

Orphans and Vulnerable Children in India – A Broad Overview



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Background

- India is the world's largest democracy with a population of over a billion- 400 million of which are children (1).
- India is known for its multi- ethnic, multi- lingual and multi- religious background . It has 15 official languages and 36 states and union territories.
- There are approximately 673 million Hindus, 95 million Muslims, 19 million Christians, 16 million Sikhs, 6 million Buddhists and 3 million Jains in India (2).
- Approximately 26% of the Indian population lives below the poverty line(3) and 72 % live in rural areas (4).

HIV/AIDS

- It is estimated that India currently has 5.1 million people living with HIV/AIDS (5) and about 310,000 persons died of AIDS in India in 1999 (6).
- UNICEF estimates that 30,000 babies are born HIV positive each year.

HIV/AIDS

- Even though the percentage of the Indian population infected with HIV/AIDS is 0.9%, (5) it has the second largest number of people infected with HIV/AIDS in the world, the first being South Africa.
- Despite the many recorded gains in the recent past, issues such as gender inequity, poverty, illiteracy and the lack of basic infrastructure play an important role in hindering HIV/ AIDS prevention and treatment programs in India.

Modes of Transmission

- Sexual contact- 85%
- Blood and blood products- 3%
- IDU's- 3%
- Perinatal transmission- 2%
- Others- 7%

Orphans and Vulnerable Children

- The impact of the AIDS crisis has not begun to fully emerge in India and AIDS related orphaning has not been documented.
- Yet, it is estimated that India has the largest number of AIDS orphans of any country and this number is expected to double in the next five years (7).
- Out of the 55,764 identified AIDS cases in India 2,112 are children (12).

Orphans and Vulnerable Children

- It is estimated that 14% of the 4.2 million HIV/AIDS cases are children below the age of 14 (12).
- A study conducted by the ILO found that children of infected parents are heavily discriminated- 35% were denied basic amenities and 17% were forced to take up petty jobs to augment their income (12).

Challenges

- Stigma and discrimination
- Poverty
- Illiteracy
- Child labor
- Child prostitution
- Street children
- Poor infrastructure
- Police brutality

Children at Risk

The Working Child

- Child labor in India is a complex problem and is rooted in poverty.
- Census 1991 data suggests that there are 11.28 million working children in India (8).
- Over 85% of this child labor is in the country's rural areas and this number has risen in the past decade.

Children at Risk

The Working Child

- The girl child is particularly vulnerable.
- Even though the Indian government has passed over 9 acts prohibiting and limiting child labor, the number of children in the work force has not diminished.

Children at Risk

Child Prostitution

- Conservative estimates state that around 300,000 children in India are engaged in commercial sex (9).
- Child prostitution is socially acceptable in some sections of Indian society through the practice of Devadasi. Young girls from socially disadvantaged communities are given to the 'gods' and they become a religious prostitute.
- Devadasi is banned by the Prohibition of Dedication Act of 1982.
- This system is prevalent in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Assam.

Children at Risk Child Prostitution

- More than 50 % of the devadasis become prostitutes: of which nearly 40 per cent join the sex trade in urban brothels and the rest are involved in prostitution in their respective villages (11).
- According to the National Commission on Women an estimated 250,000 women have been dedicated as Devadasis in Maharashtra- Karnataka border.
- A study conducted in 1993 reported that 9% of the devadasis are HIV positive in Belgaum district in Karnataka (15).

Children at Risk

Street Children

- Street children are those for whom the street more than their family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision, or direction from responsible adults (10).
- Human Rights Watch estimates that approximately 18 million children live or work on the streets of India.
- Majority of these children are involved in crime, prostitution, gang related violence and drug trafficking.

Law and Policy Reforms

- In response to the growing epidemic the government of India convened a Parliamentary Meet on HIV/AIDS in May 2002.
- On world AIDS day 2003, the health minister announced that the government plans to provide free ARVs to all HIV-positive new parents and children under 15 in the six states with the highest rates of infection.

Law and Policy Reforms

- Eventually all patients with AIDS cases in high risk states are to be treated.
- A new law is being drafted under which doctors will no longer be able to refuse treatment to people with HIV and discrimination against children with HIV will also be banned . Harsher penalties for selling fake medicines or making claims about the effects of untested medicines are also likely to be included in the legislation.

NGOs

- NGOs have played a vital role in prevention, advocacy and care.
- There are approximately 470 NGOs working with vulnerable children in India and 30 directly work with AIDS orphans (13).

Conclusion

- India has been struggling to provide basic amenities to the already existing vulnerable children. The stigma associated with HIV/AIDS has been a barrier to integrating children affected and infected by HIV/AIDS into mainstream society and the country is currently not equipped to deal with AIDS orphans.
- In the face of this challenge the government and civil society need mobilize resources to provide health care, education and shelter to these children in an environment that is conducive to their growth and well being.

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