

# India: NHRC Calls for Reopening Schools in Staggered Manner, Restoring Midday Meals

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**With millions of children not having access to food and education during COVID-19, the panel has issued a detailed advisory to ministries and states on ensuring welfare.**

**New Delhi:** Noting that the COVID-19 pandemic has deprived 64 million children of their right to food through a disruption in anganwadi services and impacted the education of over 250 million children across the country, the National Human Rights Commission recently issued an "Advisory for Protection of the Rights of Children in the context of COVID-19". In this, it has urged seven Union ministries and all state governments and union territories to take specific actions for promotion and protection of the rights of children under five broad categories – their health, food and nutrition, education, childcare institutions, and child protection and justice systems.

On the need for the advisory, the Commission said the "pandemic and the way it has panned out has resulted in violation of the rights of many children. It has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, created new ones and adversely affected their access to a range of services."

**Large number of children deprived of mid-day meals'}} Stating that "there are concerns of food security because of the interruption in the supply of meals and supplementary nutrition under Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)," the NHRC also recorded that "multiple reports show that a large percentage of children have been deprived of these meals during the lockdown." It added that estimates by the Right to Food Campaign show that a disruption in anganwadi services has deprived 6.4 crore children of their right to food." {{Education of children impacted as only 15% rural households have internet'**

The NHRC also said with only 15% rural households having access to the internet, the education of over 250 million students has been adversely impacted. "There have already been multiple cases of student suicides due to the helplessness of not being able to access education digitally. An assessment by Oxfam found that 75% government school parents struggled to support their children in accessing education that was delivered digitally," it added.

The panel also said during this period, there have been reports of increased violence against children, both physical and sexual, child marriage and child trafficking. "Cases of child abuse and safety have also increased manifold during the lockdown is evidenced by the increase in calls to helplines."

Thus, it said, urgent action was required in light of constitutional obligations, domestic laws and international principles to safeguard the lives and dignity of children who constitute 39% of India's population.

In view of the directions issued by the Supreme Court and Patna high court on September 18, the

Commission said it constituted a “Committee of Experts on Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Human Rights and Future Response” comprising representatives from the civil society organisations, independent domain experts and the representatives from the concerned ministries and departments. The panel assessed the impact of the pandemic on human rights of people, especially the marginalised and vulnerable sections, and its suggestions formed the basis of the five separate advisory that have been issued.

**Ensure routine immunisation, continuation of health services’}}** On the issue of health of children, the advisory seeks adherence to Health Ministry’s guidance note of April 13 that sought ensuring routine immunisation and continuation of essential child health services without disruption at the Primary Health Centre (PHC)/ Community Health Centre (CHC) /Mohalla clinics, quarantine centres, and Anganwadi Centres (AWCs). It also directs ensuring health and nutrition requirements of adolescent girls through regular supply of iron supplements, Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) services, menstrual hygiene products, and supplementary nutrition through ICDS. The advisory also calls for making mental health services available and accessible to all children; and ensuring that no child victim of sexual offences is denied free first aid or medical treatment, including medical termination of pregnancy. Further it expressed concern at reports of sexual violence against children in the quarantine centres and called for putting in place child protection protocols. **{{Resume mid-day meal scheme; distribute diverse foods to children’**

Another advisory pertaining to food and nutrition of children said orders should be issued to update enrolment records of Public Distribution System to include names of children born after 2011 in the ration cards.

It also advised distributing diverse foods such as millets, ragi, oil, etc, through PDS; continuation and expansion of feeding centres/community kitchens; reopening Anganwadi Centres to ensure continued access to crucial services; providing supplementary nutrition through ICDS for children, pregnant and lactating women in the form of home delivery of dry rations or cash transfers; and providing sufficient quantities of dry rations and take-home rations for all children under three years, as well as pregnant and lactating women, irrespective of their registration with AWC.

The advisory also urged re-start of mid-day meal scheme to provide hot cooked meal or dry rations to every child, including children who have migrated, even if schools are shut so that they do not slip into malnutrition. It also called for providing mid-day meals to children who usually reside in social welfare hostels, tribal welfare hostels, etc, but are now at home due to closure of residential schools.

For ‘street-connected children’, the advisory called for making provisions so that they may avail food from the State Feeding Centres; and proactively monitoring the delivery of services on the ground. Similarly for children of sex-workers, whose livelihood has been grievously affected, it urged ensuring that they have access to basic necessities for survival, especially food and nutritional facilities.

### **‘Explore safe and staggered re-opening of schools’**

In its advisory pertaining to education of children, NHRC has called for exploring safe and staggered re-opening of saying till they are re-opened, children may be taught in small groups and the use of various mass-media to teach children may be explored. It has also asked for developing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to be followed when schools reopen and for building the capacity of teachers and school management committees to function effectively.

The Commission also urged issuing guidelines to prevent private schools from hiking fees, and setup a helpline for parents. It said designing and delivering accelerated learning curriculum should be explored to recover teaching time lost due to the pandemic. It also asked for reorganising the academic year and forgoing examinations up to Class 9 if feasible and having assessments based on academic and extra-curricular performance instead.

With regards child care institutions, the advisory has urged placing data on number of children in CCIs; those released, restored to family/guardians, provided sponsorship, and placed in foster care, adoption, and kinship care. It also called upon states to take measures to ensure adequate supplies and protective gear for maintaining sanitation, ensuring health and safety of children in the institutions.

Finally, the advisory pertaining to child protection and justice systems has urged treating core child protection services, service providers and authorities as 'essential workers/services' and provided with necessary protection material, training and supervision during the pandemic. It also called for including physical distancing when producing children before various fora. It also urged that where sittings are conducted through video-conferencing or other audio-visual means, quorum should be ensured while passing orders and social workers should be a part of the inquiry process.

Also, among other things, the Commission has demanded a clear guideline for registering and responding to children, who report violence, abuse, or exploitation through phones or in person to the police. It also called for issuing guidelines for establishing quarantine centres and isolation centres within hospitals in every district to serve children in the JJ System.

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