**How Mental Health is Linked to**

**Various Concerns of Child in Need of Care and Protection**

**When Institutionalised**

**Introduction**

India, the largest democracy of the world is also the home of largest number of children in the world, significantly larger than the number in China.[[1]](#footnote-1) Though The Millennium Declaration in 2000 overtly called attention to the need to protect children from conflict, violence, abuse and exploitation[[2]](#footnote-2), the situation of children in the country is abysmally low and they are at risk for exploitation, abuse, violence and neglect.

Moreover, A Study conducted by United Nations (UN) on violence against children called for urgent action to prevent all forms of violence against children. The study highlighted child care Institutions to be one of the sources of violence against children.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is important to understand that children who enter institutionalisation through the Child Protection system are those who more often than not have been through something grave – loss, abandonment, death of loved ones, violence, betrayal, neglect etc. This is what makes the need to focus on mental health because, while it is the direst need of the traumatised child, it is the one that has received absolutely no attention.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to understand the minimum standards prevailing for quality care that encompass emotional, educational, behavioural, nutritional and educational issues.

Following are some major concerns this paper will look upon.

1. Child labour: The phenomenon of child labor raises the concern of many human rights activists in the world, given the negative effects of child labour on society in general and on children in particular. However, the fight against this unacceptable phenomenon remains a real challenge for all societies in light of the increasing incidence of poverty and lack of awareness of its adverse effects on the development of children. While all countries address child labour as a national challenge and substantial progress has been recorded, daunting challenges still remain.

2. Child Trafficking: Children worldwide experience violence, exploitation and

Abuse and are forcefully trafficked into exploitative conditions of work and are often exploited for commercial sex, including prostitution, pornography and sex tourism. Evidences from 2012 Global Report on Trafficking, released by UNODC have revealed that 27 per cent of all victims of human trafficking, between 2007 and 2010 are children.[[4]](#footnote-4)

3. Child Marriage: Marriage at an early age is a violation of rights of all children, it denies basic rights to health, nutrition, education, freedom from violence, abuse and exploitation and also takes away the child of his/her childhood. In case of girls, it puts additional risks associated with early sexual life and child bearing. Although, according to UNICEF Report India recorded a steady decline in the rate of child marriages since 1992-1993 i.e. 9%, the rate of child marriages is high in the country i.e. 43%. These Young girls, who get married at a very early age, often become easy victims of domestic violence, bonded labour and sexual abuse. Moreover, these child brides often live with their husband’s extended family, which may also be a source of violent abuse, in crowded conditions.

4. Corporal Punishment: Children are most likely to face corporal punishment by their parents, teachers and also their care givers. In a survey of 4,022 parents in 10 cities in India carried out by the Podar Institute of Education, 65% of respondents said they had “spanked” their children. Mothers were more likely than fathers to hit their children, with 77% of mothers having done so. Also, a study of men’s childhood experiences of violence 2012 conducted in Brazil, Chile, Croatia, India, Mexico and Rwanda, which involved men, aged 18-59 living in urban settings, found a high prevalence of corporal punishment in all six countries.[[5]](#footnote-5)

5. Child Sexual Abuse: Child sexual abuse is one of the most pervasive social problems faced by this society. Its impact is profound because of the sheer frequency with which it occurs and because of the trauma brought to the lives of children and adults who have experienced this crime. A study conducted by the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) revealed that 53 per cent of the interviewed children reported having faced some form of sexual abuse and also showed that boys were as vulnerable to abuse as girls.[[6]](#footnote-6)

How Mental Health is Linked to Major Concerns of Child Protection: Child labour, Child Trafficking Child Marriage, Corporal Punishment and Child Sexual Abuse

1. Child labour: Children working at an early age constitute an undeviating threat to child’s mental health, physical health, social development and general wellbeing and, often interfere with his/her education.[[7]](#footnote-7) Besides, child labour at an early age has often resulted in a kind of disrespect for him, losing communication with the family due to a long stay in the work place. Another factor that is linked to the mental health of these children is the element of violence that is often associated with them. Working children are mostly subjected to beating, abusing and spanking by their masters. This disturbs their psychological state and often converts them into criminals and anti-social elements. The issue of working children has been addressed by the government through various plans, policies and laws. However, there are still many risky work places which imply misuse and abuse of children without giving the child an opportunity for good education, food and shelter.

Likewise, it also generates negative consequences on the quality of life and on the mental health of minors. A study conducted on domestic servants by Department of Pediatrics, Faculty of Medicine in Nairobi, Kenya, indicated that out of 500 servants between the ages of 6 and 15 years, 90 % suffered from severe emotional distress, had symptoms of withdrawal and regression, and were prematurely aging, as well as experiencing depression and low self esteem. Most of these children had sleep problems; exhibited phobic reactions to their employers, wetted their beds and, in some cases, exhibited behaviour not consistent with their chronological age.[[8]](#footnote-8)

2. Child Trafficking: Child victims of human trafficking face significant problems. Existing researches indicates that for most of the Victims, the experience of trafficking both follows from, and contributes to a history of Trauma. Longer and severe experiences with trafficking can lead to higher levels of mental health problems, including symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Importantly, symptoms of PTSD remain high regardless of the amount of time since trafficking, indicating that the traumatic impacts of trafficking can endure over time for victims if untreated.[[9]](#footnote-9) Also, it endangers a child’s dignity and morals, especially when sexual exploitation is involved, such as prostitution and child pornography.

Child victims of labour trafficking are often hungry or malnourished to the extent that they may never reach their full height, may have poorly formed or rotting teeth, and later may experience reproductive problems. The psychological effects of torture are helplessness, shame and humiliation, shock, denial and disbelief, disorientation and confusion, and anxiety disorders including post traumatic stress disorder, phobias, panic attacks and depression. Moreover, after being abused by multiple adults, trafficked children often feel afraid of all adults.

In case of trafficking for sex industry, the victims have to serve many people in a day. Therefore, with the frequency of un-protective sex, they are subjected to high risk of HIV infection and multiple pregnancies for girls. The child Victims also found to be in poor health conditions. Child victims of labour trafficking have had prolonged hunger resulting in poor nutritional status to the extent that it may result in permanent stunting of growth. Furthermore, as documented by UNODC trafficked children may suffer, for example, from poorly formed or rotting teeth and may experience reproductive problems at a later date.[[10]](#footnote-10)

3. Child Marriage: Child marriage brings many destructive consequences to the life of a victim. It leads to the removal of girls from school, segregation from family and friends, limiting the child's interactions with the community and peers; it also leads to early pregnancy, which carries considerable health risks for girls (MDG 5) and their babies (MDG 4).

Their psychological well-being and empowerment are seriously affected, since the victim of child marriage is denied of her childhood and adolescence phase. At a tender age of playing with dolls and peers these girls, are subjected to physical and psychological abuse by her family members and husband and also the inherent disadvantage of complete education and a lack of employment opportunities contribute to the cyclic poverty and gender inequality.

Child marriages also results in bonded labour and sexual exploitation, and their powerlessness to fight back make them more vulnerable to both domestic violence and sexual abuse, including non- consensual sex with their husbands. Also, they are unlikely to be protected by a condom and are therefore at high risk of HIV infection and repeated pregnancies. The probability of pregnancy at an early age also creates a situation of emotional turmoil. Complications from pregnancy and childbearing are the leading causes of death as well as mental instability among girls aged 15–19 years.

Many researchers found that those girls under 18 who get married are at high risk risk of lifetime and current psychiatric disorders. They are more likely to experience mental health problems, including depression, anxiety and bipolar disorders. They are also more likely to become dependent on alcohol, drugs and nicotine.[[11]](#footnote-11)

4. Corporal Punishment: Physical punishment, which is considered an effective, and even necessary, means of socialising children since long time, has been discovered to be a cause of a wide range of negative developmental outcomes. There is abundant evidence that corporal punishment is associated with increased aggression in children. Children who have experienced corporal punishment are more likely to be aggressive towards their peers, to approve of the use of violence in peer relationships, to bully and to experience violence from their peers and their parents.[[12]](#footnote-12) It is also associated with the following undesirable behaviours and experiences: decreased moral internalisation, increased child aggression, increased child delinquent and antisocial behaviour, poor quality of relationship between parent and child, decreased child mental health, increased risk of being a victim of physical abuse, increased adult aggression, increased adult criminal and antisocial behaviour, decreased adult mental health, and increased risk of abusing own child or spouse.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Moreover, people who have had experienced physical punishment are more likely to experience nearly every type of mental illness examined. Their risk of mood disorders, including depression and mania, was 1.5 times greater than people who hadn’t been slapped or grabbed. The risk of depression alone was 1.4 times greater, which was the same rate for anxiety. People who’d been physically punished were 1.6 times more likely to abuse alcohol, and 1.5 times more likely to abuse drugs.[[14]](#footnote-14)

5. Child Sexual Abuse: Child sexual abuse is one of the most pervasive social problems faced by this society. Its impact is profound because of the sheer frequency with which it occurs and because of the trauma brought to the lives of children and adults who have experienced this crime. Studies related to the impact of sexual abuse in childhood indicate an association of the experience with significant mental health problems in adulthood. High rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, dissociative disorders, interpersonal dysfunction, sexual problems, and suicidal tendencies have all been identified to varying degrees among women and men who survive sexual abuse. The severity of psychological and psychosocial problems experienced by adult survivors of childhood victimisation has been found to vary based on the age of the victim, the relationship between the victim and the offender, the violent or coercive nature of the crime, the length of time during which the molestation occurred, and other factors.

**Need of Mental Health Framework for Children: When Institutionalised**

Since the general principles of JJ Act and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) uphold the right of all children to grow up in a family with institutions as the last resort for children in need for care and protection except in the case of children who cannot be reintegrated with family , who is a run away child and whose parents cannot be found after a reasonable inquiry, or whose parents have abandoned him and also the child who doesn’t have parents and also in the case where parents are not able to care or upbring the child, can be put . Therefore, only few victimized children can be provided with special psychological care when intituionalised.

The psychological need of every child is different, so of these children who have been through a traumatised past. The children who are compelled to work at an early age, when put into an institution for rehabilitation find it difficult to accept and adjust with the new home. These children face myriad challenges – from abuse and neglect, to emotional, behavioral, and educational difficulties– that threaten their health and well-being. Also, in the case of a victim of child labour, the child becomes economically independent and often doesn’t likes to be dependent on anybody else and also finds it difficult to adjust in a disciplined atmosphere of an institution and often shows tantrums and petulance.

Likewise, when physically and sexually abused, as in the case of corporal punishment, trafficking and child marriages, children have distinctive medical and psychological needs that must be addressed before advancing in the formative years of adulthood. Furthermore, these children often face the situation of lack of trust which leads to difficulty maintaining relationships due to fear of being controlled or abused. Also, abused children cannot express emotions safely. As a result, the emotions get stuffed down, coming out in unexpected ways.

Since, society needs more responsible citizens with very strong ethics if we are aiming at improving human dignity. Consequently, institutions have a strong responsibility towards the children they care for and indirectly, towards the society they work for. Neglecting the vulnerability of children in institutions and denying them protection has a terrible impact on the lives of these children and defers the needed integration of such children with the mainstream. Therefore, these victimsed children when rehabilitated need physical and psychological care, which is far beyond providing a child with basic minimum necessities of food and shelter. A comprehensive mental health framework catering the physical, psychological and emotional needs of a child plays important role in providing the need based care and also the coping mechanism to the victim to come out of their traumatic past and develop a positive outlook towards life.

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Increase in global child trafficking gives cause for concern, says new UNODC report

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