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COVID-19 and the Education of Children with Hearing Impairments: Reflections from Social Work Placement**Dr. U.L.M. Ashker***Lecturer Gr-1, School of Social Work, National Institute of Social Development, Sri Lanka..***Dr. Cheng Ling***Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Central China Normal University. China..*

Abstract: Children with hearing impairment have been identified as one of the extremely vulnerable cohorts globally and the pandemic caused multiple impacts on receiving education, protections and emotional wellbeing of them. With the intention of leaving no one left behind, few student social workers were placed in the Centres during the pandemic in order to work with hearing impaired children, family members and groups. This social work research study examined the challenges faced by the hearing impairment children during their educational activities in Sri Lanka and the experiences from the student social workers during their placement in the same selected centers located in western province. The research design adopted in this study was qualitative and the respondents were students with hearing impairment, teachers, caregivers and the student social workers. Sixteen students, five teachers, four caregivers and five student social workers participated in the study. Purposive sampling technique was adopted to identify the respondents who were in the status of revealing

their actual situations. The study has found three types of challenges. The type one was that the children with hearing impairments were experienced various sexual harassment and abuses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The type two was that they have experienced numerous emotional challenges such as being isolated from family and friends. Finally, the educational challenges were extreme due to various reasons such as lack of skilled teachers, acoustic issues, outdated devices, absence of trained social workers, shortage of hearing aids & caregivers with limited sign language skills. The findings are disseminated to relevant stakeholders to take necessary remedial and developmental measures to strengthen legal acceptance of sign language to protect their rights as a preventive measure.

Key words: Covid-19, Hearing Impairment, Child Abuse, Educational Challenge, Social Work Reflection/Intervention

1. INTRODUCTION

Millions of deaths reported worldwide due to the Covid-19 global pandemic. Although, there are various types of issues prevailing among the community due to this outbreak, some of the issues were not held accountable specially issues against the children with hearing impairments. The issues that emerged during the pandemic were not addressed and, this is the time to be immediately addressed, since the outbreak was immensely influenced by all types of challenges to the hearing-impaired children. Covid-19 has made several impediments, burdens and challenges among children with hearing impairment, caregivers, parents and teachers. Due to rapid spreading of Covid-19 virus, almost all the schools and educational Institutions have temporarily closed and caused profound impact among the children with hearing impairments during their learning process.

Children with hearing impairments have been suffering from Childhood anxiety disorder, depression and emotional problems throughout their education. According to Sri Lanka Central Federation of the Deaf, there are over three hundred thousand deaf people in Sri Lanka. The World Health Organization has revealed that approximately 9% of the population in Sri Lanka has loss of hearing. (World Health Organization, 2022)

Although there were certain prenatal and the perinatal causes behind the hearing impairment of children, the Covid-19 pandemic affected multiple damage toward hearing impaired children in the country. While the Act No: 14 of 2003, on Persons with disabilities ensures the rights of disability people in the country, the children with hearing impairment are still discriminated during the outbreak and then after.

The existing disability legislation, Act No: 28 of 1996 is limited to access to education, employment, and physical accessibility to public places with the ratification of UNCRPD in 2016. The government is accountable to prepare local legislation in line with the UNCRPD. In 2013, Sri Lanka legalized the National Action Plan on Disability. Then again in 2017 the government implemented the National Action Plan for the promotion and protection of human Rights. The Disability Rights bill was formulated with public participation in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and enacted by the Parliament by 2020. The government and the non- government sector have been involved to make the hearing-impaired children educated.

When it comes to the government Sector, there are two types of prominent centers available for providing services for people with hearing impairments. The first type of schools for children with hearing impairment has been administered under the surveillance of the state. The other schools come under the private or NGO sector. Although Sri Lankan states are providing free education that was mandated by the Education policy for all in 1948, educational policy has failed to find a way to give the education for hearing impaired children. At present, there are 26 such special schools across various districts in Sri Lanka and sign languages and lip reading are the learning medium for instruction of hearing-impaired students.

1.2. PROBLEM STATEMENT:

During field visits in the relevant schools for children with hearing impairment, as a social work field supervisor of the students who practice their micro & mezzo practice, were able to realize the

importance of exploratory kind of study to discover the issues behind the children with hearing impairment. The researcher has realized that the children had worse experiences during the pandemic and, the initial visits revealed that they have been sexually harassed as well as emotionally abused in the day-to-day life and, some of them were neglected from the community, family and friends. The visits had further inculcated that the children with hearing impairment have encountered many difficulties in order to receive their education during Covid -19 outbreak. The findings of this study can be viewed as an eye opener to the government and other authorities to take action to implement a proper online learning mechanism for children with hearing impairment.

“According to the statistics of World Health Organization Over 5% of the world's population (432 Million people) require rehabilitation to address their 'disabling' hearing loss. Among 432 million adults, 34 million are children with hearing impairment. People have disabling hearing loss due to some unsafe listening practice. Global Burden of Disease Study 2019”(Deafness and hearing loss (who.int))

“A study from the Ministry of Health of Sri Lanka shows that 9% of the total population of Sri Lanka suffer from some sort of hearing disorder. Mar 29, 2013 while the Sri Lanka Central Federation of the Deaf, there are over three hundred thousand Deaf people in Sri Lanka.” ((Sri Lanka Central Federation of the Deaf, n.d.)

Considering 2030 sustainable development, the inherent principle of “leaving no one left behind” reiterates the importance of ensuring that children with disabilities have the same opportunities for learning as other children.

Sri Lanka’s latest Population Census of 2012 indicates that around 2% of children between the ages 5-14 have some form of disability, of which around only three-fourths attend school, compared to the near universal enrollment of other children. In addition, this share falls considerably with age; the share of total disabled students engaged in educational activities ranges from a high of 80% among 5-9-year-olds who attend primary school, to only 45% among 15-19-year-olds, including students at the upper secondary (grades 10 and 11) and collegiate (grades 12 and 13) levels.

Most online platforms were not designed for children with hearing impairment. The study has found that the stigmatization and discrimination have been seriously reflected on the decline of the education of children with hearing impairment in Sri Lanka. This exclusion caused childhood depression among children with hearing impairment and, the student social workers who have been placed to the entres timely overcame the issues by helping them to help themselves. This was realized through the interference of “teaching a younger child, demonstrating to other adults in the schools and practicing on the computer with peer” made them more effective in the inclusion of the children who have been alienated during the learning task.

It has been very unfortunate that lack of social interaction due to social distance made them away from society and even hardly interacted with the family members. Children with hearing impairment have no technical knowledge and other academic skills to fully cooperate with the learning process. Lack of efficiency and knowledge in lip reading and sign language from the teacher's side made students disappointed, distressed and demotivated.

1.3. PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of social work research study was to examine the challenges faced by the hearing impairment children during COVID 19 in Sri Lanka and, to explore the experiences and the responses from the student social workers during their placement in the same selected centers located in western province.

1.4. REVIEWS RELATED TO HEARING IMPAIRMENT:

1.4.1. Hearing Loss and Deafness:

Hearings impaired - A person who is not able to hear as well as someone with normal hearing – hearing thresholds of 20 dB or better in both ears are known as Hearing impaired person. Hearing-impaired is perceived as an offensive term within the Deaf community because the word impaired implies damage, and it focuses on what the person cannot do. (Deafness and hearing loss, 2022)

Some people identify themselves as “late- deafened,” indicating that they became deaf later in life. Other people identify themselves as “deaf-blind,” which usually indicates that they are deaf or hard of hearing and also have some degree of vision loss. Some people believe that the term “people with hearing loss” is inclusive and efficient. However, some people who were born deaf or hard of hearing do not think of themselves as having lost their hearing. Over the years, the most commonly accepted terms have been used as “Deaf,” and “hard of hearing. “Referring to people with hearing loss, the preferred term is hard of hearing is caused due to genetic factors, intrauterine infections such as Rubella or Cytomegalovirus infection, low birth weight, birth asphyxia , chronic ear infections etc. (deaf and , 2022)

1.4.2. Special Needs Education:

Receiving education is a right and it should not be discriminated, but Special education (also known as special-needs education, aided education, exceptional education, special ed., SEN or SPED) is the practice of educating students for those who are mentally, physically, socially and emotionally delayed, which places them behind their peers. In special education situations, individual learners' needs often dictate the curricula.

Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, No 28 of 1996 parliament of Sri Lanka says that “A person with disability means any person who, as a result of any deficiency in his physical or mental capabilities, whether congenital or not, is unable by himself to ensure for himself, wholly or partly, the necessities of life”. This definition is a reasonably broad one, encompassing both medical and socio-economic aspects of disability. Actually, disability includes those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment barriers that may hinder their full and active participation in society.

1.5. METHODOLOGY

1.5.1. Research Design:

The research design adopted in this study was qualitative in nature and the type of study was exploratory research. The rationale behind choosing qualitative design was to explore the

feelings, values and perceptions that underlie and influence behavior by hearing impaired children within this Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of the researcher choosing this location due to the availability of population density of the disability and the placement of these children in the selected Centre in the western province. This population was chosen to fit the scope of hearing-impaired learners and teachers to provide the primary information needed for the study. The sample of this study was chosen based on purposive and snowball techniques. Therefore, the respondents were children with hearing impairment, caregivers/Parents and the student social workers.

The required qualitative design was used to gather information from 30 respondents and six case studies (06) were carried out from child respondents for detailed information. The sample was selected 03 students from each grade 06-11, 07 caregivers and 05 student social workers. Data collection has been done with key informant interviews with the professionals and semi structured/guided questionnaire interviews with the students. The data has been collected mainly via interview questions, situational interviews over telephone calls as well as in-person. All data collected from the interviews and case studies were analyzed through “narrative analysis”. Since researcher had to interpret stories from hearing impaired children, narrative analysis was appropriate to analyze all data. The limitation during data collection was that the researcher was dependent on interpretation.

1.6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

All data collected from various respondents, were analyzed and presented in thematic format. The following table shows the summary of the respondents of this study and highlights the incorporation of social work care workers to find out the gaps filled by the social workers in order to emphasize the importance of recruiting and producing trained social workers to serve the country.

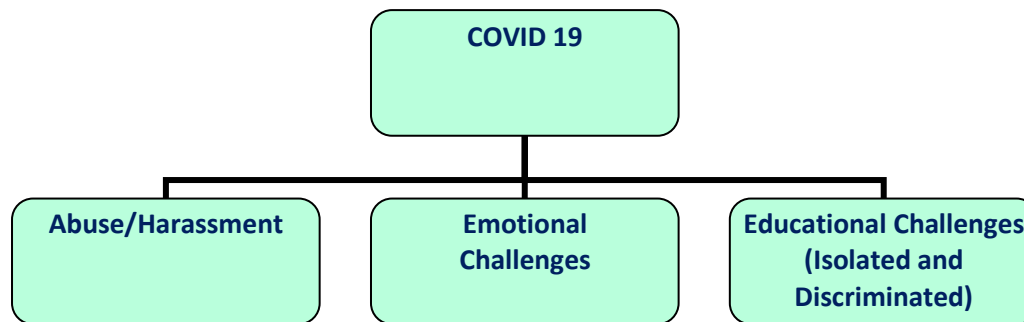
Table: 01: Demographic Characteristic of Respondents

No	Gender	Age Category of	Age Category	Undergraduate	Number	of
		Child Respondents	of Caregivers			
		11-16	32-56			
01	Male	09	04	03		16
02	Female	09	03	02		14
03	Total	18	07	05		30

As expected, the researcher was able to interview all thirty respondents and all children have been interviewed with the consent of them and the Institutions. All respondents have very close connections with the School for Hearing Impairment located in western province. Almost all respondents who have been interviewed represent similar kinds of schools. The researcher’s intention was to find out the impact that they had faced during the pandemic and more specifically during their learning activities. In Sri Lanka there is a lack of attention for the hearing-impaired children. Especially in Covid 19 pandemic period, they have been isolated from the family

environment as well as the school environment. They were excluded from the online portal and the exclusion caused declined on their education. Teachers or parents must always be behind the children to facilitate online studies. But, unfortunately most of the caregivers and parents were unsound in technical knowledge.

Figure: 1:1: Types of Challenges



The rationale of choosing educational issues for further analysis is that, the harassment & abuses, emotional abuses/suffering have finally reflected on the attainment of education. The first cohort revealed that children with hearing impairment were more prone to get abused and notably there were few cases reported by the student social workers. Due to the pandemic, some of the issues and accused were not held accountable. However, the issues were overcome through the student social workers and timely intervention was taken to protect few children from the harassment and abuses.

The most heightened emotional challenges were that they have been isolated from the community, family and friends. Almost all the respondents revealed that isolation made them more emotional suffering and caused declines in their educational achievements. The third type of experience were shortage of hearing aids, communication barrier with the community surrounding the school, unfavorable acoustic environment, negative attitudes of normal people/community, inadequate funding, abandonment by parents and relatives, shortage of teachers and the lack of sign language knowledge were other types of challenges faced by them during the lockdown. In addition to that, these challenges caused less progressive and thereby led the child in the long-term impact on education. This study concludes that differently abled students especially those with hearing impairment in the particular hearing-impairment school have been struggling to attain basic education due to the social isolation.

1.6.1. Zoom Technology and Acoustic Conditions:

Noise levels of classroom setting are extremely making several adverse impacts on the education of hearing-impaired children. Noise levels significantly higher within the learning premises in the school even during the normal situation. However, the learning procedures were significantly interrupted during the Covid due to higher noise level in the centers as well as at home. Since all are new to this Zoom technology, especially this cohort was extremely affected by the violations of acoustic requirements for conducive teaching and learning. Considering the situation of people with special attention has made several impacts, especially hearing impairments, learning disabilities and bilingualism. According to WHO, for classrooms with children who have hearing problems, the maximum values of background noise and RT are 30 dB(A) and 0.4 s, respectively. (Gheller, 2020).

An RT of 0.4–0.5 s is generally considered appropriate for a speech-to-noise ratio of +15 dB. (Picard, 2001 & 2009).

According to Student Social Workers who served as interns have been facilitated to develop conducive learning environments by making sure about basic acoustic requirements for an effective learning environment for the children. As advocates, student social workers have played a role like cost effective and reasonable adjustment such as turning off electrical equipment that has not been used and suspending displays from the ceiling to reduce reverberation. Inappropriate distance between teacher and children were also measured to keep them at an appropriate distance for improving listening. In addition to that, student case coordinators were facilitated with the help of professional acousticians to improve listening conditions. Classroom modifications were improved for a better learning environment.

1.6.2. Impact on School Education:

The study has found that the children with hearing impairment have been intentionally or unintentionally discriminated against due to the lack of facilities available at school. Because of lack of facilities such as sign language disc, all teachers skipped their main subjects that caused less progressive in education. Hence, the children with hearing impairment have no accessibility to learn missing lessons due to unavailability of translations/interpretation. Even at grade 04 stage, they are still learning alphabets; hence, it is impossible for them to sit for the grade 05 examination.

The reason for under development was that the teacher and caregivers are lacking the knowledge on sign language and not having a proper teacher's guidebook. Lack of trained teachers have been influencing the decline in the level of education they are supposed to achieve at that particular growth and development. Also, the teachers have been only provided with the manuals. Lack of facilities and equipment for the teaching process made teachers incapable of helping these special needs children. Therefore, it is unfair to blame the teachers for not supporting children with hearing impairment. Since 1985, the government has only one manual produced for special needs children and, thereafter no materials produced to make sure their educational rights are upheld. Timely intervention made by student social workers during the outbreak was eliminated from childhood disorders. Liaising role made by social workers were a significant contribution during the learning activities specially developing relationship and trust between educators and children with hearing impairment.

It is appreciated that Children with hearing impairment were combined with other normal children during their learning process. Yet, the student social worker has realized during the teaching and learning process, the teachers intentionally or unintentionally focus only on normal students. However, this situation led the hearing-impaired children to be excluded during the learning process. Even some of the caregivers were being rude with the hearing-impaired students, and they failed to recognize that they were also in the learning process. Hearing-impaired children who have been deviated during the common learning activities were facilitated to determine their rights protected. For instance, when teachers are moving around the classroom, children with hearing impairment are unable to focus their learning. This was observed at several occasions and highlighted to educators who had been interacting with the children with hearing impairments. However, children with hearing impairment have been encountering many psychosocial challenges that reflect various emotional suffering like stress, anger, sadness, disappointment, isolation and

other emotional disturbance in cognition. All these emotional sufferings and cognitive status led the child to be more problematic in their educational achievement.

1.6.3. Online Education:

Like normal people involved in the program like “Gurugedara” these hearing impaired people were not facilitated to learn through online educational platforms. It was not successful without a sign language interpreter. Children with hearing impairment also have the right to learn as others. In order to realize the rights, the duty bearers must appoint the interpreters. Although most of the students use the zoom as a learning platform, children with hearing impairment have been encountering many practical problems since they communicate with different signs and gestures including facial expressions. When the coverage issues prevail, the hearing-impaired children will be unable to receive the correct sign to learn. There are no platform suits for the deaf and disabled children in Sri Lanka.

The experts also express their ideas about online learning platforms. Most of the students with hearing impairment are economically unstable and some of the parents are also being hearing-impaired. Due to economic hardship, children are unable to afford to buy smart devices and this inability lets the children lose their education. As a result, this study recommends for the attention of duty bearers to take necessary actions towards the betterment of the students with hearing impairment as it violates their rights of equal access to education.

1.6.4. Technology and Accessibility

Some of the hearing-impaired children have been using the zoom as a platform. Those students have mentioned that they have attended the whole classes by hiring a sign language interpreter on behalf of the teacher. Due to lack of knowledge of online platforms, most of the teachers were reluctant to get involved in the teaching activities. These are some of the serious issues faced by teachers and students with hearing impairment.

A mother of hearing impairment children said that she has three children and she is the one who goes outside work to earn some money. Her husband divorced her and she is economically unstable to help her children. Very unfortunate that this mother has another two children who are partially disabled. Hence, it has been noted that almost, all three children were in the vulnerable conditions and, the student social workers identified through their occasional visits to the Centre, took necessary steps to control her suicidal thoughts due this pandemic, and facilitated to get involved with education. The student social worker has taken his initial steps to calm down her mental abnormality during the pandemic.

Due to the weakened network connection, unavailability of software drivers and outdated licentiate software, the students were unable to participate in the online classes and it led to many interruptions and laggings. The other issue that was faced by the parents due to the technological development is to afford a smart device. Due to the outbreak, many families lost their daily income and were unable to afford their daily life expenditures. Since, the learning process was carried out via zoom, the parents were in a pressure to afford a smart device which will impact their daily income and expenditures.

1.7. CONCLUSION:

When online learning gives several troubles for normal children, it is the time to think about the difficulties that children with hearing impairment may face in day-to-day life and platforms like ZOOM do not support a better learning platform to hearing-impaired students. Especially during Covid 19 pandemic, they have been isolated from the family environment as well as the school environment. Acoustic issues, insufficient teachers, unequipped schools, a lack of instructional and assessment tools, issues related sign language, issues related to syllabus revisions, negative attitudes of people caused decline in their education. The occasional visits of student social workers during the pandemic, played multiple roles and contributions to the children with hearing impairment and optimally, facilitated the children such as lip reading, watch signing and emotional support. There were serious issues behind the unsuccessful teaching and learning among the children with hearing impairment due to issues related to the FM (frequency modulation) hearing systems.

Hence, teachers were little intransigent towards children with hearing impairment and, the gaps left among them were fulfilled by the student social workers to motivate and cooperate with existing settings for children with hearing impairment. Trained teachers and special trained social workers must be appointed or must be granted training for effective efficient educational services for hearing-impaired children. Children must be treated equally and duty bearers must make sure that their rights are upheld. Children also should not be treated on the grounds of caste, creed, race, religion, gender, age, ethnicity and socio-economic background. As above-mentioned, the findings were disseminated to the implications for policies and programs in the educational sector in Sri Lanka.

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