EDITORIAL

CHILD PROTECTION IN THE ERA OF MULTIPLE EMERGENCIES

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It is currently widely recognized that multiple emergencies, acute or protracted, constitute a major component of the complex humanitarian crisis of international concern. Natural disasters, disease outbreaks (Ebola, HIV infection, COVID-19, etc.), terrorist attacks, conflicts, or other crises cause emergencies that call for child protection involving prevention strategies and response. Emergencies or disasters, in general, require effective and sustainable solutions, particularly in children, as their impact can be long-lasting and significant both at the individual and societal levels (1,2). Besides the huge immediate vulnerability and effect, children are also most likely to suffer long-term developmental, physical, and psychological setbacks (1,3). Indeed, public health emergencies and their consequences are typical examples that affirm the dictum often quoted "children are not just little adults." Child protection interventions in emergency situations are specifically required to address the needs of affected children at various locations, including crisis sites, health service delivery posts, camps for internally displaced populations, and refugee facilities.

Exposure to multiple types of abuse like extreme violence such as maiming, torture, abduction, rape, neglect, and mistreatment are heightened in emergencies (2,4) exerting far-reaching consequences among children. It has been emphasized that children are often more at risk of domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, and corporal punishment in these situations (5). Weakened protective social structures and coping mechanisms that arise from the immense strain on families and the community result in abuse of children by the family, the community, and various community and government establishments. Reports also show that in the chaos that can follow emergencies, children are especially at risk of sexual violence and exploitation and indicate that sexual violence against girls, often hidden, is one of the most prevalent types of violence during and after emergencies, particularly armed conflicts (6). There are also clear indications that harmful practices such as early marriage or female genital mutilation and their untoward effects can become more prevalent in the aftermath of emergencies (7,8).

Of note, it has been underscored that there is no word strong enough to describe the horrific conditions that children in armed conflict endure (9). Evidence shows that children can accidentally be killed, conscripted into armed groups, in a conflict or a natural disaster situation, or become separated, abandoned, abducted, or orphaned (10,11)). Conflicts and the associated violence and insecurity can have major psychological effects, and unaccompanied and separated children can be extremely vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking (12). Their distress can also last well beyond the end of the crisis unless appropriate support is provided in time (13). The stressful situations experienced by children in times of emergency can lead to short and long-term psychosocial distress and mental disorders such as sleeping problems, nightmares, withdrawal, problems concentrating, guilt, confusion, insecurity, and post-traumatic stress hindering the successful future development of the child (14).

Despite the growing international attention and wide condemnation of the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, they are forced into service with armed forces or armed groups unhampered (8)–often forced both to witness and commit violence, while being abused, forced to use drugs, exploited, injured, or even killed as a result (12,15). Moreover, in emergency contexts, children become particularly vulnerable to being exploited through child labour, often become the victims of the worst forms of labour as well as forced to directly engage in armed conflict, trafficked for sexual exploitation, and involved in illicit work which is likely to harm their safety and health (9,16). As suggested by others in previous reports (5,17), the physical, emotional, and spiritual consequences of sexual violence in and after emergencies require, in general, a comprehensive and multi-sectoral response.

A broader framework that supports prevention and response needs to be developed or adopted to strengthen child protection systems before, during, and after emergencies. As outlined by others (18), this needs to consider legal and policy environment, institutional capacity, community contexts, and detailed planning. Out of necessity, a strong involvement from the government is required to ensure a formal and effective child protection system. Such a system needs to be in place well before an emergency – emergencies in this era with major multiple emergencies occurring simultaneously – and be adjusted to the context as the emergencies occur. When law and order break down in emergency situations, children are usually subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention for suspected involvement in crime or administrative offenses. The possibility that they encounter the justice system and might experience arbitrary arrest, torture, and other forms of ill-treatment increases. Prevention and response strategies need to address this and a host of other possibilities and the challenges among children in emergencies need to be explored adequately to guide interventions based on the emergency type and the context in which it occurs.

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