

Violence and Child Protection in COVID-19: What should be done in Kampala Slums?

Agnes Kyamulabi & Gloria Seruwagi

Introduction

Kampala is Uganda's most densely populated district with a population of 1.6 million people, 60% of whom reside in informal settlements. Informal settlements – specifically slums – are typically overcrowded with shoddy dilapidated structures, poor living and appalling sanitary conditions with high propensity for accelerated spread of infectious diseases like COVID-19. Slum inhabitants are mostly young, informally employed and extremely mobile. Nearly all urban slum dwellers have limited socioeconomic resources and the evidence shows that more than 50% engage in some form of high-risk behaviour including prostitution, substance abuse and petty crime. The evidence shows that children living in slums face increased disadvantage with physical, psychological and socioeconomic vulnerability [1].



Photo credit: Badru Katumba

Anecdotal evidence and media reports in Uganda show several cases of child abuse, most occurring in crowded places like slums although middle-income neighbourhoods have also witnessed a fair share of child abuse cases.

A recent report in the aftermath of COVID-19 [2] shows a significant increase in child protection concerns in general since the outbreak began. These concerns include a rise in violence and abuse against children, increasing poverty and hunger, and more children forced into harmful practices such as child labour and child marriage. Impoverished girls who are being pushed further into poverty during lockdown are increasingly trading sex for money, food and sanitary towels. Another recent child protection assessment [3] reports 60% of its participants to report an increase in sexual violence against children since the lockdown started; while 80% reported that parents are also perpetrators of violence against children (VAC). All these present a cause for concern given the intrinsic interlinkages between VAC and poor outcomes for children.

The onset of COVID-19 constrained socioeconomic living conditions and experiences of most families in slum communities. This has, in turn, negatively affected the health and wellbeing of children. Increased cases of VAC have been reported [4,5] raising multiple child protection concerns.

In the COVID era children are facing unprecedented threats to their childhoods and future. For many children, home has never been a safe place; and schools have always provided an alternative environment that frees them from violence [6]. School closures forced children into involuntary isolations within the home [7]; and in the slum setting, this also meant overcrowding which further exposes them to violence in part due to the additional stress on families resulting from COVID-19 [6]. Children

living in crowded slum conditions with no school-going “cushion” are particularly more vulnerable. COVID-19 restrictions, including lockdowns, have pushed people into isolation to their homes, involuntarily closing the shutters on violence against children. These restrictions have a bearing on children, reinforcing unintended violence against children.



Photo credit: Marc Ellison

We conducted research on children’s lived experiences in COVID-19 in two Kampala slums. This policy brief outlines key findings and their implications for children.

The ALERTs Study

Makerere University implemented a COVID-19 study on *Adherence, Lived Experiences and Resilient Transformation among “slumdweller” (ALERTs) in COVID-19*. The study assessed pre-post knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) in slum communities; explored local perceptions of risk or exposure; determined the feasibility of and compliance to COVID-19 preventive guidelines in slums; identified existing support systems and determined their efficacy.

The study design was cross-sectional and mixed methods, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. It was conducted in two Kampala slums i.e. Kataba slum in Kabalagala-Makindye division and Ki-Mombasa slum in Bwaise-Kawempe division of Kampala, Uganda. The study recruited 807 participants i.e. 660 (quantitative) and 147 (qualitative). The sample size for both children and youth (aged 15-24) was 117 (m = 31, f= 86). Data collection methods included a facility and community survey, interviews and FGDs. Study tools were questionnaires, interview and FGD guides. Quantitative data was entered in SPSS, cleaned and analysed using relevant descriptive, bivariate, and multivariable statistical methods. While qualitative data was audio recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. This policy brief focuses on the study’s qualitative arm.

Key Findings

Whereas the government of Uganda put in place an alternative for schooling, almost three quarters of all children (62%) and parents or caretakers (58%) in the study sites reported that children are not benefiting much from the Education Continuity Programme.

- 1. Increased levels of VAC:** The forms of violence reported include defilement, child marriages, teenage pregnancy and pimping children for transactional sex. Study findings showed that, in slum communities, it was common behavior for parents to send their children into sex work in order to support the family. One participant reported:

During the lock down, domestic violence increased and family break ups since both men and women were home without food and no income sources. The school-going children have been exposed to the bad vices like prostitution since they are at home and to contribute to household income. There is also increased teenage pregnancies (Community leader, Ki-Mombasa).

Physical abuse of children by the parents was also on the rise. This was reported to mostly be related to food-or the lack of it, prolonged proximity imposed by the lockdown and alcohol among others. A community leader shared:

We have forwarded many of these cases to the LC [Local Chairman] and police where many children are beaten by their mothers and fathers... I believe this is all because of financial depression. Remember before Covid the parents were not living with their children, so I believe this very close contact with them has put all the stress on the children and the community. Their parents are drunkards and then when they ask for food from them ofcourse they hit them” (Study Participant 4, Kimombasa).

Some children could not get the required number of meals in a day which affected their nutrition status. “Some people take one meal or porridge, children are starved, and you cannot even begin talking about effects of starvation” (Female Parent, Kabalagala-Kataba)

The COVID-19 situation has resulted in children engaging in child labour to supplement the household incomes; including in some cases, engaging in labour categorised as the worst forms of child labour (WFCL) like engagement in sex work.

- 2. Closure of Schools:** This presented heightened vulnerability for children as they became more exposed, over prolonged periods of time, to multiple rights violations including lack of food and different forms of violence including physical, verbal, emotional and sexual. One of the children shared:

Children like me [girls] have gotten pregnant during lockdown and got diseases... some of their parents have sent them to get married. There is also too much beating, where we are beaten for many things, including small mistakes. Some girls are defiled, sometimes by family members, and are chased from home while pregnant which stops them from completing their education so they go to live on the streets... COVID has not been good for anyone; even the boys, there are gangs of boys who steal and engage in criminal behavior (Girl Child, Ki-Mombasa)

by both men and women so some sexually transmitted diseases and other infections have resulted from that (Male, Ki-Mombasa)



- 5. The Government's Education Continuity Programme:** Whereas the government of Uganda put in place an alternative for schooling during lockdown and school closure, 62% of children and 58% of parents or caretakers in the study sites reported that children are not benefitting much from the Education Continuity Programme. Moreover, most caregivers were not in position to support learning during school closure because focus was on looking for food or survival. However, they were also not equipped to support learning from home as shown in the excerpt below:

I did not do anything [to support learning] because I'm looking for what they [children] can eat... they will learn when they go back to school... food is a priority now. I don't have a radio, I don't have a TV and I can't send him to the neighbors' home because he might learn bad manners from there or spoil people's property (Parent, Ki-Mombasa)

Cognizant of how much they had missed during school closure, 92% of children want to return to school and 10% worried about the uncertain future of their education.

- 3. Sexual Violence and Exploitation:** Some girls were lured into sexual violence, abuse and exploitation. This was mostly because of the dire economic circumstances caused by the situation created by the COVID-19 control measures. Being sexually abused during the lockdown was commonly reported by this study's child study participants. Sexual violence was commonly reported by female children. Violence against children was confirmed by community leaders who also reported high teenage pregnancy rate within their communities:

Lock down increased GBV, drug abuse, assault, theft and teenage pregnancy. This was all because most people were not working yet the families needed support. Men engaged so much in drinking yet they had not left food at home. Given the nature of our community, children were more vulnerable to defilement during COVID-19 because they were not at school and the drunkards were all over the place (Community Leader, Kabalagala-Kataba).

- 6. Declining Levels of Vigilance for Child Protection:** Vigilance among the local leaders to decisively and punitively deal with VAC cases was reported to be declining. Despite the existence of child protection structures including parents, local leaders and law enforcement officers; these systems were reported as quite weak and sometimes collusive with the perpetrators of VAC. Some parents were easily bribed by perpetrators while local leaders did not have the resources or clout to effectively address or prevent VAC cases.
- 7. Children Remain Invisible and Voiceless:** Whereas the government of Uganda has done a tremendous job in providing information and some products like masks to support in reducing the transmission of the disease, the children were not directly targeted with COVID-19 prevention messages or products; increasing their risk to contracting the disease.

- 4. The Link between Congestion and Violence:** Shared facilities like toilets in slum setting increased the susceptibility of the children especially the girls to sexual violence:

These shared resources have actually been a source of violence... for example a housewife goes to the well to fetch water but delays because people are many, when she goes back home late the husband won't believe she has spent all that time at the well, hence violence since he suspects infidelity. Children have also been victims of sexual abuse because some men take advantage of them in the process of using these toilets and defile them. The toilets and bathrooms are shared

You look around tell me, have you seen anyone selling small masks for children? Even what the government gave, those masks were only for adults. They assumed only adults wear masks yet Corona does not discriminate (KII-2, Kabalagala-Kataba)

What does the Evidence say?

- Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic is having a distressing impact. Efforts to contain coronavirus are very important; however, unfortunately, they are also inadvertently exposing children to increased risk of

violence including sexual exploitation and broadly, violation of child rights [9]. Alternative schooling was not possible for many children in the slums. As early as April 2020, UNICEF reported of the over 1.5 billion children and youths worldwide whose learning had been affected by school closures, children in informal settlements could not access the alternative learning because they lacked access to the needed infrastructure such as internet. The ALERTs study confirmed that closure of schools presented heightened vulnerability for children as they became more exposed to multiple rights violations including lack of food and different forms of violence including physical, verbal, emotional and sexual.

- UNICEF [9] showed that school closure may be a precursor to a cycle of violence against children. Similarly, our study revealed that school closures in Uganda have exacerbated violence against children. Movement restrictions, loss of income, overcrowding, high levels of stress and anxiety are increasing the likelihood that children experience and observe physical, psychological and sexual abuse.
- Girls and boys experience violence differently, facing different risks to different forms of violence. Unequal gender power relations and discrimination drive high levels of violence against girls. Plan International UK [10], found that food security for individuals in homes was affected differently and in part due to gender social norms. The study cites an example in Jordan where more boys (24%) than girls (7%) of the same age managed to get access to material [food] assistance. The ALERTs study revealed that sexual violence was mainly among girls with increased teenage pregnancies. The study also found out that girls in families were forced into commercial sex work and child marriage to support the family incomes and the boys were mainly engaged in selling of food items.
- Despite the importance of case management for children at risk, UNICEF [11] found this to be one of the most disrupted effort for children most at risk of violence. In this study, increased vigilance of the local leaders to decisively and punitively deal with VAC cases was found to be declining. A Save the Children's survey [11] found 56% of respondents reported an increase in children working since the lockdown and some of this work was categorized as hazardous. This is in line with the study findings where some children in the slums were engaged in sex work to supplement the household incomes.

Recommendations

Strengthen child protection structures in communities to increase their vigilance and action in the prevention, detection management and referral of VAC cases.

- First, target children with COVID-19 information and other prevention tools. However, use child-centred methodology in engaging; and ensure that their voices are heard. In addition, equip them with skills to identify, report and recover from VAC experiences.
- Strengthen child protection structures in communities to increase their vigilance and action in the prevention, detection, management and referral of VAC cases.
- Screening for VAC should be integrated into routine services at health facilities and schools as they open. This will require capacity strengthening for the different significant adults daily interfacing with children including teachers, administrators, healthworkers. Child protection specialists and law enforcement officers should also be supported to actively and continuously protect children from violence.
- Continued sensitization of the communities about violence against children to reduce its occurrences, through reporting any such cases to the local authorities.
- There should be measures to improve or cushion the household incomes of urban slum dwellers since the deprivation that occurs increase the likelihood of violence within the household, including VAC.



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About the Study

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For more Information, Contact:

Agnes Kyamulabi – agnes.kyamulabi@chuss.mak.ac.ug
Dr Gloria Seruwagi – gseruwagi@musph.ac.ug

Centre for Health and Social Economic Improvement (CHASE-i)

Makerere University,
P.O. Box 7062
Kampala, Uganda

