

THE SITUATION OF VULNERABLE FAMILIES AND CHILDREN DURING THE PERIOD OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

SITUAȚIA FAMILIILOR ȘI COPILOR VULNERABILI ÎN PERIOADA PANDEMIEI COVID-19 ÎN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA

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Abstract

The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus has spread to almost every country in the world, affecting tens of millions of people. The restrictive measures imposed have led to significant changes in multiple spheres of human life, with major consequences, especially for the population from socially vulnerable categories, of which children are some of the most affected socially and economically, due to their dependent status on parents and / or other significant adults. In addition to other countries in the world affected by the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, there is also the Republic of Moldova. Therefore, this article analyzes the current situation of vulnerable children and families in the Republic of Moldova based on data of some studies of national organizations and the author's own study.

The research results showed that the vulnerable families had suffered a sharp reduction of income, loss of jobs and difficulties in getting online educational services for their children, especially families with 3 or more children, single-parents and the families from rural areas that doesn't have the necessary equipment or internet connection. This also has been exacerbated by the issues with offering social benefits and access to socio-medical services. At the same time numerous vulnerable families were getting support from various agents like NGOs, state institutions and other types of organizations.

While members of vulnerable families expressed fears of isolation, food insecurity and other psychological and financial issues they remained hopeful and wished for a source of stable income; direct psychological, material support and quality online education. Also, the study on the changes in the expenditures in the pandemic period has shown a more significant prioritization of expenditures for goods for basic necessities in the population.

Keywords: *vulnerable children, vulnerable families, COVID-19 pandemic, Rep. of Moldova*

JEL: *H53, H75, I31, J13.*

1. Introduction

Currently, according to Johns Hopkins University, a total of 30.2 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported, of which 946.1 thousand have been fatal [COVID-19 Map - Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center]. In order to reduce the rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus world countries have implemented restrictive measures on an unprecedented scale. Moldova was affected as well, in which there were registered 44983 cases of COVID-19, from these 33239 recovered (73.9% of registered cases), 1170 deceased (2.6%) and 10574 active cases (23.5%) [COVID-19 în Republica Moldova].

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To curb the spread of the virus Moldova declared the state of emergency during the period from 17 March 2020 until 15 May 2020. Between other restrictive measures this entailed establishing a special regime of entry and exit from the country; the establishment of a special traffic regime on the territory of the country; introduction of the quarantine regime and taking other mandatory sanitary-anti-epidemic measures; establishing a special working regime for all entities; prohibiting the holding of assemblies, public demonstrations and other mass actions. This affected not only the health, but also the working status, access to services and goods and other areas of human activity, which especially affected vulnerable families.

2. The situation of families and children in difficulty during the period of COVID-19 pandemic in the Republic of Moldova

CCF/HHC Moldova (an organization from Moldova which aims to reintegrate children from residential institutions into family-based systems) has conducted a research [COVID 19 – The Lockdown Diaries] [Raport privind situația familiilor cu copii în contextul pandemiei COVID 19] [Research on the situation of families with children at risk] [From crisis to solution - Opinion of Social Work Territorial Structures] on the situation of families with children at risk in the context of the pandemic caused by coronavirus in the period from 14th to 28th April 2020 using a sample of 140 families registered at the Territorial Social Assistance Structures, from which 76% were from rural area and 24% - from urban area and by regions – 18.6% from Chisinau, 38.6% from North, 13.6% from South, 28.6% from Center and 0.7% from ATU Gagauzia.

The families included those with family members with disabilities, a low income, a large number of children, single parents, nuclear family or cohabiting with a partner etc. The majority of them were biological families – 88%. From the sample – 34% were single-parents, 28% - cohabiting with a partner and 38% - complete or nuclear families. Half of the surveyed families (50.7%) had 3 or more children, a third (30.7%) – 2 children and a fifth (18.6%) – only 1 child.

The families with 3 or more children had 73% of the surveyed children. From the surveyed sample 54 children or 13% had special needs and most of them are of school age (7-17 years old) and 13 persons or 4.6% of adults from the families have special needs.

The limitation of the study is the weak representativity on the national level and the collected data was limited to the period from 1 January 2020 to 15 April 2020. According to the research results, the majority of families (78%) consider serious or very serious the consequences of COVID-19 crisis, while 16% believe it is not serious. A third of respondents (32%) declared that they have concern for the tomorrow, the stress, exhaustion, fear of infection and other concerns. A small part of surveyed people (5%) said they didn't knew anything at all about COVID-19 and didn't believe themselves to be affected. Some respondents expressed the issue of information overload that produces overwhelm and worry. About the feelings of children most of people (79%) mentioned calmness and peacefulness, 14% - boredom and isolation from friends, and 7% - sadness and sacredness. The majority of families know and use protection measures against the virus.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected also the income of the vulnerable families. A little more than half (54%) of the surveyed families declared that in the period March – April 2020 in comparison with January – February 2020 their income decreased. Their monthly income varied between 540 MDL and 9500 MDL and even lack of income for some families. The biggest monthly income the families had in January 2020, thanks mainly for the family support allocation for the year 2019.

The income began to decrease from February 2020 until April 2020. If in January around half of surveyed families (47%) had an income of more than 3000 MDL, then in April this share reduced two times (to 21%), at the same time during this period the share of families with a monthly income of 1601-3000 MDL from 29% has grown to 36%, while the share of the ones

with less than 1600 MDL increased from 22% to 31%. It should be noted that if in January there were only 2% of families with no income, this share has increased to 12%. All these changes in the structure show that overall there was a continuous decline of monthly income for vulnerable families irrespective of income groups, a reduction that induced fears of food insecurity for the respondents.

COVID-19 restrictions had determined layoffs, technical unemployment and other measures that companies had used and as a result in vulnerable families as some respondents declared, only one adult member works while the other stays home with the children. Besides these measures, they mentioned the reduced casual work and short contract work due to difficulties of going to other places. On top of this, there were delays of the payment of social benefits, that were also caused by the difficulties of determining the needs of the vulnerable family by the multidisciplinary teams and making the necessary acts.

Also, during COVID-19 crisis was affected the access to services for the vulnerable families, especially because a number of social and educational services moved their activity online. From those 140 respondents 62.9% have school-age children that had before access to traditional educational activities, but after the transition to online activities only half of the families (52%) could offer to their children the possibility to study online, others didn't have the necessary equipment and internet connection. From those families that couldn't offer online education to their children nearly half (46.7%) had a monthly income lower than 1600 MDL, while a fourth (28.6%) had an income of 1600-3000 MDL and another fourth (24.7%) – more than 3000 MDL.

A different structure by the monthly income is in the case of families who could offer online education to their children - only 13% had a monthly income of less than 1600 MDL, while 44% had an income of 1600-3000 MDL and 43% - more than 3000 MDL. Living in the rural area, having a low income and having 3 or more children, single-parent household are important factors in the case of families who couldn't offer online education to their children. Respondents whose children could get online education mentioned its poor quality, especially in the adaptation degree for special educational needs.

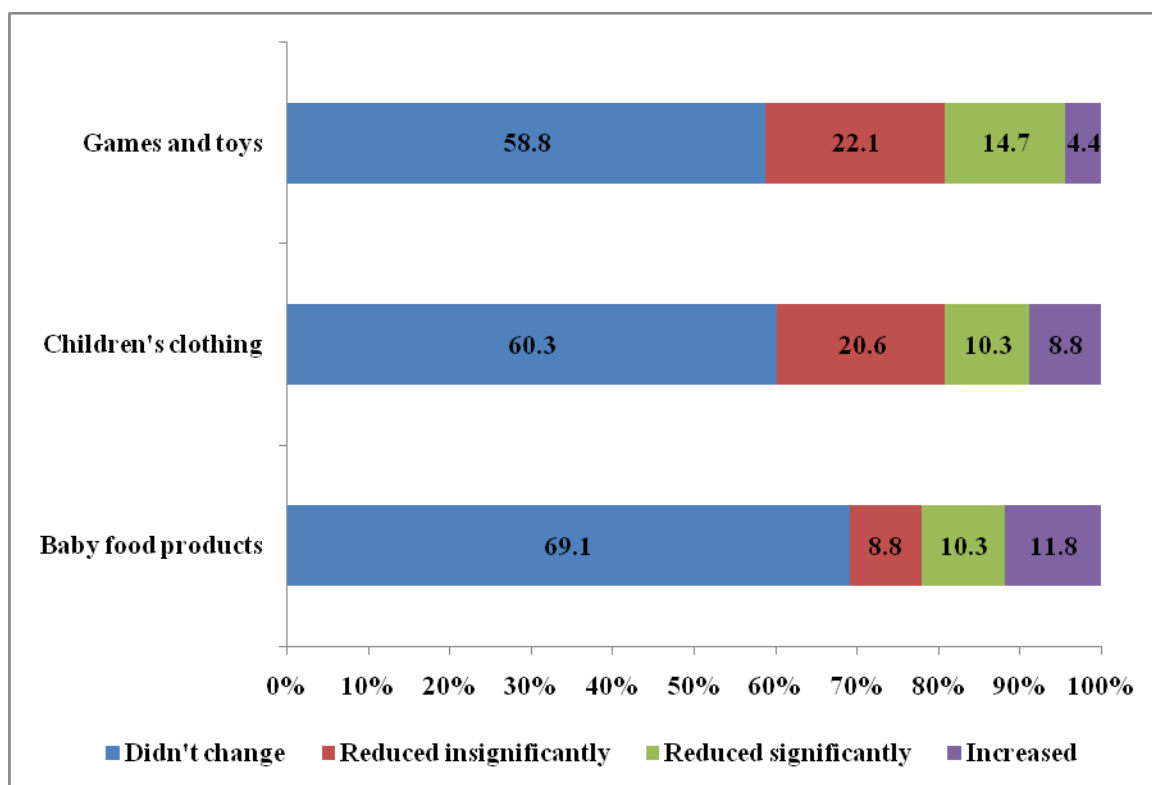
While access to medical services was not so problematic, 71% surveyed persons mentioned lack of access to day centers, social canteens and other social services that were quarantined. Other issues faced by the respondents which they mentioned are the financial ones, like from reduction of possibilities of daily labour, necessity of getting loans because of reduced financial resources, difficulties with family responsibilities. Another issue is the negative effects of COVID-19 crisis on the mental state of family members, education quality, distribution of time and efforts between work and household activities.

The majority of families got support from various agents: non-governmental organizations – 66%, relatives and friends – 56%, state institutions – 25%, neighbour people – 20% and from the church – 11%, while a minority (11%) stated that they didn't get help during the pandemic period. The respondents declared that they need a source of stable income; direct psychological, material support and quality online education.

Regarding the population expenditures, the author elaborated a survey that has the aim of evaluating how various groups of expenditures changed during the COVID-19 crisis in Moldova in 2020 in the population. The survey was conducted in September 2020 and 112 persons participated in it from all Moldovan regions. A small block of questions is related to expenditures for goods/services for children. In the **Figure 1** is shown the structure of the

answers of survey's participants for the questions related to the changes in their expenditures for goods related to children in the period of pandemic from the preliminary data.

Figure 1. The answers of the survey's participants for the questions related to the changes in their expenditures for goods related to children in the period of pandemic, %.



Source: Author's data

As can be seen in the **Figure 1** the majority of people declared that expenditures for buying goods related to children in the period of pandemic didn't change, this is the case for all groups of goods mentioned in the survey: 58.8% - games and toys, for children's clothing – 60.3%, baby food products - 69.1%. In the case expenditures for baby food products for only 19.1% they have decreased during pandemic period (10.3% - significantly and 8.8% - insignificantly), while for 11.8% they have increased – more than in the case of other types of mentioned products, that is because baby food products are basic necessities. An important share of respondents mentioned that their expenditures have reduced for children's clothing (10.3% - significantly and 20.6% - insignificantly) and for games and toys (14.7% - significantly and 22.1% - insignificantly). This may be a result of postponing of these expenditures for some other time and/or savings and redistribution of expenditures to goods closer to basic necessities. This is also shown by the share of respondents for which the expenditures for goods related to children have increased – small for games and toys – 4.4%, higher for children's clothing – 8.8% and much higher for baby food products – 11.8%. In other words, this shows the degree in which goods are closer to being basic necessities, higher for food, lower for clothing and much lower for toys.

3. Conclusions

The spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus has affected the health and the social and economic aspects of the life of people from most world countries. In the case of Moldova the declaration of the state of emergency has affected the jobs, income, education of children, especially the vulnerable families and children.

The vulnerable families had suffered a sharp reduction of income, loss of jobs and difficulties in getting online educational services for their children, especially families with 3 or more children, single-parents and the families from rural areas that doesn't have the necessary equipment or internet connection.

This also has been exacerbated by the issues with offering social benefits and access to socio-medical services. At the same time numerous vulnerable families were getting support from various agents like NGOs, state institutions and other types of organizations. While members of vulnerable families expressed fears of isolation, food insecurity and other psychological and financial issues they remained hopeful and wished for a source of stable income; direct psychological, material support and quality online education. Also, the study on the changes in the expenditures in the pandemic period has shown a more significant prioritization of expenditures for goods for basic necessities in the population.

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