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Topic: International Standards of Drug Use Prevention.

Issue: Prevention approach to manage the increasing problem of transactional crime, substance abuse and narcotics trade in children during COVID, since education moved online.

I will be discussing the unexpected crisis created by the pandemic that has derailed the entire learning process exposing children to misinformation, targeted marketing and increased access to drugs and narcotics leading to organised transactional crime. As the speed of the pandemic increased, the classrooms moved to online platforms and the downside of this on children has seen to affect societies around the world. As a result various child related problems in the Asia Pacific regions has increased many fold reversing all the concentrated efforts made to address these issues in the last decade.

I will also highlight the need to mount an urgent, dynamic and international prevention backed response to deal effectively the pandemic induced challenges related to the safety of children affected by and exposed to narcotics use and trade.

Among the many changes in young children's lives, the sudden access to digital content and the opportunity for online communication has opened up a wider world for access to substance abuse and addiction. Increased use of cyberspace by children for education has made them vulnerable to abuse, trafficking, trade and misinformation.

In a country like India, where access to technology and internet connectivity has enabled the migration of classroom education to an online platform with great ease, children as young as 11 years are now on social networking platforms. There has been an increasing trend to force, threaten or unknowingly partake in social media challenges leading to unforeseen complications. For parents who did not expect their children to use social media so young, virtual learning is an unexpected push into the digital deep.

Just for a background on the internet use in India, which penetrated into our country very fast, majority of the population are not educated on how to use the internet. We were never taught important things like the protocols of the internet and digital safety. Even today children use the internet without understanding the underlying dangers that are designed to specifically target them. Issues being reported everyday by children include cyber bullying, impersonation, drug peddling and child pornography.

Schools are now faced with the reality that there are no more school campuses or boundaries to keep children under watch. Daily reports from parents, children and teachers on the need to protect children from misinformation specially related to substance abuse is increasing. The lack of know-how and the preparedness to manage this is also adding to the complexities that children face today. The absence of treatment facilities for children, child drug courts, child treatment protocols and services, make it important that we design prevention guidelines for schools at the earliest.

It is an increasing concern for parents with children engaged in distance/ online learning, that their young are in multiple, unsanctioned hangout groups chatting and gaming with her friends. Among the many topics of discussion are messages along the lines of an unending stream of misinformation on substance abuse leading children to take up challenges and dares on-line. This precipitous push into social media for school children may seem relatively minor against the sweep of the pandemic. But for parents who have tried to keep their children to minimal use of devices or use social media its becoming a cause for concern.

Fourth Wave Foundation's Project VENDA has been working on a prevention approach to effectively contain and manage the increasing problem of substance abuse among teens and school children. The recent data collected in Feb this year of 2021, has shown that the problem among this age group has increased to an unbelievable 24% as against 10-12% pre pandemic. The realities that, payments for illegal substances and delivery has moved online into gaming sites and social media platforms and use of payment gateways make it difficult for parents and schools and the enforcement bodies to monitor these activities.

Project VENDA intends to bring this to the attention of the UNODC and the world-wide community that there needs to be a clear prevention approach focusing two important areas:

School:

- Prepare content on preventive/protective measures addressing internet as a gateway for drug use, trade, distribution, sale leading children to transactional crime.
- Emphasise the need to conduct digital literacy classes opening up the reality of the danger and targeted misinformation to lure kids into addiction and substance abuse.
- Enforce school policies on substance use and enhance involvement of all stakeholders to keep children SAFE at schools while learning online.

Parents:

- Have to work with schools towards regulating the time spent online, learning, playing games and using apps as they deem fit to enable healthy use of the internet.
- Parents need to be taught that their children seem to stay undetected by parents due to parental ignorance and their digital illiteracy.
- Part of the exploration leads kids into the dark web/net and this is an increasing trend. The reality is that young learners find themselves exposed to misinformation at a time when parents have the least work life balance to help their children.
- Socialising for children online through chat groups and game groups is the only way of communicating in these Covid times and parents need to be sensitive about that while also teaching them to be responsible about what they share as content online and its consequences.
- Encourage and teach children to look behind the scenes of why, how and for whom these techs platforms are targeted.

The reality for a state like Kerala, in India is that we are currently doing everything possible to cater to the increasing need for child treatment and care for children affected by/addicted to the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. More than 50% of arrests related to narcotics involve teens and young adults, the need for fast track child drug courts to manage this increasing trend is an imperative. The current lack of drug rehabilitation centres, child treatment services and need for creating child friendly policies has been our prerogative.

We as an informed community about the raising issue of narcotics and drugs among children and youth, are working hard to comply with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in relation to Article 33 which stands alone among the core UN human rights treaties in preventing children from the illicit use, production and trafficking of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.

I thank the UNODC, VNGOC and everyone gathered here today, working sincerely towards creating a safer world for our children. I also take this opportunity to reinforce the need for us as communities to work on a prevention approach to create Substance Abuse Free Environments for our children.

Diana Vincent is a social scientist working on child rights issues, she works towards creating S.A.F.E – Substance Abuse Free Environments in schools and communities. She serves as the Director at Fourth Wave Foundation India. She has a Master's Degree in Human Resources and Advanced Management Program in CSR from the Swedish Institute, Stockholm.