

## COVID-19 IMPACT ON THE EDUCATION OF GIRLS IN INDIA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The recent COVID19 pandemic had caused a global health emergency which also dragged down the economic development of almost all the countries. Apart from these direct effects of the outbreak, it also caused many serious socio-economic issues in India. The increased dropout rates of girls from schools and widening the gender gap in access to education was one such consequence. Many factors contribute to this increased drop outs such as digital divide, prioritising boy's education, lowered public finance contribution to education sector, forced child marriages, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and increased domestic chores.*

**KEYWORDS:** *COVID19 Pandemic, Gender Inequality, Education of Girls, Discrimination*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The COVID19 pandemic is truly global in its impact irrespective of the geography, state of development, or the efficiency of governance of the countries. The entire humanity has been affected by the novel corona virus and has altered the pattern and structure of many economies. Apart from the direct bearing on the health and life expectancy of the people, it also caused a serious economic emergency across the globe. An unintended yet significant consequence of the economic downturn was the deepening of the existing gender inequalities (Alon et al., 2020). The scope of this paper is to focus on the discrepancies in the access to education among girls and boys as an after effect of the pandemic. The closure of schools throughout the countries lead to around 60 percent of children left out from the primary school education as they weren't having access to internet facilities (UNDP Report-2020). UNESCO estimates that education of around 32 crore students in both schools and colleges in India will be affected by the coronavirus incidence. Gender inequality in access to education was always a serious concern in India and the progress made through years had taken a hard hit by this global emergency. The closure of schools resulted in girls facing more challenges in realising their fundamentals right of Right to Education. By withholding women from participating in the economic progress of a country, development of the country is in fact getting staggered. The pandemic has not only denied the girls from getting educated, it has aggravated many socio-cultural burdens faced by women (Corlatean, 2020)

### **India – Access to Education**

According to the United Nations Children's Fund Report (2020), one in three "adolescent girls from poorest households has never been to school." The situation in India reflects this statement where socially and culturally girls has been denied the opportunity to gain education or employment through decades. This discrimination happened on the basis of both caste and gender which lead to serious political movements and reforms for bringing in more equality for women and other marginalised sections of the society. There exist many schemes by the government for improving the female education level such as

BetiBachao Bet Pado, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, Balika Samridhi Yojana, National Scheme of Incentives to girls for secondary education and so on. A proposal by the current Government to increase the legal age of marriage of women at par with men to 21 years seems to be one of the latest of such initiatives. The policy is proposed to have significant socio-economic impact on the women, allowing them to spend more years on education rather than getting married. All that being said, the gap in the literacy rate between men and women is still a reality. According to the 2011 Census report, male literacy is at 84.7 percent while that of female is 70.3 percent bringing a gap of 14.4 percent between the two. The situation is graver in the rural areas, where the gap between the urban male and rural female is a disturbing 27.2 percent.

The country has been making slow yet definite progress in improving the educational status of women and the school enrolment of girls which is facing serious offset due to the spread of the covid virus. The nation-wide lockdown included closing of schools and colleges for indefinite period of time. The medium of education has primarily shifted to online mode and there were serious disruptions in education at all levels. This has created a digital divide among the students in India where the economically backward regions and financially challenged households were further alienated from the system of formal education. According to the NSSO 'Household Social Consumption: Education in India' survey (2017-18), only one in ten households in India possess a computer and only 15 percent of rural India has access to internet. The digital literacy rate is just around 40 percent even among the 15 to 29 age group. All these setbacks are worse for female and it is expected that around 20 percent of the girls will be dropping out from the schools due to varied reasons in the post covid India.

### **Digital Divide Leading to Gender Discrimination**

Closure of schools across the globe was an integral part of the process of containing pandemic from spreading, especially among young children. India adopted the same strategy and had closed all educational institutions as a part of the national lockdown which led to the rise of online mode of learning as the new normal. When the entire education system was shifted to internet mode, the regional, income, and gender inequalities existing in the country became even more prominent. The internet penetration in India stands around just 50 percent (Statista Report, 2020) which leaves the other half of the population having no access to internet facilities. When compared to 72 percent of rural male internet users, rural female users were only 28 percent signifying the gender and regional inequality in access to digital services. Girls belonging to poorer and rural households have limited access as well skills to use technology as compared to boys belonging to urban or well-off households. India having the largest number of children going to school with half of them being young girls face the added challenge of retaining them in the school system by managing the setbacks due to digital divide. The girls are unable to cope up with the boys with the online learning which is pushing them backwards even further and finally forcing them to drop out from the schools permanently.

### **Household Spending on Education of Girls – Preferential Treatment for Boys**

Economic turmoil created by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown was felt by all the sectors and economies. India witnessed a sharp decline in its GDP and an unemployment rate of around 27 percent amid the covid pandemic. The loss employment of the parents inadvertently leads to increase in child labour to compensate for the income loss. Considering the increased opportunity cost to educate children, especially girls, they are made to drop from schools. These patterns are seen mostly in rural areas and urban slums. Educating girls are seen as the least priority in many households and in times of financial emergencies, the resources allocated for their education gets diverted to either other household expenses or to

educate boys. Past evidence of 2008 financial crisis shows that boys from low-income countries benefitting from gender gap in education (Paz et al., 2020) This economic impact is larger for girls marginalised on the basis of caste, tribe, etc. This substitution of the schooling of children were not found to have any favourable impact on the household assets or calorie intake (Bharadwaj et al., 2019). The short term interruptions for education usually leads to permanent drop out from schools which is expected in the post covid India as well.

### **Lowered Public Financing for Education**

COVID-19 primarily being a global health emergency has forced the attention and resource allocation from the policy makers exclusively on managing health care facilities. Health care sector received one of the highest allocations in the latest Union Budget of 2021-22 along with thrust to revive the economy by pushing the investments and other MSMEs. Education sector took a step back in its allocation and the funds were diverted for reviving the economy and containing the pandemic. The lack of resources from the State for education sector has resulted in the inability to support the marginalised sections, especially girls. Many states were not able to continue with the mid-day meal schemes once the lockdown was removed which proved to be deterrent for girls to attend schools. Lack of access to technologies is also a rampant issue faced by poorer states where the girls were falling behind their male counterparts finally forcing them to drop-out.

### **Early Forced Marriages**

India is one among the five countries which accounts for 50 percent of the child brides in the world (UNICEF Report, 2021). Child marriages were a common custom in many rural parts of India which was getting slowly eradicated over decades of reforms, laws and social movements. The spread of the pandemic caused a resurgence in early forceful marriages of girls in India at an alarming rate. 10 million secondary school girls are estimated to drop out from schools in India, many of whom will be forced to marry early or will be facing domestic violence. Unemployment had hit the economy hard and many economically vulnerable households' resorts to marrying off their daughters at a young age in order to reduce their financial drain. The spike in child marriages is occurring across the country at odd times and places to avoid being reported to authorities. With schools being shut, poor families have no place to send their daughters to get engaged during day and are also missing out on the mid-day meals from schools. Lack of affordability of the food requirements and sustenance are forcing the parents to forcefully marry off young girls instead of re enrolling in schools.

### **Domestic Violence, Sexual Exploitation and Teenage Pregnancies**

Closure of schools across the country has confined the girls inside their houses resulting in an increased incidence of domestic violence and sexual exploitation. Past evidence shows that the Ebola outbreak had caused a higher rate of teenage pregnancies as the girls had no access to sex education or contraceptives when the schools were closed (Rafaeli & Hutchinson, 2020). National emergencies exacerbate teenage pregnancies, especially in rural areas. Teenage girls will thereby drop out from schools as many pregnant teenagers will be prohibited by their family to resume their education (Muller & Nathan, 2020). The social stigma associated with pregnancy will deter teenage pregnant girls from attending classes once the school reopens and they will have to eventually drop out. The young mothers are also expected to take care of their new born leaving them with no option but to discontinue their education.

### Increased Domestic Chores

The higher rate of dropout from schools among girls can also be attributed to the increased amount of household chores as members are forced to remain inside their own houses. The societal norms dictate women to be the primary care takers and are expected to take the responsibility of all additional work inside the house. Girls do not have the option to leave the premise of their houses for education and thereby end up devoting most of their time in chores rather than studying. There has been a disproportionate increase in the unpaid household chores for girls in the pandemic, especially if the primary care giver had to stay away from the house due to covid emergency, or are missing due to death or any illness (Muller & Nathan, 2020). As girls are devoting more time in helping out domestic chores, it encourages the parents to keep them at home even after the school reopens, especially those parents who do not prioritize girls' education. Thereby, a temporary break in the education leads to permanent withdrawal of the girls from the schools. This patriarchal notion of girls bearing the responsibility of domestic work and not needing education or employment furthers the gender inequality gap persisting in India.

### CONCLUSIONS

The way forward is to find sustainable and tailored solutions region wise for retaining the girls in schools. Different countries had adopted various measures to reduce this gender inequality in access to education. China is providing subsidised internet connection and other technological services for helping students to survive the pandemic. Various state and local governments are also implementing various measures to help marginalised students to tide through this national emergency (Alvi & Gupta, 2020). The policy makers are required to give additional attention and focus on helping young girls to continue their education. Several interventions were reported across states where authorities had to forcefully stop child marriages. Stricter law enforcements against these practices are the need of the hour. By providing economic support to vulnerable households can go a long way in mitigating many of these obstacles, especially child labour.

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