

COVID-19 inflicts fear and thoughts of not wanting to live in vulnerable children

- One in seven children surveyed felt so afraid that nothing could calm them down; one in 18 felt so hopeless that did not want to go on living most or all of the time
- 13% of adults reported violence against children in their households; 26% reported emotional abuse
- 40% of children surveyed were engaged in economic activities
- 55% of children affected by school closures were not able to continue accessing formal education remotely; one in every five children (5 – 15 years) were not attending school in any form

The impact of COVID-19 on children's mental health is so severe that one in seven surveyed feels so afraid that nothing calms them down, while one in 18 said they feel so hopeless that they do not want to carry on living, a new report by World Vision has found.

Nearly two years into the global pandemic, the new [Unmasking II: Childhood Lost](#) report which surveyed close to 5,500 children across eight countries in Asia between April and June 2021 reveals that children are suffering very poor mental health due to the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on their families. 'Most vulnerable'¹ children are even worse off.

The international child-focused humanitarian organisation has urged for immediate action amongst leaders and other civil service organisations to:

- prioritise children's mental health, learning and protection needs as part of overall socioeconomic recovery plans
- direct increased resource investments to developmental efforts that will help put vulnerable children and their families back on track
- provide immediate relief to the vulnerable, and strengthen inter-agency collaboration to build on longer-term opportunities presented by the pandemic.

The dire mental health situation of children is thought to be caused by increasing violence at home, disrupted education and play, and worries about worsening family income and health. This has left many children and youth feeling anxious, angry, afraid and concerned about their future.

"Children and youth are currently suffering from emotional distress because of school closures and lack of physical activities. We want parents and caregivers to understand our feelings and difficulties, and provide emotional and spiritual support," said 17-year-old Blessing, a child leader from Myanmar.

The figures are even more startling for children living in difficult situations:

- If a child was experiencing physical abuse, the likelihood of feeling so hopeless that they did not want to carry on living increased to almost one in every five children, as compared to those not experiencing physical abuse (one in every 18 children).
- Four times more children engaged in economic activities (79%) reported feeling so afraid that nothing could calm them down most or all the time, compared to those not involved in economic activities (21%).

¹ For the purpose of this report, World Vision defines the most vulnerable children (MVC) as those living in at least two of four vulnerability dimensions. These include those living in (1) extreme deprivation (2) catastrophe/disaster (3) abusive relationships (4) serious discrimination.

These findings follow other research reports by World Vision which paint a worsening mental health picture for vulnerable children around the world. A May 2021 survey of refugees and internally displaced persons had respondents listing the lack of psychosocial support in their top three concerns for children; the number of refugee children who say they need mental health support has more than tripled due to COVID-19.² A Joint research by World Vision and War Child³ on the psychosocial well-being of children in conflict-affected countries found that overall, 38% of children and young people who responded felt sad and fearful; a further 25% of children did not express their emotions at all.

Even before the pandemic, studies have shown the severity and risk of common mental health problems heightened amongst people living in poverty who experience high rates of social exclusion, stress and trauma, poor health care and nutrition.⁴ Now across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to exacerbate social inequalities, existing vulnerabilities and limit children's access to social services due to lockdown measures.

Access to education is a critical need, as poor educational systems can increase the risk of mental health issues for youth,⁵ yet 55% of children surveyed affected by school closures said they were unable to continue accessing formal education remotely. One in five children (5 – 15 years) were not attending school in any form. According to UNICEF, since the beginning of the pandemic, 800 million children across Asia have had their educations disrupted by school closures.⁶

“We must pay urgent attention to prioritise children’s mental health, learning and protection needs. So much more can be done to fight against stigma and promote a better understanding of the issues that afflict our children who deserve hope and joy of a better future,” said Terry Ferrari, Regional Leader for East Asia, World Vision International.

World Vision has adapted its programming to address the challenges posed by COVID-19 and reached more than 18.5 million people, including 7.7 million children in Asia Pacific since the onset of the pandemic.⁷ Interventions also include addressing the mental health gaps and psychosocial well-being of children and families.

Note to Editor –

The Unmasking II: Childhood Lost report is a compilation of primary household and child survey data from nearly 12,000 people, including close to 5,500 children across nine Asian countries: Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand (household surveys done; no child surveys were done here), and Vietnam.

Download the report: www.wvi.org/publications/asia-pacific/unmasking-ii-childhood-lost

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² World Vision (2021) *High Risk – Low Priority: Why unlocking COVID-19 vaccine access for refugees and internally displaced communities is critical for children* [Online]. Available from: <https://www.wvi.org/publications/in-an-instant/high-risk-low-priority-refugees-excluded-covid-19-vaccine-rollout>

³ A child-focused humanitarian organisation

⁴ <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/youth-mental-health.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/youth-mental-health.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/press-releases/future-800-million-children-across-asia-risk-their-education-has-been-severely>

⁷ World Vision, Asia Pacific regional COVID-19 Situation Report #26, 25 October 2021.

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