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Avoiding a Child Welfare Crisis: Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 through Social Service Workforce Strengthening.

Introduction

Although children appear less susceptible to the physical effects of COVID-19, the pandemic is increasing the vulnerability of children to abuse, neglect and exploitation. As noted by the UN Secretary-General,

“What began as a health crisis risks evolving into a broader child-rights crisis.”



A social worker from the Department of Social Welfare lodges a report of child abuse with an officer at the police station.

Social welfare services are critical to keeping children safe and mitigating the long-term consequences of the pandemic on children's wellbeing and welfare. However, social service providers have faced significant challenges in delivering services due to social distancing and lockdown measures, restrictions of movement and other pandemic suppression strategies. Despite investment in a child protection system to tackle complex welfare challenges, research suggests that social services are not uniform in Malaysia and do not adequately reach some communities.¹

Definition:²

The social service workforce for child protection refers to social workers, social welfare practitioners and professionals from allied sectors, both paid and unpaid in government and non-governmental sectors, who provide a safe and healthy environment for the development of children. The primary focus of this workforce is on care, promotive and preventive measures, support and rehabilitative response services,

advocacy, research and capacity building in an effort to protect children from harm and promote family-based care in Malaysia.

The term 'social service workforce' as used in this brief encompasses a range of sectors that deliver general social services. This includes specific child protection and probation services, as well as services provided by other sectors including health, education, etc.

Social workers are professionals with an academic qualification that entitles them to practise their profession. In the absence of an official regulation of this profession, other social service workers are commonly referred to as 'social workers'; however, it is important to reserve this professional title for qualified social workers.

In Malaysia, social workers are employed by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD) at the national level and by the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) at the national, state and district levels. The Child Act established the roles of child protectors and probation officers, defined as 'social welfare officers'. Social workers are also located in hospitals, the National Anti-Drug Agency, the National Unity Department and in NGOs.

Pre-COVID-19 Child Welfare and Protection

Research and studies indicate that children in Malaysia were already vulnerable to harm before the COVID-19 crisis³ such as violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation in the home, in schools, in the community and institutions (care centres and detention) and through trafficking, forced labour, child marriage and commercial sexual exploitation.⁴

Impact of COVID-19 on child welfare and protection

COVID-19 is increasing the exposure of children in Malaysia to physical and emotional harm in some of the following ways:

- Likely increased risks of child marriage, teenage pregnancy, child labour and exploitation and recruitment into criminal gangs
- Economic challenges and stress also increase the risk of caregivers becoming violent or abusive, especially if substance abuse, mental health problems or domestic violence history are involved.
- During lockdowns due to school closures, children were less visible and unlikely to be in contact with protective adults such as teachers, medical professionals, and child and family welfare service providers.
- Increased time online may also result in exposure to online bullying, sexual abuse or grooming, increased risk-taking behaviour, exposure to pornographic materials and inappropriate content, and violations of privacy.

Precisely at the time when children are at heightened risk of abuse, neglect and exploitation, social service providers have been less able to reach and deliver protection services to children and their families.

The Social Service Workforce during the COVID-19 Crisis: Impact & Lessons learnt in Malaysia

Before the COVID-19 crisis, the social service workforce in Malaysia already faced challenges, including geographical constraints to the delivery of essential services and significant capacity and human resource limitations.⁵

Limited coordination between civil society and government agencies and the lack of clear delineation of roles and responsibilities have also hindered efficient service delivery. There is a recognized need to increase the numbers of the social service workforce and to ensure that staff are adequately trained to meet the range of needs for all vulnerable populations.⁶

During the COVID-19 crisis, the ability of the social service workforce to meet the needs of children and families was impacted. For example, during MCO and in some successive lockdown periods⁷, the government was unable to provide dedicated child protection assistance due to reassignment to food relief services and suspension of services. MWFC's 24-hour helpline, Talian Kasih recorded an overwhelming increase in calls during this period⁸, raising concerns about sufficiency of staff to respond to domestic violence and child protection issues, and accessibility of the helpline. Children affected by migration, who already face barriers in accessing services, have been left especially vulnerable by the closure of services, including those provided by civil society organisations (CSOs).

Pre-existing challenges in coordination between government and NGO service providers manifested themselves during the crisis. Due to understaffing and insufficient professional training, the workforce was not adequately equipped to face the additional demands placed on them during the COVID-19 crisis.

Opportunities to capitalise on learning from COVID-19

Our recommendations are as follows:

1) Strengthen the capacity of the Social Service Workforce:

- Urgently pass the pending Social Work Profession Bill because it is the principal lever for recognising and regulating the social work profession, building in mechanisms for quality service delivery, and ensuring the professionalism and ethical practice of social workers.
- Upgrade Children's Division under DSW to a department with increased numbers of trained child protectors, specialised and tailored to meet the needs of the spectrum of vulnerable children in Malaysia.
- Develop strategies to prioritise child protection as an essential service and minimise service delivery disruption in future crises.

2) Ensure a multi-sectoral response and services to address children and caregivers' needs holistically.

- Establish and strengthen child-specific helplines and referral systems in accordance with international standards⁹.
- Ensure sufficient allocation of financial and material resources for social welfare services.

- Identify and support needs of children affected by migration in national social welfare service provision as well as in response and referral to health and other essential services.

3) Promote strategic planning and coordination between Government and CSOs for effective service delivery to protect children from the negative impacts of COVID-19 and future emergencies.

- Strengthen collaboration with Assistant Child Protectors (currently from CSOs), and optimise their recruitment through institutionalised capacity building, to strengthen social welfare service provision.
- Delineate and enhance the mandate of CSOs within the child welfare and protection system, for them to become formal partners with government, and to increase emergency preparedness and capacity.

4) Strengthen and link social protection responses to child protection priorities.

The pandemic highlights the critical importance of strengthening Malaysia's social protection system through the expansion of child and family benefits and increasing access to unemployment insurance to a broader population.

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For more information, see also UNICEF, *Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Children & Families in Malaysia*, 2020.¹¹

Endnotes

1. Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and UNICEF Malaysia, *Child Protection System in Malaysia*, 2013, pp. 56-71.
2. Adapted from the *UNICEF Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection*, UNICEF East Asia, Pacific Regional Office and the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, and *The Social Service Workforce in the East Asia and Pacific Region: Multi-Country Review*, UNICEF, Bangkok, 2019.
3. UNICEF and ASEAN, *Ending Violence against Children in ASEAN member States*, 2016; UNICEF Malaysia, *Situation Analysis of Women and Children*, September 2020.
4. US State Department, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2019, Malaysia; Report of the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material, Visit to Malaysia*, 2019, para. 23.
5. UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office and the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, *ibid* (note 2).
6. *Ibid*.
7. The MCO was implemented March 18, 2020 and ended on May 4, when the Conditional MCO began. This was followed by the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) phase between 10 June and 31 August 2020.
8. New Straits Times, "All calls to Talian Kasih taken seriously, says ministry", 4 April 2020. Speech of the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development during the Ministry's Monthly Assembly ref. 2/2020 and launch of the Short-Term Economic Recovery Plan (PENJANA), 25 June 2020.
9. Maestral, UNICEF Malaysia, MASW, *Protecting children during COVID-19 Tips for social workers and social welfare practitioners*, June, 2020. The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action-Child Helpline International, CP AOR, UNICEF. *Technical Note: Child Helplines and the Protection of Children during the Covid-19 Pandemic*, May 2020.
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11. UNICEF and partners, *Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Children & Families in Malaysia: Social service workers share their experience, perspectives and recommendations*, November 2020.