



UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO GIRLS' SECONDARY EDUCATION IN RAJASTHAN POST COVID-19



Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has been unprecedented and has affected large populations globally with high fatalities. The impact of the pandemic on the social, economic and political spheres has been extensive. There is perceived risk that it will reverse the gains made in access to education and learning across the world.

The countrywide closure of educational institutions including schools and colleges has affected a large majority of students across geographies. This has had a significant impact on students especially girls, more so in vulnerable and underprivileged contexts. In Rajasthan, schools have effectively remained closed for seven months and counting, with the education sector facing extraordinary challenges. The delivery of various school-based schemes like Mid-day meal, school health programmes and scholarships have been affected adversely due to the pandemic. The state has experimented with finding solutions to address the current situation by initiating e-learning platforms through the digital space.

The status of girl's education has been a critical area of concern in Rajasthan. While there is evidence of growing parental interest in education of girls and intergenerational changes are visible, there are gender differences in educational aspirations for boys and girls.

A few districts in western Rajasthan continue to report high gender gaps in enrollment at the secondary level. Given the pandemic and prolonged disruption in schooling, it is feared that this situation can lead to a reversal of positive behavior and attitudes towards gender norms leading to multiple consequences on girls. Early studies on impact of the pandemic on girls have also highlighted that the pandemic increased the burden of work for girls. School closure has not only led to break in education but has meant a disruption of girls' own spaces. Girls also fear that they may have to discontinue their studies and be pushed into early marriage (GNB, 2020)¹.

This policy brief presents findings from a recent survey undertaken by the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur and Development Solutions, New Delhi, to understand the barriers and enablers to Girls Secondary Education post COVID-19 in Rajasthan. It is based on a cross sectional survey of 666 adolescent girls, aged 13-16 years and their parents (belonging to SC, ST, and OBC communities), in 4 districts of Rajasthan - Dausa, Tonk, Karauli and Udaipur in September-October 2020². It highlights the key takeaways for policy to help address the multiple intersecting barriers and enablers for better educational outcomes for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds post the pandemic.

Objectives

- Understand the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of girls, with a focus on understanding the contexts and narratives on girl's education, owing to Covid-19
- Understand access (to), demand (for), and stakeholder perspectives on the pre-matric scholarship scheme
- Understand stakeholder expectations from the Government – in enabling opportunities for continued education for girls, more so in the context of Covid-19.

Survey Findings

The demographic profile of girls covered in the survey shows that out of the total 666 girls, majority girls were in the age group of 13-16 years and were unmarried and belonged to Hindu households. 44% girls were ST, 21% SC, 35% girls were OBC. The representation of Muslim minority was negligible. Fathers were mostly self-employed in agriculture and animal husbandry; mothers were primarily homemakers and were also involved in farm work.

A significant finding of the survey is that 97% girls reported that they were enrolled in school prior to lockdown; the same was corroborated by their parents. They were enrolled in age appropriate classes with majority (91%) girls being enrolled in Government schools. This finding reiterates that reach of poorer and disadvantaged households is to government facilities and given parental aspirations girls are mostly sent to government schools in comparison to boys. A small percentage of girls were attending private schools. The main attraction for private schooling was location, better quality of schooling and medium of instruction being English.

The FGDs in Dausa, Karauli and Tonk revealed that girls study up-to secondary/ higher secondary levels and some pursue graduation and beyond. However, in Udaipur, girls and their parents reported that girls usually study only till elementary level i.e. Class VIII.

Most girls reported attending school regularly. It is evident that in Dausa, Karauli and Tonk, schools are available within a radius of 2-8 km in most Gram Panchayats (GP). Wherever schools are beyond 4 kms, it was reported (by teachers, girls and parents) that bicycles have been provided to girls and they were able to cycle to school. However, safe passage in case of deserted roads and eve-teasing continue to be a concern for the parents. In Udaipur, several sampled villages were located in remote areas or on hilly tracts. It is hence, a challenge for girls in these areas to access schools. Concerns around safety were also higher among parents here.

As in most parts of the country, household work is an intrinsic part of women's /girls lives in Rajasthan. Among the surveyed girls, 80 percent or more reported to be involved in unpaid household labour /work. The percentage of girls involved in paid work/ labour was not significant.

In Udaipur, in ST households where both parents engaged in daily wage work– the burden of household chores is higher for girls (as they reach the adolescent age). As a result, they are also not able to complete their homework/ studies and hence many fall behind and drop out after class 8/9.

Girls Education: Aspirations, Barriers and Enablers

The transformatory potential of education is well acknowledged by most girls and parents in all the districts. Educated girls were seen to be more respected, self-sufficient, and raise their children and family in a better way. It was also felt that education helped in increasing confidence levels, and in decision making. Parents also felt that educated girls could earn and support the family.

Barriers

- Issues of safety and security of girls, lack of safe transport
- Girls not allowed to go alone to school after attaining 'marriageable age'
- Financial status of HH
- Poor quality education in Government schools
- Gender differences in educational investment
- Perception that higher education among girls leads to divorce/ separation

Enablers

- Location of schools near the village
- Female teachers in schools
- Provision of good quality education
- Mid-day meal
- Provision of scholarships; free books; transport vouchers, scooty and laptops by government
- Online education in school
- Role models from the village having studied and acquired a job

Despite various challenges faced by girls during the lockdown period, most girls seemed eager to get back to schools when they reopen. Parents also said that they were keen to send children back to schools. Majority of the girls (93%) reported to have already enrolled in schools post lockdown; another 5 % said that they were planning to enroll in school. The girls who did not want to go back to school said that even if they got a scholarship, they would not be able to enroll in school.

Similarly, most parents also reported their daughters had been enrolled in schools. A small percentage of parents reported that they did not intend to send their girls to school due to financial constraint. They also said that they needed support for household chores and they would prefer to get them married at an early age. However, they were ready to send them to school if they got scholarships.

The access to online education during COVID-19 was limited³. Only 11% of total girls surveyed, who were enrolled in schools prior to COVID-19, accessed online classes. The girls reported that they were accessing online education through WhatsApp (92%), YouTube (12%), problem solving with teachers over phone (9%). 16% girls reported that their schools were holding online classes.

Caste wise analysis shows that access to online education was reported higher by OBC girls (18%), as compared to SC (7%) and ST girls (7%). Among parents, 13% parents of girls who were enrolled in schools prior to COVID-19 reported that their daughters accessed online classes. The main reasons for not being able to attend online classes were lack of devices, poor/ no internet, girls being busy with household work and economic activities (11%, 23% girls).

Qualitative interactions also substantiate the survey data. Few girls were attending online classes during Covid-19 lockdown. In Udaipur, no girl reported attending online classes. Girls reported that sometimes teachers called students to guide them and encourage them to join the online classes. They had received links to videos made by both Government and Private school teachers. In Tonk, girls mentioned attending online classes through SMILE program of the Education Department. It is evident that girls are at a disadvantage as they do not have access to digital resources. In addition, the reach of SMILE and similar initiatives is also limited given the various challenges. Recent studies have also shown that access to online resources and modes continue to be a challenge in most districts of Rajasthan more so for girls (Rajagopal and Gupta 2020, GNB, 2020)⁴.

“Not all households have smart phones. My father has it, but he is not at home during the study hours. We don’t have a TV also” – Girl student, Udaipur.

“We don’t understand the language and way of teaching of the online teacher. And if we don’t understand, we cannot seek clarifications” – Girl student, Dausa.

Better reach of online education: Suggestions

- Operating computers and laptops to be taught in schools
- Provision of laptops/ computers and mobile phones to most vulnerable girls
- Coaching/ classes to be initiated by putting up big screens in communities
- Opening online educational centres in villages
- Computer labs in schools to be fully equipped, students to attend in batches
- Ensuring language and content of videos is clear and easy to comprehend
- Continuous electricity supply and support for internet facilities
- Teachers/schools to engage with parents to emphasize the need for girls to attend online classes

The impact of COVID19 on mental health was seen in terms of anxiety and tension. Both girls (65%) and parents (68%) reported this. 70 per cent girls also reported that they had to spend more time on household chores during the pandemic and lockdown. On the other hand, only 56 per cent parents reported an increase in time spent on household work. This finding also corroborates with other recent studies undertaken in the state.

The survey highlighted that post COVID-19, the deeper concerns revolved around loss of livelihoods and income, re-employment and meeting household expenses. The increased workload on women and girls due to greater number of family members being home, means women and girls have to spend greater time on managing HH activities. A resultant factor is that girls are not able to attend online classes, even if available.

Awareness and Access to Pre-Matric Scholarships

The Pre-matric scholarship programme for children from SC, ST, and OBC communities is being implemented in the State for over two decades. Some of these schemes are co-financed by Centre and State government; while others are fully funded by the State government. The main objective of these Scholarships is to enable boys and girls from the disadvantaged communities to pursue and complete their school education.

The survey findings show that 66% girls and 63% parents were aware that students receive financial support; a similar percentage of girls and parents were aware of the pre-matric scholarship. There was no major difference in awareness across caste groups. Among those who were aware of the pre-matric scholarship – an average 50% girls and 63% parents were aware that SC, ST, OBC students were eligible for the scholarship.

Qualitative interactions with girls, parents and community stakeholders indicate lower awareness of scholarship schemes in Udaipur. Two of three girls’ groups and parents’ groups were not aware of the scholarships. The main source of information regarding scholarships were cited as school teachers and principals, internet, family members, messages received on the phone.

Access to Scholarships

Among parents and girls who were aware of scholarship schemes, 58% girls and 56% parents reported that they/ their daughters had ever received a scholarship/ stipend/ or fees reimbursement. Of these, 96% girls and 91% parents reported to have received the pre-matric scholarship. Hence, of the total eligible population of 13-16-year-old girls, belonging to SC, ST, and OBC, enrolled in schools, on an average only about 44% girls and parents, reported to have received the pre-matric scholarship. Reported receipt of the pre-matric scholarships among OBCs was slightly lower than ST and SC respondents.

Among girls and parents who reported the receipt of any scholarship, 30-35% reported to be receiving the same since the last academic year, 28-30% since the last two academic years and 23% for three or more academic years. Girls and parents, who had received the pre-matric scholarship, reported the need of several documents to access the scholarship – bank account, Aadhar, Bhamasha number, income and caste certificates, etc.

Scholarship amount reported to be received (in INR)	Girls	Parents
2250	13%	8%
3000	4%	4%
1000	35%	40%
Other amount	45%	43%
Don't Know	3%	6%

Of those who reported to have received the pre-matric scholarship, 88% girls and 68% parents reported that they received an annual monetary benefit as a part of the pre-matric scheme. However, significant variation was noted in the monetary benefit of the scholarship received. It ranged from Rs.1000-3000. This indicates a lack of awareness among girls and parents on the actual amount received, or inconsistent receipt of scholarship benefit. This needs to be further explored/ verified.

Challenges in Accessing Scholarships

The survey findings as well as qualitative interactions indicate the several challenges and difficulties faced by girls and parents in accessing the scholarships. These include:

- Delayed disbursement of scholarships was a critical area of concern. Sometimes, the amount was received after a year. In Tonk, some girls and parents said that they got the amount once in three years
- Girls/ parents stated that money had to be spent to ensure documentation – in getting certificates made, notarization, photocopies, payments to be made at the E-Mitra Kendra. In Dausa families reported spending Rs. 500–1000 in getting all the documents together. There is also a perception of rent seeking to enable access to scholarships.
- Access to banks and block office was difficult since they were located far from the village
- Community members perceive the delays in receipt of scholarships to be a result of inefficient management by the Government

The need for greater monetary support was also mentioned across 36% groups who perceived the scholarship monetary benefit to be less.

“Kagazi karavahi zyada, aur paise kam hote hain. Aur vo bhi samay pe nahi milte hain. (The focus is more on verification of documents and the amount received is less and delayed)” – Parents’ group, Dausa.

87% girls enrolled in schools and 76% parents reported that other than the scholarships, girls had received support for education in the form of textbooks, laptops, scooty/ bicycle. A negligible percentage had received the transport vouchers and laptops. The non-receipt of transport vouchers may point to the fact that schools were within reach from girls’ homes/habitations. While direct cash transfers are seen as useful, given the delays in receipt, girls and parents felt that provision of material benefits – such as books, scooty, laptops etc. was more useful. They also expressed that the scholarship amount disbursed does not cover all education expenses. Besides it is not disbursed timely.

Benefits of Scholarships

- Helps to reduce the burden on the household and provides support to buy teaching learning material
- Girls from poorer and vulnerable households are able to study for a longer duration
- Given the broad eligibility criteria and easy selection large number of girls especially from poorer households’ benefit

Parents felt the amount should be disbursed every month or on half yearly basis and should cover all expenses of education beyond schooling. They also stated that scholarships should be distributed through schools, to enable ease of access. It was suggested that the scholarship amount should be enhanced. The recommended enhancement ranged from Rs.1200 to 7000.

Conclusions and Takeaways

It is positive to note that there is near universal enrolment of girls in schools. Majority girls across caste groups were enrolled in schools prior to the COVID19 lockdown in the four districts covered during the study. Majority of the girls were attending school regularly (average 15 days or more in a month in Government schools). However, issues pertaining to ‘academic learning’ once the schools reopen is of concern. Many girls may drop out as they may not be able to cope with lessons in the appropriate grade.

Scholarship schemes are seen as useful mechanism for completing Secondary schooling; but is accessed by only 44% of the eligible candidates. The gap in uptake of the scholarships is of critical concern.

It is evident that there are several expectations from the government in terms of support - better facilities, safe and environment in schools, safe transportation, access to online education including availability of digital devices.

Action Points

- Ensuring that girls do not drop out once schools reopen
- Concerns around safety of girls in and on the way to school, lack of safe transportation needs to be addressed on priority.
- Barriers in accessing pre-matric scholarships including documentation process, verification of documents and delays in receipt of benefits are of serious concern and need immediate intervention and streamlining.
- Enabling access to online education for those who are left out due to lack of digital devices and poor internet connectivity.
- Ensuring regular access to mid-day meals, IFA tablets, sanitary pads when schools are closed.
- Gradual reopening of schools with all COVID-19 protocols in place and sensitive engagement with children to address their concerns regarding completion of syllabus, exams and promotion to the next grade.



Endnote

- ¹ Girls Not Brides (2020) COVID-19 Response: Impact on Girls - Making Their Voices Heard, Study in Rajasthan, GNB Global.
 - ² A Mixed-method study design was used in the survey. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. The survey focused on girls in the age group 13-16 years and their parents. The qualitative data was collected through FGDs and IDIs with girls, parents, panchayat members, AWWs and teachers.
 - ³ In response to the current crisis, the Government of Rajasthan put in place several strategies to address issues arising out of disruption of schooling. There has been a push to provide digitally-based distance learning opportunities - use of text/video/audio content through SMS, WhatsApp, Radio and TV programmes to reach out to the students. The Social Media Interface for Learning Engagement (SMILE), an e-learning platform via WhatsApp was initiated by the Department of School Education in April 2020. The stated objective of the initiative was to provide online courses and classes to all students enrolled in government schools of the state.
 - ⁴ Rajagopal, S and M. Gupta (2020) 'COVID-19: Navigating Digital Learning in Government Schools in Rajasthan: Voices from the Field', July 2020, IDSJ, Working Paper.
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