



***Mitigating the Risks and Vulnerabilities During
COVID-19 Pandemic: Emerging Solidarities With-in the Migrant
Neighbourhood of Delhi, India***

***Ograniczanie ryzyka i podatności na zagrożenia podczas
pandemii COVID-19. Powstające solidarności w sąsiedztwie
migrantów w Delhi w Indiach***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The article explores migrant children's lives and emerging solidarities in the selected neighbourhood (a squatter-slum) during the early phase of COVID-19 pandemic induced lockdown. Children's lives within the family, as community member and mutual relationship in the moments of risk and resilience are explored.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: Belonging to marginalised group, for children and their families, the COVID-19 lockdown period added multiple layers of disadvantage. Children's lives are explored with ethnographic fieldwork (as part of the broader study initiated in 2017) and during the lockdown period (early 2020) with telephonic interviews.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The article establishes migrant children's contribution who despite being doubly disadvantaged in an adult centric society, actively shape and co-build the social spaces. Drawing upon Walby's work on crisis; the New Sociology of Childhood, children are reinstated as collaborators, presenting the adaptation strategies of children to sustain and cope during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH RESULTS: Risk and resilience have become *normalised* part of the lived reality of migrant children's lives. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic the risks got elevated and with it the adaptive coping strategies at the level of family and neighbourhood emerged that helped in mitigating the risks to some extent.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH: The article demonstrates migrant children as collaborators and recommends (i) considering children's voices and participation while framing policies, programmes, and schemes, and (ii) to view children as expert of their lives, active members, reiterating recognition of their role at various fronts.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **MIGRANT CHILDREN, SLUM, COVID-19 PANDEMIC, RISK, RESILIENCE**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Artykuł bada życie dzieci-migrantów i wyłaniającą się solidarność w wybranej dzielnicy (slumsach) we wczesnej fazie izolacji wywołanej pandemią Covid-19. Badaniu poddane zostało życie dzieci w rodzinie (jako członków społeczności) oraz wzajemne relacje w sytuacji ryzyka i nabywania odporności.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Dla dzieci i ich rodzin, które należą do grupy marginalizowanej, okres izolacji związany z pandemią Covid-19 pomnożył aspekty niekorzystnej sytuacji. Życie dzieci zbadane zostało przy pomocy etnograficznych badań terenowych (w ramach szerszego badania rozpoczętego w 2017 r.), a w okresie izolacji (początek 2020 r.) przy wykorzystaniu wywiadów telefonicznych.

PROCES WYWODU: Artykuł ukazuje wkład dzieci-migrantów, które pomimo tego, że znajdują się w podwójnej niekorzystnej sytuacji w społeczeństwie skupionym na dorosłych, aktywnie kształtują i współbudują przestrzeń społeczną. Opierając się na pracy Walby'ego na temat kryzysu; w Nowej Socjologii Dzieciństwa przywrócono dzieci do roli współpracowników, przedstawiając strategię adaptacyjną dzieci pomagającą im przetrwać i poradzić sobie w początkowej fazie pandemii Covid-19.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Ryzyko i odporność stały się *znormalizowaną* częścią rzeczywistości, w której żyją dzieci-migrantów. W czasie pandemii COVID-19 ryzyko wzrosło, a wraz z nim pojawiły się adaptacyjne strategie radzenia sobie na poziomie rodziny i sąsiedztwa, które w pewnym stopniu pomogły w łagodzeniu ryzyka.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Artykuł ukazuje dzieci-migrantów jako współpracowników i rekomenduje (i) uwzględnienie głosów i uczestnictwa dzieci przy opracowywaniu polityk, programów i projektów oraz (ii) postrzeganie dzieci jako ekspertów w ich życiu, aktywnych członków, ponownie podkreślając uznanie ich roli na różnych polach.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **DZIECI MIGRANTÓW, SLUMSY, PANDEMIA COVID-19, RYZYKO, ODPORNOŚĆ**

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and its multiple deadly waves brought devastation to various walks of people's lives, reminding us the unpredictable nature of pandemics. The pandemic which appeared as a health crisis eventually engulfed multiple social systems including the economy, polity, education and domestic life of people. The multi-varied and multi-level nature of this crisis requires it to be explored and researched from different vantage points, not only at macro-level but also micro-level impacts that it has brought in the lives of people. The devastating effects included deaths, health emergencies, impact on economies during the pandemic induced lockdown, increase in the cases of abuse, domestic violence, unemployment, job losses etc. were some of

the immediately experienced effects of the pandemic, registered at a global scale. At the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of India imposed a mandatory lockdown to check the community spread (Biswas, 2020). Though many steps were taken at the State and National level, but the lockdown aggravated existing social inequalities. Families employed in the informal sector rendered unemployed overnight. Living conditions of these families and children were labelled as un-sanitised and perceived as the source of this deadly virus.

This article explores the lives of migrant children (and families) from a squatter slum in Delhi, during the early lockdown phase. Sudden job loss, no savings and mandatory lockdown adversely affected them which further got intensified for the children, with the closure of school, and no availability of mid-day meals and education. Many children got involved in active working with their families. Children's key role as social actor (James & Prout, 1997) is explored in sustaining (and strengthening) social relations during the pandemic with the changing material conditions of respective family, household, and neighbourhood (Corsaro, 2018; Gittens, 2009). In this study, children and their experiences are not seen in vacuum but as embedded in the familial context and community that they inhabit. As part of the dynamic social-relations, children's participation, the adaptive strategies by respective families, and the community are explored. The study enquired: How COVID-19 pandemic impacted the lives of migrant children, residing in the selected slum, and what were the strategies and negotiations they employed to sail through the crisis?

The purpose of the research is to explore and understand the experience of crisis from the view point of children. Following the New Sociology of Childhood (James & Prout, 1997), the study treats COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis (Walby, 2022) *seen and experienced* by children from the squatter slum.

Children and their respective families devised context and situation-specific strategies to mitigate and minimise the impact of the pandemic with limited resources and opportunities that they had. Discussing such strategies, the article does not attempt to problematise their lives but establishes children as active beings, shouldering the burden of crisis in their home and in neighbourhood. This study reveals socio-structural inequalities and contestations that migrant children and their families faced in the everyday context. This crisis led to the strengthening of in-group solidarity during the moments of crisis providing children, their respective families, a much required hope and strength to sail through the pandemic.

The COVID-19 Pandemic: An Unprecedented Crisis

The novel coronavirus identified in Wuhan, China in 2019 by early 2020 spread across the globe, demonstrating *risk society* (Beck, 1992). The COVID-19 pandemic fits into the definition of crisis as, "an event that has the potential to cause a large detrimental change to the social system in which there is lack of proportionality between cause and

consequence” (Walby, 2015, p. 14). Its associated changes must be studied by the lens of socially constructed nature of the pandemic (Walby, 2022). The enquiry in social situatedness of the crisis can uncover the resultant narratives, contesting claims of impact and experiences of individuals and general societal response to it. The spatial, temporal and socio-cultural scale is important to ascertain the crisis and its impact upon a population in its entirety. So, as to know why and how a particular event impacts a particular population? How is it felt, and experienced? What are its consequences upon a set of population say having distinct class, age group, caste, gender etc.?

In the lockdown, the worst-hit population were those who did not have the resources and opportunities to mitigate these risks, especially the marginalised and vulnerable populations. Beck (1992) demonstrates how administering a defensive goal, the risk society diverges the burden, and extreme effects of risk towards the most vulnerable, in a calculated manner. This calculated diversion of risk happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the mobility of individuals was restricted. The burden of this virus, its containment was kept mostly to the marginalised population.

To curb the community spread a mandatory lockdown was imposed in India, rendering migrant daily waged labourers unemployed overnight. Within this marginalised population, children formed a doubly marginalised group. The study showcases that, lived realities of children from marginalised background were different from the experiences of children of similar age group from middle and upper class families. Working and contributing in the familial income was one such experience that children shared and justified as most suitable and preferred act in the situation, than continuing online education. But such informed initiatives and situational decisions taken by children are dubbed as regressive and exploitative. From the lens of Westernised models of childhood, working children and their lives are classified as problematic. Foregrounding children’s understanding and experiences during pandemic, this article adds to the complex models of childhoods situated in Global South, without problematising them.

Studying Children’s Experiences

Children have occupied a centre stage at various child rights platforms and protection commissions (UN, 1989). But, their positionality in the society is very peculiar, where they are seen in relation to adults as *becoming*. The adultist view point marginalises children by sidelining their ongoing lives, needs, desires, experiences and contribution. Representing children from adult’s lens reduces their portrayal to as vulnerable, dependent and in need of protection. This hierarchised positioning of children, their views, opinions marked as *childish* are not given a due credit (Nandy, 1997). With several models of envisioning children’s lives, their association with education and play is well received as normal. However, children involved into work and at times if earning a livelihood (part-time or full-time) to sustain themselves or to add to their familial income are discredited and called out as exploitative. For clarity, it is imperative to take into consideration the

point of view of children- do they consider working out of their will or being forced by the circumstances, by the employer etc.? Do they want schools to reopen during the pandemic? Are they willing and at ease to pursue education online? Nieuwenhuys (1998) argues that child is a sociologically empty category, reiterating diverse experiences with respect to class, context, gender that shapes children's lives. Children living in Asian and South Asian context have always worked, helped and at times contributed in sharing the labour/ work at familial or community's level (Balagopalan, 2002; Lancy, 2017, 2020).

Children's lives mirror the socio-cultural, political and economic contexts of the society. Migrant children, living in slum face contesting claims over resources, opportunities and space as *resident*; are being perceived by affluent neighbours as the illegal occupants, a threat to the aesthetics of the city. But, their contribution in shaping the neighbourhood spaces by working as help or playing cannot be denied. This study establishes children as active beings capable of traversing at the peak of the pandemic by working and contributing tirelessly towards the upkeep of their respective family, community and neighbourhood. The nature of work however was of a different kind (elaborated in the sections further). Children, rather than being dependent, were actively taking the responsibilities during the initial lockdown period. Such initiatives and strategies lead by children strengthens their agentic side and active membership as 'social' actors (Sharma, 2020, 2021).

Field Site: The Selected Neighbourhood

The specific field site- a squatter slum, is located in the Southwest District of Delhi, a prime location, and surrounded by the upper and middle class neighbourhoods in close proximity. The residents of slum shared an ambiguous relation with their affluent neighbouring localities, where they were required to take up work as domestic help, cleaning staff but were not supposed to roam without any valid purpose. The pandemic advisories on social-distancing, quarantine were difficult to be followed in the populated slum with shared toilets, hardly having water supply, a common tap for drinking water further aggravating concerns of health and hygiene. At times, a room's space say of 5 feet by 7 feet was shared by 6 members of the family. This slum had narrow by-lanes, where most of the household chores took place. Living in such a close proximity, maintaining physical-distance was not at all possible for the residents. The experience of home was altered for the residents of slum during the COVID-19 pandemic. For them it was some distinct kind of disease – a *bimaari*, which gets spread in the unclean environment. The residents realised that in order to be safe, one cannot work in isolation but has to take charge of the entire neighbourhood. It was during this time, that the safety measures were followed by most of the residents wilfully and responsibly, to keep one-self and others' safe. This close-living facilitated in building a shared community, a support group in which children played the role of catalyst. In these uncertain times, children took initiative by getting actively involved with many of the NGOs running in the community, to procure basic ration and other essential items.

Research Participants and Data

This study was part of the broader ethnographic work, initiated in the year 2017. The sample of children and their respective family members were drawn followed by purposive sampling from the larger set. In total 19 children, out of which 11 were girls and 8 were boys, representing 10 families participated in this work. All these children were enrolled at Government school. Due to the lockdown their scholastic activities were suspended. This provided the opportunity to children to engage in community relief works, which they coordinated despite restricted mobility during the pandemic.

Oral consent from the participants was taken. Since, the researcher shared good rapport with the children and their families, the conversations sometimes took a very personal turn. In the absence of consent for recording, the conversations were only referred to wherever necessary insights are required, keeping the confidentiality and research ethics in place. During the lockdown period, children were at ease in sharing their problems, asking for help say financial, for reference of contact persons etc. The primary data for this study was generated via telephonic conversation, with the children and their families. These conversations had children talking to the researcher mostly in pairs and groups, at times alone and at times in the company of their parents or elder members of the family.

Children as Catalyst in Emerging Solidarity Networks

The sudden lockdown, followed by job loss, closure of schools, not receiving the mid-day meal etc. left the children and their families further neglected and dilapidated. The children and their families made way through such a crisis facing many struggles, at times not being sure of making it to the next day alive. The relatively better-off neighbourhoods were quick enough to discard the services that residents of the slum provided on day to day basis. As the lockdown was extended and the grip of the pandemic was tightening, it was getting difficult for the families to survive in the city and many of the residents (with their families) decided to walk back to their respective home-towns. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the entire city of Delhi during the early lockdown phase registered massive exodus of families shattered and left alone struggling, taking the long journey by foot to their respective home towns (PTI, 2020; Ellis-Petersen & Chaurasia, 2020).

Those who stayed back in the city, the situation continued to be difficult. The attempts to further curtail the mobility were done by their relatively better placed neighbours proposing and initiating the construction of a boundary wall, around the (selected) slum, in order to *contain* the spread of corona virus. During this time children and the young members of the slum, who stayed back in the city extended every possible support to the dependent residents' – be it due to medical emergencies, old-age or any other reason.

In one of the instances, Sonu (10 years old) with her elder sibling Bablu (17 years old), got in touch with an NGO which was providing the essential medicines and ration kit to the needy. Since their family had access to smart phone and internet (intermittently available), they used it in establishing contact with potential donors via the NGO. Such efforts were not just taken at the level of family, but at the level of community, extending support to residents in the pressing conditions. The elder children organised the help by contacting several organisations working in the slum providing essential services, the younger children were also involved within families and at the level of community in extending support.

Neeru (8 years old) with her elder sibling Muskan (14 years old) tried developing a concoction of *neem* and *tulsi* (locally available medicinal plants) in the place of hand sanitizer, since it was difficult for them to keep purchasing the required amount of sanitizers, in order to be safe. This home-made sanitizer was distributed within the slum, to other residents also. Within the community, children as young as 7 and 8 years old were entrusted with fetching the drinking water, from the only community tap installed. Occasionally, if the water tanker arrived, the elder children and adults would accompany them. This limited access and the quantity of drinking water, was further used only after boiling. Children also fetched water for other aged residents living in proximity.

Another strategy that was adopted with respect to food and boosting one's immunity i.e. *taakat* was the consumption of more green-chillies with the food. Tapasya (13 years old) shared that, it served dual purpose for them- helping in killing the *keetanu* i.e. the virus if consumed by chance with the heating sensation and, restricted them from over-eating. Since under the lockdown, they were receiving a limited amount of ration. So, to make sure they had the steady availability of eatables, children shared that they consumed less food. Tapasya told that, to further strengthen the *taakat* they used the freely available sunlight. She mentioned that she had read in school that vitamin D is the source of immunity, and therefore made it sure that on daily basis, all her younger siblings soak in sun (mostly while playing outside).

At the peak of the pandemic, when the residents from middle and upper class neighbourhoods were battling with isolation, within the slum new networks of support and solidarities were emerging. From taking care of the infected neighbour, to fetching water, providing with hand-made sanitizers, elder members taking care of infants when parents were away for searching work, were some of the instances of the support system that developed during the crisis.

Strategising the Move(ment): Children's Everyday Negotiations

Outside the slum especially in the neighbouring localities, children's movement was also restricted. But, it did not deter them from reaching out for help as well as from extending the support to the community members. The casual roaming within the by-lanes was restricted, but as children were involved into procuring various help to the community, their contribution was valued.

Manisha (10 years old) mentioned that prior to lockdown she used to accompany her younger siblings and other children to the DDA park in the neighbouring locality. But, with the lockdown and strictly restricted entry of slum residents in the middle class neighbourhood, she took care of her siblings by staying at home, keeping them occupied by singing songs, poems that she had learnt at school and in several games like *stapoo*, *tittli* etc. Meanwhile, taking care of her siblings, Manisha kept herself occupied with household chores including cooking food, cleaning the home, when her mother was away at work. Manisha's mother who earlier worked as domestic help, rendered jobless when the lockdown was imposed. But, since they had not much savings, her mother had to immediately look for an alternative, which was a sewing centre in the community, involved in preparing face-masks and parts of Personal Protective Equipment kit. Her father, a truck driver, during the lockdown was stranded away from Delhi. Majorly the household responsibilities and sibling care came upon her. In another instance, Varun (15 years old) took the charge of earning for this family as his father went severely ill during the first wave of pandemic. Varun instead made it sure to continue his father's work of selling vegetables and expanding it to selling fruits also.

From providing a helping hand, to actively taking up earning roles, children played active role in sharing their savings, and providing labour during the time of crisis. This is not to treat children as reserved labour force, but to foreground their decision-making especially during the pandemic, where they were actively earning and participating in organising relief work within the slum. Children took active work during this phase, prioritising their role within the families. These children, though had a very scattered engagement with education during the early and late lockdown phase, but it would not be wrong to say that for them education was still very important. Not even a single respondent mentioned that education was something they would not return back to. Categorically all the respondents and their respective family members, reiterated time and again that education is the key factor that can help bring mobility, and once the situation would normalise, they would surely come back to it and resume their scholastic activities.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Children's participation and contribution often gets unrecognised. But, this study foregrounds numerous instances where children and their families showcased remarkable resilience in fighting back the pandemic situation and pandemic induced social-vulnerabilities. This article demonstrates how during the COVID-19 pandemic children contributed in providing the support to their respective families and even to other residents of the slum. The strategies reveal children's abilities to take up initiatives responsibly, contributing to the understanding around children's lives by challenging the patronising model which treats children as dependent and in need of protection. Taking the responsibility up on their shoulders, children connected with various helplines during the

pandemic, sought support via raising funds, coordinated ration distribution emerged as resilient and responsible beings, furthering the solidarity networks of the community.

This study reiterates that children and their lives situated in a particular context must be understood from their specific locations, rather than to be judged by westernised models of ideal childhood, and reducing and problematising children's work, just as a part of exploitation. The instances discussed above shows that children were actively engaged in the process of mitigating the effects of crisis. Children taking up active work, or intermittently working must be respected for their life choices than to be penalised as engaged in labour or employment opportunities. By denying the right to work, the society is forcing children to be dependent. Children engaged in work at will, within home spaces, earning and contributing to their families must not be seen as deviance or a threat, rather as an integral part of their everyday life. They must receive the flexible opportunities of work, education, in order to realise their full potential. Lastly, it is to reiterate that children do not inhabit a separate world, but are very much part of the world with adults sharing, co-sharing and co-building it.

REFERENCES

- Balagopalan, S. (2002). Constructing indigenous childhoods: Colonialism, vocational education and the working child. *Childhood*, 9(1), 19–34.
- Beck, U. (1992) *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. Sage.
- Biswas, S (2020, March 30). *Coronavirus: India's pandemic lockdown turns into a human tragedy*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52086274>
- Corsaro, W.A. (2018). *The sociology of childhood*. Sage Publications.
- Ellis-Petersen, H., & Chaurasia, M. (2020, March 30). India racked by the greatest exodus since partition due to coronavirus. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/india-wracked-by-greatest-exodus-since-partition-due-to-coronavirus>
- Gittens, D. (2009). The historical construction of childhood. In M.J. Kehily (Ed.), *An introduction to childhood studies* (2nd ed., pp. 35–49). Open University Press.
- James, A., & Prout, A. (Eds.). (1997). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. Falmer Press.
- Lancy, D.F. (2017). *Anthropological perspectives on children as helpers, workers, artisans, and laborers*. Springer.
- Lancy, D.F. (2020). *Child helpers: A multidisciplinary perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nandy, A. (1997). *Traditions, tyranny, and utopias: Essays in the politics of awareness*. Oxford University Press.
- Nieuwenhuys, O. (1998). Global childhood and the politics of contempt. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 23(3), 267–289.
- PTI. (2020, March 29). Exodus of migrant workers out of Delhi unabated but police block their entry into Anand Vihar ISBT. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-exodus-of-migrant-workers-out-of-delhi-unabated-but-police-block-their-entry-into-anand-vihar-isbt/article31198725.ece>
- Sharma, R. (2020). Reading UNCRC and children's rights sociologically: A paradigm shift from 'protection to rights'. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Education and Research*, 9(11), 188–198.

-
- Sharma, R (2021). Altered lives of children from Coolie-Camp, Delhi: Navigating through the vulnerabilities amidst COVID-19 lockdown. *Akados*, 15, 82–102. <http://akados.in/2021/07/82-102.pdf>
- UN. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. United Nations. https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&clang=_en
- Walby, S. (2015). *Crisis*. Polity Press.
- Walby, S. (2022) Crisis and society: developing the theory of crisis in the context of COVID-19. *Global Discourse*, 12(3-4), 498–516. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204378921X16348228772103>

Copyright and License



This article is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution – NoDerivs (CC BY- ND 4.0) License <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>

Source of funding

Lack of funding sources.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
