global GDP. We need to act now to minimise the risks and prevent further escalation of all forms of violence against children.

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Decreased ability to seek help

While risks have increased, the capacity of formal and informal child protection systems to respond have been limited. The services to prevent, report, respond, care and support have been restricted due to the current emergency or moved to remote support. Movement restrictions have prevented child protection and welfare workers, as well as humanitarian aid workers, from being able to reach girls and boys who are in need.

Our recent report *A Second Revolution Thirty Years of Child Rights and the Unfinished Agenda*,[xxvi] noted that violence against children is the one area where the largest gap between aspiration and implementation can be seen. We found that child protection systems in many countries have been unable to prevent and protect children from violence even before the COVID-19 outbreak. This was mainly because they were relatively new systems, which are response-oriented and widely underfunded. However, these shortcomings were exacerbated by the fact that in some regions, some forms of violence are seen as "culturally acceptable" or "inevitable." This is especially true in cases of sexual violence, child marriage and physical punishment. The implications of the response to COVID-19 are likely to exacerbate these existing problems.

We are particularly concerned for children living in fragile and humanitarian settings, where

child protection systems are already weak or non-existent. The Ebola outbreak in West Africa showed that statutory or community-based systems were weakened and child protection responses were either delayed, under-funded or insufficiently integrated into the response by the international humanitarian community.[xxvii]

Promising Interventions

The new context has also sparked new ways of doing things and a plethora of localised innovations supported by global guidance and technical notes. Education and information-sharing campaigns to support parents by helping them to relieve stress and adopt positive parenting methods have been implemented on an unprecedented scale in many countries. Protocols are being developed to ensure a continuity in child protection reporting, referral and case management mechanisms. Different options are being explored to offer mental health, physical support and counselling through online contact or generic activities distributed through different media channels. In some countries, first responders, including community health workers are being trained to recognise signs of violence. These efforts help, but the majority of human and financial resources are still being devoted to responding to the health implications of the pandemic; responding to violence against children must be seen as priority. Currently, the child protection component of the Global Humanitarian Response Plan remains greatly underfunded, with the funding gap close to 90%. With the proper prioritisation from governments and donors, this can be reversed.

Agenda for Action

Joining Forces, as a coalition of six child rights organisations, calls for child protection to be prioritised in the response to COVID-19. A child protection approach that places children at the centre – upholding child rights principles, reaching the most vulnerable and with adequately funding – is essential for all children, girls and boys, to be able to access and receive the support and services they need in these difficult times.

Such considerations in 'Back to School' campaigns can also ensure greater protection for the girls and boys who were not enrolled in school in the first place or at risk of not returning to school and are at a high risk of exploitation.

It is also imperative for social protection campaigns to place the protection of children and recognition of their rights as a central aspect to initiatives – such as those which support positive parenting, help secure family finances and address family violence – as these can address some of the root causes that increase the risk of violence against children.

Working on the frontline to prevent and respond to violence against children, Joining Forces knows how quality and well-funded holistic child protection programming can transform children's lives and how, when we work together across education, health and social protection, it enables us to reach every last child.

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Calls to Action:
Joining Forces calls on governments, donors, UN agencies and civil society organisations to:

→ Recognise child protection as a priority lifesaving intervention, ensuring it is fully funded and incorporated in all COVID-19 response plans and efforts. All COVID-19 response plans should include a strong age, gender, disability and inclusion analysis to ensure the unique needs of girls and boys are met.

→ Ensure adherence to child protection ' minimum standards and globally recommended practices in all response interventions, including; the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action; the INSPIRE strategies for ending violence against children, and; the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action's technical notes on the protection of children during the current pandemic.

→ Recognise formal and informal child protection services and the social service workforce as essential and ensure that all child protection services are continued, particularly for those in fragile and humanitarian contexts and that all child protection workers are provided with personal protective equipment.

→ Prioritise investment in child protection systems and close the gap in child protection funding, especially in the Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

→ Adapt and continue the delivery of services that mitigate risk factors for violence, abuse and neglect, including programmes relating to domestic violence, substance misuse and caregivers' mental health and psychosocial well-being.

→ Ensure steps are taken to minimise child-family separation, including placing temporarily-separated children in safe, adequate and family-based care, preference given to kinship placements and with the ability to communicate with their parents or primary caregivers. The best interests of children in residential or other alternative care, as well as those in quarantine/isolation and detention centres and other children deprived of their liberty, must be primary consideration in making decisions on their protection and psychosocial support.

→ Support child-friendly and survivor-centred reporting mechanisms and ensure they have the capacity to provide child-friendly and gender sensitive counselling, reporting and response to all those who need it. This includes the maintenance of child helplines, and of essential case management services.

→ Prioritise age- and gender-sensitive mental health and psychosocial support to children and their parents or caregivers who are at risk of or have experienced violence – especially for the most vulnerable children.

→ Ensure all first responders are trained and able to identify COVID-19-related child protection risks and know how to safely report and refer concerns.

→ Urgently put in place direct cash transfers and other child-sensitive and gender-responsive social protection programmes designed to help families meet the basic needs of children and discourage negative coping strategies to supplement family

income through child labour, child marriage or sexual exploitation. Cash transfers can also mitigate family and intimate partner violence linked to confinement measures and economic stressors.

→ Ensure access to safe online/remote education for all children, including those with disabilities and living in refugee camps and situations of displacement, by using child-friendly distance education methods such as TV, radio or online learning to alleviate pressure at home and prevent drop-outs. The curriculum should include life skills aimed at minimising risks related to exclusion, improving psychosocial well-being and increasing capacity to mitigate risks of violence and stigmatisation.

→ Ensure safe reopening of schools including by establishing violence-free learning environments and support the return of all children – especially the most vulnerable and those at risk of child marriage, child labour and teenage pregnancies – to school.

→ Support dialogue between children and decision-makers at all levels, so that the reality of the experience and impact of COVID-19 on children and their families can be heard and the necessary steps can be taken to improve all aspects of COVID-19 responses based on the perspectives of children.

ANNEX
How are Joining Forces members responding

Members of Joining Forces have been at the forefront of efforts to prevent and respond to multiple risks of violence from COVID-19. From the very beginning of the outbreak, an emphasis was placed on ensuring that cases of violence against children can be recognised and that children have access to reporting mechanisms and response services. This means **training frontline responders,** such as community health workers and other frontline actors, including faith leaders, on child rights and protection, as well as establishing Mobile Health Teams on safe identification and referrals for child protection concerns, with a particular focus on referring unaccompanied and separated children.

The importance of **maintaining mechanisms for children to report violence and seek support** such as child helplines is widely recognised; Joining Forces partners have worked together in a number of countries including Uganda, India and the Philippines to ensure that helplines are active, resourced and are connected to essential child protection services at a community level. In Uganda, Joining Forces agencies advocated strongly for the Child Abuse Helpline to be recognised as an essential service and to be reopened and staffed after it was suspended at the beginning of lockdown. In some cases, applications were developed to facilitate reporting online or through mobile phones; in Indonesia, Mongolia and Peru, World Vision and partners worked with the government to develop such options. In Yemen, Save the Children has been working with **community-based child protection monitoring mechanisms** to identify child protection concerns linked to the outbreak, including community-led identification of children and remotely facilitated psychosocial support and integrated, gender-sensitive approaches.

All agencies are responding in different ways to the interruption of direct contact experienced by most caseworkers with children and caregivers for **child protection case management**, to ensure that children are connected to the support they need. This has involved: providing phone and messaging advice and support for community child protection workers (para-social workers and community leaders) closest to children and families; developing criteria for communities and caseworkers to prioritise the most urgent cases; advocating for and providing continued direct support for those most urgent cases by trained social workers, and; both adapting and expanding online case management information systems and protocols.

In both Iraq and South Sudan, for example, Save the Children is finding that Primero/CPIMS+ allows for agile and safe remote case-management supervision during lockdown that would not have been possible with paper-based systems. In South Sudan, World Vision has also adapted a comprehensive child protection case management approach. In Uganda, ChildFund, Plan International, Save the Children and World Vision are supporting over 25 District Action Centres to respond to cases of abuse reported through the child helpline. In Kenya, World Vision has targeted 1,000 assistant chiefs (leaders working at almost the lowest level of administration) to monitor the status of children and their safety and protection from violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic is taking a toll on children's mental and psychosocial well-being – not least with the shut-down of schools affecting over 1.65 billion children – and increased stressors on families through income losses and economic downturns. Several Joining Forces agencies have adapted **MHPSS programmes to COVID-19** (World Vision Syria) and incorporated **psychosocial messaging** into support for distance and online learning (Save the Children).

All the Joining Forces agencies have taken steps to adapt their communications with parents and

caregivers to the pandemic situation, with an emphasis on **disseminating positive parenting messages** to meet the challenges of lockdown. Plan International has adapted their Parenting and Life Skills package to include a 'Coping with COVID-19' segment for remote delivery through radio, WhatsApp, phone or other platforms dependent on context. In Mongolia, World Vision is using social media to reach parents and teachers with positive parenting stories and practical tips to protect children. World Vision Mongolia's Ambassador, a famous actor, used Facebook and Instagram posts/live sessions to share information on positive parenting. Save the Children has lifted key messages from its Parenting without Violence approach for transmission via radio; conference calls; social media; flyers for caregivers, children and adolescents; community announcement systems. The organisation has also formulated short skill-building sessions to help parents during this time. SOS Children's Villages has created a video in Spanish for the Latin America and Caribbean regions that gives a series of examples on possible risks and how to protect children from violence in the home. In South Sudan, ChildFund has developed and disseminated posters for children and caregivers on how to keep engaged through play, where to report cases of violence and integrated COVID-19 prevention messages to help communities cope during lockdown. These messages have been translated into Arabic and are also played on radio as jingles and as spot messages to reach the South Sudanese refugee children and caregivers.

SOS Children's Villages supported **online counselling and support services for foster parents and other care providers** in several countries. In Bolivia, they developed and disseminated guidelines to support and enhance safeguarding and child protection measures for children in alternative care and for children receiving support within their families.

All Joining Forces agencies have committed to **listening to children and their experiences during COVID-19 outbreak.** Almost all members have organised surveys with children to solicit and share their views on the problems and solutions. The surveys will elevate children's voices on how the current pandemic is impacting their day-to-day lives and subjective well-being,

how they understand the current situation and the impact it can have on both their societies and their futures.

Plan International's Girls Out Loud digital platform allows girls to speak in confidence about issues affecting them and receive information about their rights; girls and young women have used this platform to inform us of COVID-19's impacts on their communities. World Vision has also surveyed 101 children from 13 countries on the impact of COVID-19 and compiled their responses in the 'Children's Voices in Times of COVID' report. SOS Children's Villages has created an online video portal entitled 'CORONA vlog: From A Child's Perspective,' featuring the experiences of children across the globe. Educo, member of ChildFund Alliance, is also currently undertaking a global 'Survey on the Subjective Well-being of Children, Adolescents and Youth During the COVID-19 Pandemic.' Terres des Hommes has partnered with the UNSG Special Representative on Violence against Children and launched the #CovidUnder19 initiative to gather children's views on their current experiences and how they see their role as active citizens. Save the Children is supporting the Latin American and Caribbean Children and Adolescents Network, bringing together 10 child-led organisations in nine countries. Together, they consulted children aged 10-18 on their experience of COVID-19 in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru and Uruguay. ChildFund Alliance has been repurposing its Child-friendly Accountability project and online platform to help children voice their concerns about the COVID-19 crisis and contribute to policy discussions.
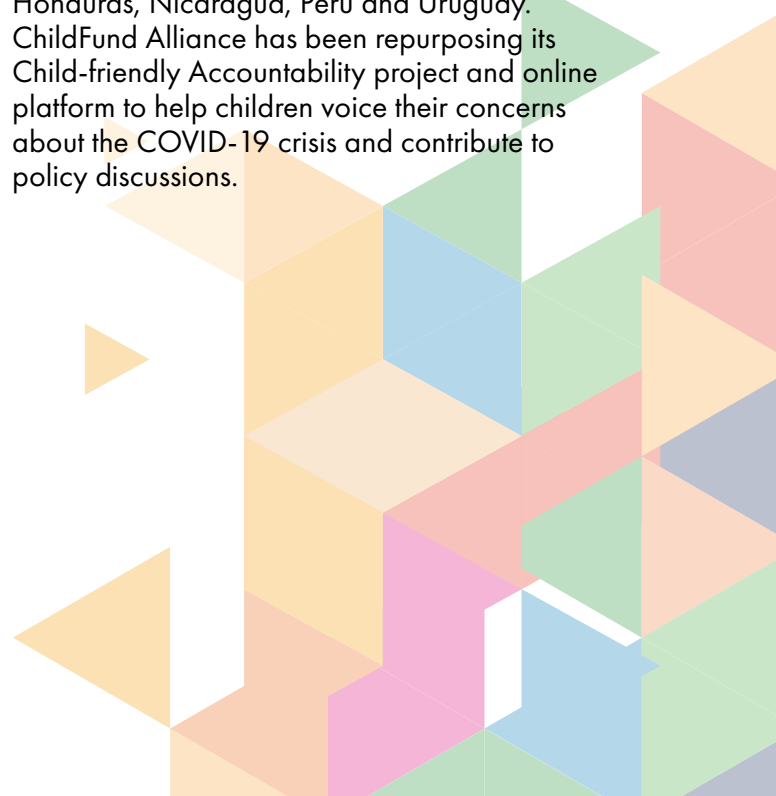
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