

Report

Revisiting Interventions for Protection of Children post Second Wave of Covid-19.



GOVERNMENT OF MAHARASHTRA



Webinar on

Revisiting interventions for protection of
children post second wave of Covid-19

12th June, 2021 | 11.00am to 1.00pm

In the august presence of



Adv. Yashomatiji Thakur

Hon'ble Minister of Women and Child Development,
Government of Maharashtra

Organized by

The Maharashtra State Commission for Protection of Child Rights

Introduction

The commencement of the lockdown generated widespread panic across India's major cities and states of destination. This situation has aggravated the cases of child abuse, child labour, child marriages, orphaned children, and as well as children of migrant workers. Children's exposure to increased risks has been intensified due to the COVID-19 crisis in many forms. Directly, the virus has resulted in loss of parental care due to death, illness, or separation, and thereby placing children at heightened risk for violence, neglect, and exploitation or sexual abuse. Moreover, the sudden lockdown measures which were implemented to address the pandemic have resulted in critical disruptions to children's everyday environments, routines, and relationships. Increasingly so, many of the prevention and control measures have resulted in disruptions to the reporting and referral mechanisms of child protection services, leaving many children and families vulnerable.

Children without parental or family care, including those living on the streets, in alternative care and those deprived of their basic rights are especially vulnerable under the current circumstances. For children abandoned on streets, access to help and support services is likely to be disturbed and even more challenging. The pandemic's impact has grown substantially and in many rural areas has given rise to an increased number of child marriages. With current circumstances, the unemployment crisis and economic uncertainty stemming from the pandemic might bring more families to use child marriage as a coping mechanism or as the only solution for the current crisis before them.

The limitations on commercial activities have effectively cut off the primary source of income for many of these labour and migrant classes, leaving them with little or no resources to ride out a twenty-one-day lockdown period which could likely be the first among several consecutive nationwide lockdowns. Countless migrant children in the country continue to live without immunisation, lack access to early childhood care and meaningful education, and are forced to work at a young age. The case has been aggravated in the times of a global pandemic, making it more difficult for children to have access to the basic facilities such as proper food, home, medical care, and means of enrolling in schools for obtaining education.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to necessitate proper call of action towards re-enforcing and revisiting the existing protection measures for the protection of children in terms of child abuse, child labour, child marriage, and orphaned/abandoned children.

The Maharashtra State Commission for Protection of Child Rights organised the webinar to assess the ground situation, take stock of the current response and plan for the impending 3rd wave of COVID.

Objectives

The webinar provided a forum to the child protection functionaries in the State to come together to assess and address the challenges faced by the children after the second wave of Covid-19, exhibit immediate preventive strategies, and means to support them with the use of cohesive measures. It further aimed at:

- Assessing the condition and challenges faced by the children including those who are orphaned due to Covid-19, children of the migrants, children vulnerable to exploitation and devise response mechanism towards their protection.
- Strengthen existing State interventions in providing immediate services to children at CCIs including medical, education, safety, nutrition, adoption, foster care and protection from abuse post the second wave of Covid-19.
- Formulate a preparation plan for the next wave of Covid-19.
- Enforce all other activities which will be relevant and necessary for the purposes of achieving the rights of children in the State of Maharashtra.

Participants

The Webinar saw participation from various departments and stakeholders such as Senior Government Officers of the Department of Women and Child Development, Child Welfare Committees, Presiding officers and members of the Juvenile Justice Boards , District Child Protection Units, Law Enforcement Officers, Special Juvenile Protection Units, Secretaries of the District Legal Services Authorities, Academicians, NGOs etc across the State, who are involved in the effective implementation and functioning of the child welfare legislations. In total over 1000 stakeholders attended the webinar.

Additionally, the webinar was livestreamed on the Department of Women and Child Development, Government of Maharashtra's Facebook page which was viewed by over 4500 participants and stakeholders from across the state.

Program Schedule

Webinar on, “Revisiting interventions for Protection of Children post second wave of Covid-19.”

Date- 12th June 2021- Time- 11.00am to 1.00pm

S.R. No	Sessions	Resource Persons	Time
1.	Welcome Address	Dr. Manjusha Kulkarni, - Administrative Officer, Maharashtra State Commission for Protection of Child Rights.	11.00-11.05
2.	Inaugural Session	Ms. Melissa Walavalkar Director of Operations, IJM	11.05-11.10
		Mr. Uday Jadhav, IAS, Secretary, Maharashtra State Commission for Protection of Child Rights.	11.10-11.15
		Smt. Pavneet Kaur, IAS, Commissioner, WCD Commissionerate, Maharashtra State	11.15- 11.20
		Adv. Yashomatiji Thakur Hon’ble Minister for Women and Child Development Department, Government of Maharashtra	11.20-11.25
3.	Session I <i>Overcoming the barriers to Legal Aid for Children post second wave of Covid-19.</i>	Hon. Hitendra Wani, Civil Judge, SD - Secretary, District Legal Services Authority, Mumbai City	11.25-11.45

	<p align="center">Session II</p> <p><i>Improved healthcare and medical facilities for the protection of children post second wave of Covid-19.</i></p>	<p align="center">Dr. Ramchandra Hankare MD (Psm) Deputy Director. RCH n FP State Family Welfare Bureau, PUNE</p>	<p align="center">11.45-12.00</p>
	<p align="center">Session III</p> <p><i>Response of Police in Protecting children from violence and abuse post second wave of Covid-19.</i></p>	<p align="center">Smt. Gopika Jahagirdar, Dy.SP, Prevention of Atrocities against Women and Children, Maharashtra Police</p>	<p align="center">12.00-12.15</p>
	<p align="center">Session IV</p> <p><i>Civil Society's initiatives to promote and protect the rights of the children post second wave of Covid-19.</i></p>	<p align="center">Ms. Priti Patkar, Co-founder and Director, Prerana</p>	<p align="center">12.15-12.35</p>
	<p align="center">Session V</p> <p><i>Role of the Government in implementing Protection measures for children post second wave of Covid-19.</i></p>	<p align="center">Ms. Manisha Biraris, Assistant Commissioner, (Planning), WCD Commissionerate, Maharashtra</p>	<p align="center">12.35-12.55</p>
4.	<p align="center">Way Forward and Vote of Thanks</p>	<p align="center">Dr. Manjusha Kulkarni, Administrative Officer, Maharashtra State Commission for Protection of Child Rights.</p>	<p align="center">12.55-1.00</p>

Welcome Address

Dr. Manjusha Kulkarni, Administrative Officer, MSCPCR, addressed the Dignitaries, Expert Panellists, Participants and introduced the need to revisit interventions for protecting children especially post the second wave and in preparation for the third wave of COVID-19 through collaborations, and solutions in the best interests of children. She urged everyone to actively participate and use this forum to present their challenges and devise a suitable plan of action addressing all areas of protection of children in the State of Maharashtra.



Ms. Melissa Walavalkar, Director of Operations, International Justice Mission, began her note by addressing the challenges faced by children especially during the second wave of Covid-19 pandemic. She commended the noteworthy initiatives taken up by the Government to build a safety net to protect children from abuse, trauma, illness, exploitation, and neglect during the pandemic. She emphasized on the urgency of making online portals more accessible to all persons who can lodge complaints against perpetrators. She enunciated on the need for greater social protection and collaborative approach as we prepare for the third wave of the pandemic. She also encouraged all to unite to fight against the menace of abuse, especially in the grim times of Covid-19 pandemic and devise solutions as we pursue the common goal of ensuring every one of our children are safe and protected.



“The prevention and actionable response to the repercussions of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic requires close coordination and collaboration between several department, sectors, and the civil society.”

Mr. Uday Jadhav, IAS, Secretary, Maharashtra State Commission for Protection of Child Rights, addressed the heightened risks children have faced in recent times due to the social, economic, and psychological impact of the second wave of the pandemic. He stated that children's exposure to various risk factors and crimes have increased, putting them in a more vulnerable state than before. He reiterated the need for common understanding between state and national agencies to combat the issue at hand. He highlighted the importance of webinars such as these which offer platforms to address deep-rooted issues and assist the government in developing a course of action which can come to the aid and benefit of children in need of care and protection in the State of Maharashtra. Lastly, he reminded us of the importance of convergence and collaboration between government authorities and civil-society organizations.



“There is a need for all of us to come together, converge and devise solutions to ensure safety of children.”

Hon. Hitendra Wani, Civil Judge, SD - Secretary, District Legal Services Authority, Mumbai City, used data and statistics to indicate the number of children in need of care and protection in the State. He emphasized on how different age groups and diverse backgrounds make their issues just as different and challenging. He said that the first and foremost priority was to identify the needs of the child and then work towards streamlining them. He also encouraged participants and stakeholders to immediately report cases where children need support by calling the helpline number 1098 or contacting the police.

Hon. Judge highlighted the need to develop an in depth understanding and implementation of the laws so that children can be better assisted and supported. He stressed on the various provisions of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 and the legal provisions related to production of children before the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), the role and authority of the CWC, etc.

He also placed emphasis on the role of the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) in providing legal aid, support, and legal assistance to children. Children in need of care and protection are guaranteed free legal aid and support from the government and the DLSA has been working hard to provide the same. The DLSA has also assisted many children to provide them legal and financial aid, thus assisting in property cases or to acquire succession certificates, etc which help uplift the rights of the child. Likewise, legal support has also been given to victims of sexual abuse and violence during the pandemic times.

He also spoke on how children can be given up or adopted through procedures which have been simplified through the “CARINGS” initiative of Central Adoption Regulation Agency (CARA). He reminded us that the primary responsibility of all stakeholders must be in the best interest of the child.

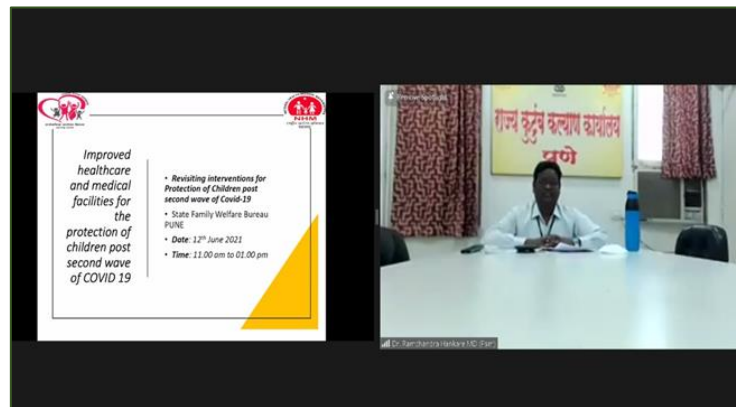


“Endeavours must be taken to uplift and promote the best interest of the child.”

Dr. Ramchandra Hankare, MD (Psm), Deputy Director. RCH n FP, State Family Welfare Bureau, Pune, described different categories of children facing different symptoms of the Covid-19 virus. While some children in particular age groups may be asymptomatic, others in different age groups could show mild or severe symptoms. He reminded us of the responsibility of parents, guardians, family members, institution staff, and any person taking care of children to ensure that the children in their care are wearing masks, sanitizing, or washing their hands, maintaining social distancing, and staying indoors as far as possible.

He presented a list of persons who are providing paediatric care during the pandemic and in preparation of the third wave in the state. He also presented a list of medical practitioners to whom children can be referred to for treatment against Covid-19. He urged district officials to

prepare a comprehensive list of such services which and distribute the same to parents, guardians, institutions, and other places where children are housed. He also underlined the importance of the *Sanjivani* app which provides free medical aid to all and can be used to consult doctors for treatment of children, especially those in need of care and protection. Lastly, he reminded us that irrespective of a pandemic, all children must be protected, educated, and their growth and progress should be our utmost priority.



“Paediatric care givers must be prepared with resources, knowledge and management skills to be able to give effective care to children in need of care and protection.”

Smt. Gopika Jahagirdar, Dy.SP, Prevention of Atrocities against Women and Children, Maharashtra Police, highlighted that there have been many instances, even during the second wave, where complaints of crimes against women and children have been reported. To address the same, sub-departments were set up and more resources have been allocated to protect the vulnerable during the pandemic. She drew attention to the fact that trends of crimes have changed, and they have been evolving in various forms especially during the pandemic. When people are in their homes because of a complete lockdown, there is a decline in the overall crime rate. But as things start unlocking, crime rates slowly start to scale up. Police officers rank of ASI, SJPU, CWPO, etc are deployed in every district to take cognizance of complaints of the vulnerable groups and missing children with utmost priority.

She spoke about how online crimes and access to pornographic photos and videos have considerably increased and there is a need to register illegal pornographic sites and take prompt action to curb cybercrimes in the state, especially involving abuse of children. She also suggested children should, as far as possible, be given limited access to laptops and screens to avoid exposure to illegal sites and their usage should be monitored while educating them about the dangers of the online and internet world.

There is a need to provide information on hospitals, helpline numbers, police contact details, etc needs to parents, families, guardians, shelter homes, institutions, and all those in charge

of taking care of children. Lastly, a collaborative and united effort is a must to avoid crimes against the vulnerable women and children.



“There is a need to have an effective response which needs to be backed by implementation of the laws.”

Ms. Priti Patkar, Co-Founder and Director, Prerana, requested all participants and stakeholders present for the session to avoid labelling children directly or indirectly, as covid orphans and rather just describe them as children in distress or children in need of care and protection. All children are unique and hence there is a need to understand the level of sensitivity towards children which must be addressed separately in different contexts. Early reporting of cases is necessary to save children from abuse and trauma. Various NGO’s have taken different initiatives to combat issues and assist children during these special times. There are also many rumours being spread which cause fear and panic among the people. Hence, when dealing with children, we need to first educate them on the right practices and protocols so that caregivers are better equipped to protect children.

There is a need to “think out of the box” and come up with innovative solutions to prevent crimes and abuse against children. Regardless of the pandemic, we need to go beyond and go to other community influencers like places of worship, volunteers, ICDS workers, as these people can also help in gathering information and protecting children. This helps in increasing our cadre of persons who can assist in the cause. Vaccination of adults is pertinent to ensure that children are safe, especially from the third wave of the pandemic. A three-step program should be initiated which includes awareness, prevention, and protection to be given to all children. Along with this, it is also important to assess the psycho-social distress of children and analyse mental health of adults and children alike.



“Protecting children is a collective responsibility and is everyone’s responsibility.”

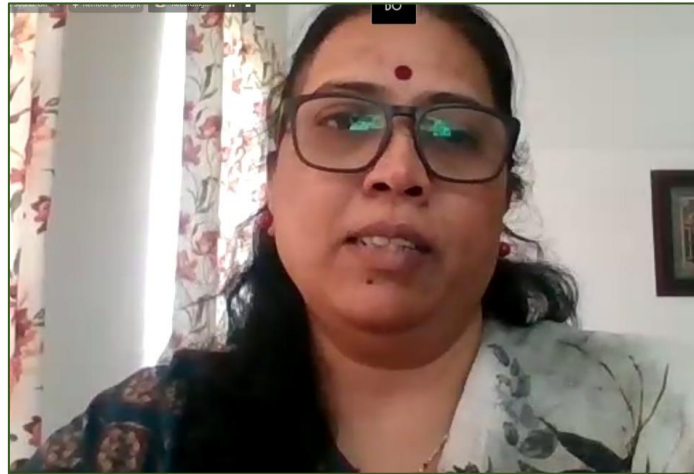
Ms. Manisha Biraris, Assistant Commissioner, (Planning), WCD Commissionerate, Maharashtra, highlighted High Court and Supreme Court notifications along with government circulars and notices which were all directed to protect children during and post the second wave of the pandemic. She stressed on how all the recommendations and guidelines laid out need to be analysed and circulated among all stakeholders who work in any way with children. As of now, the whole world is unaware of the nature of the upcoming third wave, but we need to be prepared for the same and work towards protection of children and prevention of crimes against them.

She emphasized that in Maharashtra, there are approximately 9.5 lakh children who need to be catered to in terms of care and protection. The Women and Child Development Department and the Child Welfare Committees play a major role in safeguarding children in need of care and protection. Today, there are different crimes against children. For example, there is an increase in the number of cases of child marriage, online abuse of children, domestic violence, etc. Hence, government agencies need to keep a watchful eye to identify these crimes and take measures to prevent them from occurring.

For all those in charge of children in any way, there is a continuous responsibility to ensure that children wear masks, social distance themselves, and have minimal exposure to the complications of the pandemic. Government stakeholders should also engage children in recreational activities and make efforts to improve mental health of the children. She informed us that a district task force has been set up to protect children and an SOP will be created to protect financial rights of the children.

Lastly, there is a need to promote the slogan, “Majhe mul majhi zababdaari” (My child, my responsibility) in every household in the state. She urged parents, families, and guardians to

prioritise and take special care of their children and themselves during these challenging times.



“All the government bodies need to come together and put a united front against the virus and against the perpetrators of crimes.”

Closing Remarks

Dr. Manjusha Kulkarni, MSCPCR, concluded with a vote of thanks and expressed her gratitude towards panellists and stakeholders present at the webinar. She encouraged the participants to create a robust plan of action to protect all children as the world prepares to deal with a potential third wave of COVID-19 pandemic.

The webinar acted as an excellent forum for all to discuss and deliberate the best guidelines and protocols for ways in which children can be protected from the effects of second wave of the pandemic. It proved fruitful in bringing major stakeholders on a single platform who all unanimously agreed that all governmental and non-governmental agencies need to work hand in hand to make a difference in the lives of children, especially in the upcoming weeks of recovery.

Key Recommendations / Suggestions:

1. Identify the needs of the vulnerable children to address them effectively; all efforts must be made bearing in mind the best interests of the child.
2. Children of different age groups face different challenges of the virus; hence the medical facilities should be customized accordingly.
3. A list of hospitals, paediatric services, chemists, etc, must be prepared and circulated among parents, guardians, institutions, and all persons responsible for the care and protection of children. Circulate contact numbers of helpline numbers, police officers and protection officers amongst parents, guardians, institutions, and all persons responsible for the care and protection of children.
4. Identify the change in nature of crimes and direct resources to combat the new face of these crimes; special efforts need to be made to investigate cases of child marriage, child labour, online sexual abuse of children, domestic violence, and other crimes which affect children during the pandemic.
5. Mental health of parents and children must be a priority. Promote positive mental health for both adults and children.
6. Provision of compensation to children in a timely manner is necessary, especially those children who are grieving and/or bereaved.
7. Create a cadre of people like volunteers, ICDS workers, etc who can help in preventing crimes against children and providing information on the same.
8. Avoid labelling and mislabelling of children and treat every individual case of a child uniquely.
9. Create a three-step program of awareness, prevention, and protection aspects for all children.
10. Prepare and circulate a list of government notifications, notices along with High Court and Supreme Court orders and judgments to be aware of the procedures and protocols to be followed to protect children during the pandemic among both government and as well as non-governmental agencies.
11. Focus on effective collaboration and convergence between all government bodies, state machinery and civil society organizations to enhance protection of children and prevent crimes against them.