



Research Paper

Education and Gender Divide: Assessing the Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Women's Education in India

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The COVID-19 pandemic has left a significant imprint on the education of children across the globe. This emergency has caused widespread closures of educational institutions resulting in disruptions to educational systems in India. While this disruption has affected children across the countries, its repercussions have been more pronounced among underprivileged children, especially girls. The pandemic disrupted early learning, formal education, and immediately endangered gender equality. This risk extends to various areas such as health, education, socio-economic status, overall well-being and protection. To effectively confront these obstacles and ensure continuous education while championing gender equality, it's imperative to grasp these gender-related intricacies. Hence, this study has aims to understand the short and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's education, especially girls, in India. It also seeks to highlight biases with regards to girls' education.

Keywords: COVID-19, Girls, Education, Schools, Equality

Received 23 Feb., 2024; Revised 02 Mar., 2024; Accepted 04 Mar., 2024 © The author(s) 2024.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction

Right to Education enshrined as a fundamental entitlement under Article-21A of India's Constitution, play a vital role in the nation's progress. They enable girls to actively participate in both family and societal advancement by involving themselves in decision-making processes at home and within their communities. Nonetheless, the global repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have had a profound impact on educational institutions, resulting in the closure of a substantial majority of schools worldwide. According to UNESCO, this closure has affected more than 89 percent of the global student population; encompassing 743 millions are girls alone. Around 320 million students in India were affected who were enrolled in schools or universities. In India, the formal education system has been significantly affected by the pandemic, leading to a range of socio-economic challenges. This difficult situation is compounded by pre-existing gender inequalities and traditional patriarchal customs. The COVID-19 outbreak has had a negative influence on women education in India, and the situation is particularly dire for women in rural areas.

Women Education Prior to COVID-19

The achievement of Independence marked a pivotal moment in the history of women's education in India. The concept of treating women as equals and ensuring social justice was enshrined in the Constitution, which guaranteed equality for all, regardless of caste, gender, or religion. The Indian government is providing universal and compulsory education for all children between the ages of 6 and 14, as evidenced by Article 45 of the constitution as a directive policy. The government has elevated primary education to a Fundamental Right for all Indian citizens. India's literacy rate currently stands at 74.37 percent, with men at 82.37 percent and women at 65.79 percent. Enrolment of children aged 6 to 14 is notably high at 96 percent. However, there is a significant decline in girls' enrolment between the ages of 15 to 18, with a dropout rate of 39.4 percent. This situation compels more than two-thirds of these girls to engage in household chores or even resort to begging (Chandra, 2019).

Girls' Education amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

India boasts one of the world's most extensive education systems, second only to China. It comprises over 1.5 million schools, nearly 9.7 million educators, and a student population exceeding 265 million, spanning

from pre-primary to higher secondary levels and representing diverse socio-economic groups. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to closure of schools following the national lockdown initiated on March 16, 2020. This setback erased the educational progress of seven decades, which had been achieved through the legislations like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All) in 2000 and the Right to Education Act in 2009. This situation raises concerns that the progress made in addressing gender inequalities in education in recent decades could be reversed (Pedrosa et al., 2020).

Dropout Rates of Girls

During the COVID-19 pandemic in India, there was a notable increase in the number of girls dropping out of schools and educational institutions. This rise can be attributed to several factors, including limited access to online learning, economic challenges faced by families, and an increased burden of household responsibilities and care giving placed on girls. According to UNICEF reports during the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 247 million children were affected by school closures in India. The dropout rate at the secondary level reached as high as 17 percent, and some children had never been enrolled in school. In 2021, the Ministry of Education reported that 3.5 million children were out of school, including those who left school during the pandemic. NGOs and education experts believe the actual number is likely much higher due to the absence of consolidated data, as several states are still tallying these figures. An alternative estimate suggests that as many as 20 million students across the country discontinued their education. According to the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) for the year 2020-21, the annual dropout rate for secondary level education stood at 14.6 percent (Sahani, 2023). The pandemic has raised concerns that we may be jeopardizing the educational future of an entire generation of children who may never return to school.

Dropout Aggravated Child Marriage

The inability to engage in online classes and the heightened burden of household responsibilities, the consequences of the pandemic have profoundly altered the lives of many girls in India. A significant number of them may never return to school, and this disruption in their education puts them at risk of early marriage, child labour, and sexual exploitation. Girls and women seem to be facing a dual crisis during this entire ordeal one that affects everyone in the form of the Corona virus, and another that specifically affects girls are child marriage or forced marriage, often referred to as the 'shadow pandemic'. According to UNICEF report, among the total dropped out girls in India 25 percent had got married. Although evidence regarding the rise in child, early, and forced marriages varies, the pressures arising from COVID-19 and school closures may have led to less stringent enforcement or the relaxation of existing prohibitions on child marriage (UNESCO, 2023).

Pandemic and Digital Divide

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled educational institutions to suspend in-person classes and transition to online learning. However, for a country like India, online schooling presents a nearly insurmountable challenge where 67 percent of the population residing in rural areas, with less access to internet and electricity. Moreover, gender based digital divide is impeding girl's access to online education. In India, women constitute only 30 percent of the total internet users, making it more difficult for girls to participate in online classes and continue their education (Pandey, 2020). Digital disparities were already prevalent among girls, women, and marginalized groups before the COVID-19 outbreak. However, as the pandemic shifted numerous aspects of daily life to the online realm, these inequalities have significantly worsened.

During online learning, girls in India were more likely to miss out because boys had preferential access to the internet and personal devices. Typically, girls are not allowed to have their own mobile phones, as this is a means of controlling and regulating their behaviour and restricting their freedom. We live in a patriarchal society where control over resources is predominantly held by males, even if they are younger. Many girls reported that they had hardly been able to study during school closures because they had only one Smartphone at home, which they had to share with their brothers (Bhatnagar et al., 2020).

Loss of Academic Activities

Closure of schools has an adverse impact on children's learning, particularly on girls' educational access. Extended periods away from school not only disrupt the learning process but also result in a significant loss of previously acquired knowledge. This loss encompasses essential skills such as reading comprehension, writing ability, and basic mathematics. In late 2020, the World Bank estimated that a seven month absence from schools would raise the percentage of students classified as experiencing 'learning poverty' from 53 percent to 63 percent. Furthermore, after a year without in-person classes, students had acquired 27 percent less knowledge than they would have in normal circumstances. In tribal regions such as Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand, many students were excluded from online learning due to limited network connectivity in remote areas. Despite the government's efforts like televised or online classes, feedback indicated that girls often had difficulty

comprehending the content, with no readily available support for additional assistance. The majority of these economically disadvantaged girls were the first in their families to pursue education (Haleem et al., 2021).

Financial Crisis hinders Women Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the impact of underlying factors such as poverty, meagre incomes, and deeply entrenched societal norms, all of which contribute to children, especially girls, discontinuing their education. An increasing number of parents were grappled with the challenge of affording school fees, uniforms, and educational materials for their children. This predicament becomes more formidable in India, where a substantial portion of the population resides below the poverty line and relies on daily wages for income. The job losses resulting from lockdown measures further exacerbate the difficulties faced by families, particularly those working in the informal sector, in meeting the substantial school fees required to continue their children's education. Consequently, this situation often compels girls to discontinue their schooling, reflecting a prevailing tradition that prioritizes the education of boys over girls in families where both genders are present (Jaiswal et al., 2021).

Gender-Based Domestic Violence

Our households are far from being neutral in terms of gender dynamics, and stereotypes are deeply rooted, placing the heaviest burden of domestic responsibilities on women. In many regions, the weight of household tasks is disproportionately falling on girls and teenagers due to the closure of schools during lockdowns. They are shouldering an unequal share of unpaid care giving and household duties while being at home, either due to school closures or because they have permanently discontinued their education. Gender-based violence significantly influences and shapes the experiences of women in both their work and education, whether in private or public spaces. We have witnessed a global increase in domestic violence, often referred to as the 'second pandemic'. Economic hardships, unemployment, and the closure of schools have exacerbated incidents of sexual violence, exploitation, human trafficking, child labour, child marriage, and other harmful practices that target girls. Numerous studies have highlighted that school closures have heightened the vulnerability of girls to physical and sexual abuse (Jaiswal et al., 2021).

Lockdown leads to Nutritional Deficiency

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only disrupted children's education but has also resulted in the cessation of school meal programs. In India, Mid-Day Meal Scheme' (MDMs) program ensuring nutritional requirements got deeply hampered. Given that India has the highest number of malnourished children globally, mid-day meals play a crucial role in combating malnutrition and guaranteeing girls enrolment. However, due to the pandemic-related school closures, girls were deprived of essential daily meal. The closure of schools and subsequent suspension of school meal programs are estimated to have impacted nearly 368.5 million children worldwide. In India, the disruption of mid-day meals has placed approximately 115 million children, particularly Dalit and Adivasi children, at an elevated risk of malnutrition. In March 2020, the Supreme Court of India directed state governments to ensure the continued provision of mid-day meals. However, a study by Oxfam revealed that 35 percent of children did not receive their mid-day meals during COVID-19 (Bhargava et al., 2022).

State Responses and Policies

In order to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian government has implemented a series of preventive measures. On March 18, 2020, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) postponed all school examinations and issued revised guidelines for conducting exams by maintaining a minimum distance of one meter between students. During the lockdown period, students have turned to social media platforms for online teaching and learning methods. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has introduced numerous platforms for online learning such as the Diksha portal, e-Pathshala app, and the National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) portal for secondary education. For higher education, platforms like the Swayam portal, Swayam Prabha DTH TV channels, and the e-PG Pathshala provide access to numerous e-books, online courses, and study materials for students (Singh et al., 2021).

II. Conclusion

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on India's education sector, particularly regarding women's education, has been profound. Rural girls' education, in particular, has been severely affected due to their limited access to computer skills and the internet. During this period, the exclusive method for continuing education has been online learning through various devices like computers, mobile phones, tablets, and laptops, all of which depend on internet connectivity. Furthermore, the escalating unemployment rate in India has exacerbated economic difficulties, resulting in a higher number of girls discontinuing their schooling. While the Indian

government has introduced certain initiatives to enhance girls' education, it is advisable to prioritize providing primary and secondary schools with sufficient access to computers and the internet. This would ensure the necessary infrastructure for online education, helping to bridge the educational gap.

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