



**BREAKING POINT:
COVID-19 and the Child Protection
Crisis in Afghanistan**

COVID-19 IN AFGHANISTAN

COVID-19 in Afghanistan is having a catastrophic impact on millions of vulnerable families. Even before the pandemic emerged, 93 percent of Afghan households survived on less than \$2 per day so the vast majority of families have virtually no capacity to absorb the economic shock of COVID-19 and the resulting loss of livelihoods. Border closures have also meant a drastic reduction in exports and a sharp decline in remittances. In addition, the price of staple foods continues to increase, making it harder and harder for families to feed themselves, support their children and meet basic needs.

A significant number of returnees have also come back to Afghanistan since the outbreak started. According to the International Organization of Migration (IOM), over 597,000 Afghans have been deported or returned voluntarily home both due to the impacts of COVID-19 as well as the deteriorating status of economy of Iran¹.

Reintegration for returning refugees including children, poses a number of challenges particularly as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically access to child protection, education, healthcare and other essential services.

The children of Afghanistan, especially those already suffering from poverty and inequity, are among the most vulnerable to the harsh socio-economic impact of COVID-19. Child mortality, malnutrition, forced marriages, sexual abuse, child labour and other forms of violence and exploitation and are all common challenges for the average child. With the addition of COVID-19 and its immediate and secondary impacts, children are now more anxious and worried than ever before and at greater risk of facing physical, sexual and emotional violence, especially as the economic impacts of the crisis set in with poverty rates and hunger in the country rising.

Methodology

This policy brief is drawn from the analysis of two World Vision Assessments, conducted in May and June 2020:

1. ***The Assessment of Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 on the Most Vulnerable Families of Afghanistan:*** To better understand the impacts of COVID-19 outbreak on the socioeconomic aspects of vulnerable families. Conducted in the 3 western provinces of Herat, Badghis and Ghor with a total sample of 409 completed interviews. 134 households were sampled for interviews in each province.
2. ***Girls and Boys Consultation in Middle East and Eastern Europe (MEER) Region during the Time of Pandemic from the Novel Coronavirus COVID-19:*** To explore girls' and boys' views and experiences related to the outbreak of COVID-19, focusing on violence against children and opportunities for boys and girls to contribute to stopping the spread of the virus. The consultation conducted in the Street Working Children's Centre in Herat included 30 girls and 30 boys between the ages of 13 and 16. Both who qualitative surveys (10) and quantitative questionnaires (50) were facilitated.

¹ https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/default/files/Reports/iom_afghanistan-return_of_undocumented_afghans_situation_report_27_sep-03_oct_2020.pdf. In the October 2020 Situation report, IOM noted that due to coronavirus transmission fears in Iran, spontaneous returns continue, with a total of 25,917 undocumented Afghans returned from Iran through the Milak (Nimroz) and Herat (Islam Qala) borders between 27 Sep – 03 Oct 2020.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings of the assessment and consultations were concerning with both results highlighting that people are severely struggling to meet basic household needs. Due to the negative impact of the outbreak, the vulnerability of the households further increased and already existing dangerous coping strategies such as child labour, child marriage and decrease of food consumption have been worsened by financial insecurity for families and losses of household income.



47.7%

of the respondents reported that they have lost their jobs or revenues.



85.6%

of the respondents reported to have contracted debts.



48.7%

of families have sent their children to work.



50.9%

of households do not have food stock.



21%

of families reported that they are “never” able to meet the basic needs of their children.

The time to act to protect the children of Afghanistan is now. As global leaders and national decision makers meet at the *2020 Afghanistan Conference* on 23rd - 24th November, World Vision calls for the following urgent actions to address the grave situation for girls and boys:

Key Recommendations

1. The Government of Afghanistan, donors, the UN and international community must continue to prioritise health system strengthening in Afghanistan, by building capacity of health services and frontline workers in COVID-19 response, and ensuring continuity of essential maternal, new-born and child health, and nutrition services to mitigate risk of mortality and morbidity. This should include specialised services to address mental health and psychosocial support needs and sexual and gender-based violence, and strengthening referral mechanisms between health, nutrition, food security and child protection actors;
2. Donors must provide funding to address immediate food security needs of children and their families;
3. Donors must prioritise funding of sustainable livelihood opportunities in order to support vulnerable families to reduce negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage and child labour;
4. The Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees must prioritize child-focused solutions that protect the rights of all children regardless of status including access to education, health care, access to clean drinking water and other essential services;
5. National and international actors must prioritize a gender and protection focused response to the primary and secondary impact of COVID-19 including the prevention and response to all forms of GBV including child marriage, physical and sexual violence.

GROWING HUNGER AND POVERTY

The findings of World Vision's recent assessment suggest that people are severely struggling to meet basic household needs. Close to 80% of respondents reported that COVID-19 measures have had a negative effect on their ability to earn income, with a further 48% confirming they have lost their jobs entirely. Results showed an increase in loans as an alternative source for compensating lost income, while 92% of the population has incurred significant debt. World Vision assessments are echoed in similar findings from peer agencies operational in other parts of the country².

Existing poverty and vulnerability to shocks due to insecure, unstable and inadequate earnings have been exacerbated by COVID lockdown and social distancing measures. At the outset of 2020, more than 12 million people were already facing acute food insecurity due to decades of conflict, natural disasters and growing poverty, according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Analysis. Findings from the

World Vision assessment showed that 88% of respondents require food assistance, confirming the negative consequences of the pandemic. WFP market price data showed that almost all main food commodity prices have increased and both purchasing power indicators decreased³. This has resulted in more than 4.6 children and women requiring nutritional assistance (up from 3.3 million earlier in 2020).

With the rise in poverty and hunger, it is sadly predictable that there is a growing chance that children who are out of school will not go back once schools reopen as parents won't be able to afford to send them and many children have started working to support their families. The loss of family income and employment directly connects to increased protection risks for girls and boys with children forced to work and young girls, being married early for the dowry which can provide families with the funds needed to survive the economic shock of the pandemic.



² According to Save the Children, 53 percent of children in Afghanistan have already observed the economic impacts of COVID-19, including the loss of employment of a parent, increased prices of basic goods in markets, or increased debt. With agriculture playing a crucial role for the national economy in Afghanistan, accounting for about a quarter of GDP and the agriculturally-dependent population constituting 60 percent of the total population, the lack of access to sustainable agricultural opportunities is detrimental to survival.

³ [WFP Afghanistan Countrywide Weekly Market Price Bulletin](#)



“The President should help Street children families and provide them with job opportunities. If COVID-19 does not kill them, poverty and hunger will surely kill them” (Girl 13, Afghanistan)

A CRISIS FOR CHILDREN: lost educational opportunities and child labour

Before COVID-19, four decades of conflict had impoverished families to the point that child labour in Afghanistan is part of the livelihood coping strategy for many families, with income from a child's work considered crucial to survival for thousands of households. At the start of 2020, it was estimated that about a quarter of Afghan children between the ages of five and 14 were engaged in work and some 3.7 million children were already out of school. These numbers have now peaked⁴ with more children being forced into daily labour or begging on the streets to supplement household income and if that fails, with 49 % of interviewed households reporting that they deal with reduced income by sending children to work.

Quarantine measures, school closures and restrictions on movement disrupt children's routine and social support structures, while also placing new stressors on parents and caregivers who may have to find new childcare options or forgo work. According to interviewed girls and boys, the COVID-19 pandemic increased financial insecurity for families and resulted in losses of household income which intensified the expectations that girls and boys can contribute financially to support the family income.

Boys are more likely to be engaged in child labour or seeking money outside the home in activities such as collecting garbage, where they are at risk of being beaten, verbally abused, harassed and exploited as cheap labourers and at risk of being exposed to the virus. These jobs are unsafe both for their physical and psychological wellbeing. Findings from the World Vision children's consultation showed that 88.8% of surveyed children contribute themselves to the family income, showcasing the prevalence of child labour in the target location. Equally concerning is that as the lockdown continues and families become increasingly poorer, there is a risk that some of the children who were going to school prior to the pandemic will be unable to continue to pursue an education. This increase in the probability of permanent drop-outs will significantly affect children's well-being and future.



⁴ *Afghanistan: COVID19- Multi-Sectoral Response Operational Situation Report, 3 June 2020*

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“From the beginning of the outbreak, I did not go to school and did not study. I heard that teachers are teaching through TV channel, but we do not have TV and Radio at home. I don’t have phone and access to internet” (Dil Aqa, Girl, 13)

“Before COVID-19 I used to go to school for half day and to work for the other half, Now I am working for the whole day” (Dil Aqa, Girl, 13)

A GENDERED CRISIS: girls now more in danger of exploitation, abuse and violence than ever before

Girls and boys interviewed during the assessment said that a pandemic like this presents unique challenges that can increase the number of child marriages. They said that with more exacerbated poverty, families are more likely to marry off daughters in times of economic stress to alleviate the perceived burden of caring for them. Promising the marriage of a girl child by a parent to secure a loan of cash or agricultural inputs in advance is a practice which highlights the reliance on the dowry economy for the financial security of a family. In addition, the dowry is usually higher for younger girls, so parents in need of the financial assets may choose to marry off their daughter earlier for a higher amount of money in dowry⁵.

One 13 year old girl confirmed that early forced child marriage has always existed and even before the pandemic, saying “Girls and boys in Afghanistan

are victims of early marriages and family violence since decades before COVID-19”.

The challenges young people experience is compounded by gender inequality for girls and young women who continue to be discriminated against due to rigid gender norms and expectations. Being a young girl in Afghanistan is especially hard as girls and young women face numerous challenges and have restricted access to essential services, information, support and safety⁶. In the poorest and remote areas of the country, enrolment levels varied extensively and girls continue to lack equal access. Low girl enrolment can be explained in part by a lack of female teachers, especially in rural schools. Only 16 per cent of Afghanistan’s schools were girls-only, and many of them lacking proper sanitation facilities, which further hindered attendance. Before COVID, 60% of out of school children were girls and there is a real possibility that post COVID, more girls will drop out.

In a survey done by Oxfam⁷, 97% of female respondents said that gender-based violence has increased since the COVID-19 outbreak started. COVID-19 is proving to be a serious exacerbating



⁵ Child Marriage in Afghanistan: Changing the narrative

⁶ UNICEF and UNFPA (2020). Covid-19 and young girls' vulnerability to Child marriage and teenage pregnancies in Afghanistan

⁷ Oxfam (2020). A New Scourge to Afghan Women: COVID-19

factor in further limiting girls from possible social support, services or information which could address longstanding gender discrimination. Many girls are even more trapped at home now due to the lockdown which in turn is increasing their exposure to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. The combination of COVID-19, the long years of conflict, the deep rooted and worsening poverty and hunger will also increase the incidence of child marriages as families increasingly see dowries as a source of income. With the economic distress caused by the pandemic early child forced marriage in Afghanistan is only on the rise.

This will result in a situation where for many children, the harm they experience as a result of COVID-19 will not be temporary. Things may never return to 'normal', and millions of girls and boys will stay trapped in cycles of violence and stressful lives, limiting their potential⁸. Poverty and household vulnerability leading to increased early child forced marriage will inevitably lead to further intergenerational cycles of poverty and violence.



“I feel the world is over, I am thinking about the future, what will happen? Can I work again? Can I be happy again? Now I am very saddened”
(Dil Aqa, Girl, 13)

CONCLUSION: A livelihoods crisis resulting in increased child protection risks

The findings from both World Vision assessments suggest that people are severely struggling to meet basic household needs. Due to the negative impacts of the outbreak, the vulnerability of the households further increased which leads to negative coping mechanisms such as child labour, child marriage, school dropouts and decrease in

food consumption, all negatively affecting girls and boys. The recent nutrition surveys⁹ in Afghanistan show that an estimated two million children under five will suffer from the most life-threatening form of extreme hunger annually. The effects of the lockdown coupled with one of the weakest health systems in the world – Afghanistan has just 0.3 doctors per 1,000 people – means malnourished and sick children are much less likely to get the life-saving treatment they need to survive.

The interruption of agricultural income generating activities threatens not only income but food insecurity as crop cycles are missed, yields are low, supply systems are interrupted and inflation occurs. Given the deteriorating opportunities for families to engage in sustainable livelihood activities, it is likely that COVID-19 will negate modest gains in previous years for families to have ownership over and increase their economic situation. The selling of productive assets is a coping strategy that families will adopt since it provides easy access to cash as observed in previous post disaster assessments. Reaching the most vulnerable with adequate funding is essential for all girls and boys to ensure their families are able to engage in sustainable income generating activities in these devastating times.

In addition, given the enormity of the problems, the funding and focus given to child protection has consistently been lower than the issue deserves. 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.

While meeting the most vulnerable people's necessities and containing the COVID-19 outbreak is pressing in the short-term, planning should start to facilitate the longer economic recovery in the country. Decisions on sustainable assistance and livelihoods support will have longer-term implications for people's resilience and self-reliance which translates directly to the increased wellbeing of families and reduction of harmful coping mechanisms that affect children.

⁸ COVID-19 Aftershocks: A perfect storm: millions more children at risk of violence under lockdown and into the 'new normal'

⁹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/covid-19-more-seven-million-children-afghanistan-risk-hunger-food-prices-soar-due>

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT OF AFGHANISTAN (GOA) AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:



The Government of Afghanistan and the international community must continue to prioritise health system strengthening in Afghanistan, by building capacity of health services and frontline workers in COVID-19 response, and ensuring continuity of essential maternal, new-born and child health, and nutrition services to mitigate risk of mortality and morbidity. This should include specialised services to address mental health and psychosocial support needs and sexual and gender-based violence, and strengthening referral mechanisms between health, nutrition, food security and child protection actors;



The GoA and the international community must prioritise funding for quality and sustainable livelihood opportunities and social protection programming in order to support vulnerable families to reduce negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage and child labour;



The GoA and the international community must significantly increase and maintain funding for child protection programming and child protection systems to prevent long-term irreversible consequences for children as a result of both COVID-19 and pre-existing risks;



The GoA and the international community must prioritize gender-sensitive programming and investments including in the prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence surging as a consequence of COVID-19, women's quality income generation opportunities, and women's leadership programmes;



The Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees must prioritize child-focused durable solutions that protect the rights of all children regardless of status including access to education, health care, access to clean drinking water and other essential services;



The GoA should immediately launch public awareness campaigns and work with religious leaders to raise awareness of the rights of the girl, including the legal age of marriage;



The GoA and the international community must support and realise increased and sustained representation and participation of women and girls in decision making processes including ongoing peace negotiations, and the 2020 Afghan Conference.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS, INCLUDING UN AGENCIES, NGOS AND INGOS:



Must prioritize a gender and protection focused response to the primary and secondary impact of COVID-19 including the prevention and response to all forms of GBV including child marriage, physical and sexual violence;



Ensure programming efforts addressing child labour are linked with social protection programming, in particular targeting parents/caregivers from rural areas and parents/caregivers with disabilities or those of children with disabilities;



Ensure social protection measures are in place for the most vulnerable, providing families with cash and food assistance to meet their children's immediate basic needs, and supporting parents to identify positive coping mechanisms cognisant of protection risks for children;



Ensure support is provided to parents/caregivers in their efforts to send boys and girls back to school, and to strengthen community-based child protection mechanisms to identify children vulnerable to dropping out of school and child labour;



Should support joint activities for caregivers and children leading to strengthened relationships and improved psycho-social well-being.

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World Vision International (WVI) began emergency relief operations in Afghanistan in 2001 by addressing the urgent needs of children and families affected by natural disasters and decades of conflict. More than a decade later, World Vision Afghanistan's (WVA) programmes have expanded to development sectors such as health, nutrition, WASH, child protection and education, empowering women to engage in civil and social change through interfaith partnership.

WVA targets the most vulnerable in its interventions; including children, women, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and returnee refugees, as well as the most impoverished and marginalized families. These priorities have been chosen to contribute to our Goal of: "Improved survival and well-being of Afghan girls and boys, building the foundations for a better future for Afghan children and their communities."

Our work is well established in Herat, Badghis and Ghor provinces in the western region of Afghanistan. We work closely with all levels of society including children, parents, teachers, village councils, religious leaders, ministries, provincial departments and other national and international agencies.

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