

## **Addressing Gender Inequalities in Secondary Education COVID-19 and Beyond**

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**Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur, Rajasthan (India)**



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# Addressing Gender Inequalities in Secondary Education: COVID-19 and Beyond

Shobhita Rajagopal, Kanchan Mathur and Vasudha Chakravarthy<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training is a critical target set in the SDG 4. Over the past decade, major progress has been made globally and in India towards increasing access to education and school enrollment rates at all levels, particularly for girls. However, despite the continued focus on Universalization of Education in India, a staggering number of girls, continue to be out of school. Enrolment also reduces drastically for SC, ST girls at secondary and higher secondary level. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected schooling in diverse ways. It is estimated that around 320 million children in India have been impacted due to lockdowns and disruption in schooling. The unprecedented disruption to education has potential immediate and longer-term effects on education and gender equality, particularly on the most marginalized. This paper focuses on analyzing the barriers and enablers to girl's secondary education during Covid-19 pandemic with a focus on the State of Rajasthan. It also highlights the adverse impact on educational access and participation of girls and argues that there is an urgent need to address the gendered outcomes arising out of Covid-19.*

**Key Words:** Girls Education, Covid-19, Secondary education, pre-matric scholarships, digital learning

## Background

The UN Sustainable Development Goals and targets refer directly to equity, inclusion, diversity, equal opportunity or non-discrimination. One of the key targets of SDG 4 on quality education is to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education. Eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training is also a critical target. Over the past decade, major progress has been made globally towards increasing access to education and school enrollment rates at all levels, particularly for girls. However, secondary school completion, remains a challenge.

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Universalisation of school education has been a stated policy agenda in India. However, despite the continued focus on universalization, a staggering number of girls, continue to be out of school. A recent report by the RTE Forum notes that at least 1.6 million girls in India remain out of school. It suggests that 39.4% girls between 15-18 years of age are out of school; 57% girls drop-out after reaching the 11th grade. Enrolment reduces drastically for SC, ST girls at secondary and higher secondary level. The situation of ST girls is worse at 10.35% at elementary level, which falls to 8.6% and eventually to 6.8% at the higher secondary level (RTE Forum, 2021).

Rajasthan has 3.7 million girls in the age group of 14 to 18 years, which constitute 5 per cent of the state's population. The recent NSS survey reported that of these, 26 per cent were out of school. Of the total out of school children in the state, nearly 60 per cent of those who had never enrolled in schools were girls. The incidence of girls' dropping out of school is also quite significant. As per the DISE data, in 2008-09, there were 1.05 million girls enrolled in Class I. In 2016-17, the number of girls enrolled in Class IX was only 530,000. This implies that half the girls drop out before entering secondary school (Kundu, 2020). A few districts in western Rajasthan continue to report high gender gaps in enrollment at the secondary level.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected schooling in different ways. It is evident that due to lock downs and disruption in schooling; many girls are unlikely to return to the classroom, burdened with increased poverty, household chores and child labor. Marginalized communities such as the poor, SC/STs and religious minorities are likely to be the most impacted by this upheaval. Gender adds an additional layer to such disenfranchisement. Interruptions in learning have been seen to have a greater impact on girls as compared to boys (CBPS, 2020).

This paper builds on a perception survey carried out by the authors in September-October, 2020 to understand barriers and enablers to girls' secondary education during COVID-19 in Rajasthan (DS and IDSJ, 2020). It examines the emerging evidence related to the pandemic and highlights the adverse impact on educational access and participation of girls. It argues that the unprecedented disruption to education has potential immediate and longer-term effects on education and gender equality, particularly on the most marginalized and there is an urgent need to address the gendered outcomes arising out of Covid-19. Section I discusses the context of Rajasthan and the impact of COVID-19 on schooling. Section II presents the findings from the Perception Survey and Section III presents the conclusions and recommendations.

## **Section I: Schooling and Impact of COVID-19: Rajasthan Context**

The status of girl's education has been a critical area of concern in Rajasthan. It is evident that girls' enrollment has improved at all levels in the past two decade. Studies also show that there is growing parental interest in education of girls made visible by inter generational changes. However, gender differences in educational attainments and aspirations for boys and girls continue at the secondary and higher secondary levels. Depriving girls of education, especially secondary education, has dramatic costs for girls themselves, their families, communities, and societies.

A study undertaken by the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER, 2019) to understand enrolment of girls aged 13-15 years in secondary education in Dholpur district, reported that parents of girls felt that it was important for girls to study up to class 10, to secure a certain level of respect and for better future and marriage prospects. However, that if a girl acquired more than a basic level of education, it could get increasingly difficult to find a marriage match (as the boy should be more educated than the girl). Highly educated boys were also reported to demand a higher dowry. Moreover, an educated daughter would not bring any monetary gain or other benefits to the natal family (since she would be ultimately married away). These perceptions hindered girls' higher education.

The leading barriers in girls' secondary education (other than parental perceptions), as reported by the study included – poverty, poor quality education, failure to pass exams, girls' contribution to household work and a threat to girls' safety. Lack of motivation among girls to study and learn was also reported as a barrier by parents.

Another recent study of 600 first-generation learners (Champions) in Rajasthan, noted that parental motivation and teacher support were some of the key factors that enabled girls to complete their schooling cycles and move to tertiary education. Parents placed great stock in their daughters' education as a tool for upward mobility. An inter generational change in social views was also apparent in the fact that 97% of girls said that they plan to work after they graduate from college. This is a striking shift given that 91% of their mothers were homemakers.

Despite the fact that the majority of participants belonged to low income and traditionally marginalized ST/ SC and OBC backgrounds, the percentage of students that received scholarships was remarkably low. Just 15% of Champion participants received any kind of governmental monetary support for their education at the upper primary level increasing to one in four at the lower secondary level. Some of participants reported that the lack of transparency around the application process for grants and scholarships at the upper secondary and college levels was particularly problematic.

The study also revealed that only one in three Champion girls had ever used the internet. Internet access and computer skills can be a vector for the enjoyment of freedom of expression and political engagement(IDSJ, 2015).

## **Gendered Impact of Disruption in Schooling**

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 for girls.

The consequences of the pandemic on girls schooling has been discussed in several recent studies. A study by Girls Not Brides, 2020, focused on assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the

various dimensions of the lives of girls / young women in Rajasthan. The study underscored that shut-down of economic activity and educational institutions has led to girls bearing the major burden of household work. 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. In terms of technology, women and girls are way behind as they do not have equal access to technology and services. 67% of the girls who are enrolled feel their education will be severely impacted and may even be discontinued in the long-term. The e-learning infrastructure is not sufficient and there is poor accessibility to e-learning especially for girls of marginalized communities in rural Rajasthan. 74% of the respondents in the survey did not even have basic phones. Of the 26% of respondents who had relatively better phones, only 72% had smart phones, of these only 67% had access to internet. Out of the girls who did have phones, some of them did not have any money for recharge, so it served no purpose for them. Majority of teachers (both at the school and college levels) in rural areas had taken little interest in organizing e-learning classes for their students since they were not well equipped for the same.

Another recent study of covering 1000 children in the 11-17 years age group across States of India (including Rajasthan) notes that a vast majority of children among the respondent groups (94% in rural and 92% in urban) believed that they will be returning to school once they reopen, with similar results emerging for girls and boys. About 79% parents shared that their children were learning little or nothing at all. One out of eight (12%) parents in the rural areas and 18% in urban areas felt that their child is learning 'as much as in school'. The study also shows that three out of every four children who were covered were not using the internet for their learning (rural 72%, urban 78%). The scenario was similar for children in the migrants' group. Despite the dependence of distance learning initiatives on online platforms, just 3% children from among the programme participants group as well as the migrants group reported having access to a computer. Many children expressed that they requested their parents for access to the internet and phone or computer. Children reported increased burden of household chores as an obstacle to learning. However, a girl is twice more likely to report an increase in burden of household (Save the Children, 2020, [www.savethechildren.in](http://www.savethechildren.in)).

A survey of girls enrolled in KGBVs in 3 districts of Rajasthan shows that out of 225 girls surveyed, 68 per cent of girls did not have access to a mobile phone during the pandemic; the girls also reported that being restricted within the household had given rise to negativity. Majority of girls were afraid that they will forget what they had learnt or will not be able to clear the examinations and will lose an academic year. The teachers also expressed that they needed support to navigate the changes in teaching learning techniques and use of digital devices (Sandhan, 2020).

Further, Rajagopal and Gupta (2020) also note that student responses in both urban and rural areas indicate that older students were anxious about the fact that their studies got disturbed due to the pandemic. The lockdown came in March, 2020 when examinations were scheduled. Students felt that since they have been promoted to the next grade without an examination,

they would have to work harder in the new grade. The students in higher classes and those at a transitional stage were worried about their future. They had not been able to attend coaching classes or access a library. Many voiced their concerns for the future if there is a delay in reopening of schools. Some of the students said they were unhappy as they could not meet their friends, consult them for studies and go out to play.

It is evident that many students are being left out and have not been able to access the online SMILE programme introduced by the Government of Rajasthan due to various reasons i.e., non-availability of smart phones, internet connectivity and bandwidth and lack academic support at home. The teachers also talked of a range of challenges in the transition to digital learning. They felt that students, parents and teachers were not prepared for this pedagogical shift. It is also essential to understand the academic consequences of these initiatives. All these factors should have been considered by the government before launching the programme. The online classes cannot be compared to offline classroom situations and cannot be substituted. In the current situation there is a gap in learning. The content and design of learning materials has to be suitable for diverse sets of learners. The teachers also felt that in the absence of textbooks, students were not able to undertake self-study; the academic support from parents is also negligible.

Similar findings have also been reported by surveys undertaken in other states. A survey undertaken by CBPS (2020) of 3176 households across five states also found that Covid-19 and the lockdown have caused notable income and employment loss leading to food, cash and livelihood crises with severe implications for children's education. Educational interventions have been grossly under-accessed due to multiple barriers faced by children from marginalized groups. In short, there has been a violation of the right to education and high potential of widening disparities in education. The non-conducive learning environment at home was clearly seen by a high proportion of girls being engaged in chores and care work, while a higher proportion of boys reported spending time on leisure activities as against girls. Similarly, a higher percentage of boys were able to spend time on their studies, as against girls.

The survey concludes that gendered impact of the pandemic may reverse the gains made in gender parity in education and empowerment unless addressed comprehensively.

## **Section II: Findings from the Perception Survey**

The Perception survey on 'Understanding Barriers and Enablers to Secondary Education post Covid-19' sought to understand perceptions of adolescent girls and their parents on girls' education, the pre-matric scholarship and its role in girls' education and the impact of COVID-19 on girls' education and their lives. The study was undertaken in four districts of Rajasthan – Dausa, Karauli, Tonk and Udaipur. A mixed method study design was used, comprising: a cross-sectional survey of 666 adolescent girls aged 13-16 years, and their parents belonging to SC, ST and OBC communities. Qualitative interactions with girls, their parents, panchayat members



and school teachers were also held. For the quantitative survey, a listing exercise was undertaken in 41 clusters (villages) in the four districts, to identify eligible respondents and create a sampling frame for the main survey.

The findings highlighted that 84 per cent girls (13-16 years of age) belonging to SC, ST and OBC communities were enrolled in schools. They were mostly enrolled in government schools prior to the COVID-19 induced lockdown. Girls' education was viewed as important, both by respondent girls and their parents. Educated girls were seen as more respected, self-sufficient, had greater ability to take decisions, could raise their family better and teach their children.

During qualitative interactions as well, girls, parents, and school teachers in all districts reported that nearly all girls were enrolled in and accessed schools. In Dausa, Tonk and Karauli, it was said that in most gram panchayats, schools were available within a 2–8-kilometer radius, and that girls studied up to class 10-12. Teachers reported, and girls and parents corroborated that cycles were provided to girls, where schools were farther than 4 kilometres. In Dausa and Karauli, it was stated that some girls even pursued graduation/post-graduation and sought to secure Government jobs.

In Udaipur, however, especially, in villages with high ST populations, and which were far away/on hilly tracts, all respondent groups said that it was challenging for girls to access schools, despite provision of cycles. (DS, IDSJ, 2020).

The main factors that helped in furthering girls' education, included location of schools, presence of female teachers in schools, teachers and local stakeholders' engagement with parents, provision of Mid-day meal, scholarships and financial support; free books; benefits of other Government schemes as well as transport vouchers, scooty, laptop etc. The precedence of other girls from the village having studied and acquiring a job also worked as enablers. However, marriage continues to be viewed as a major goal post for girls in the state.

## **Scholarships as enablers**

Several scholarship schemes are being implemented in the state and their usefulness to furthering girls' education cannot be understated.

To address the challenges in girls' secondary education, the Governments both at the center and state have instituted several programs and schemes. These range from enrollment drives, systemic transformation including school consolidation to address teacher vacancies and quality education, provision of transport vouchers, distribution of cycles/ scooties to girls, provision of books and laptops, to scholarship schemes for girls, especially to those belonging to socially and economically backward communities.

Both girls and parents reported scholarship schemes to be beneficial. Girls felt that scholarships enabled them to study longer –more so for girls from poor families. Teachers reported that the scholarships were beneficial for girls belonging to vulnerable groups, due to the broad eligibility

criteria and easy selection. However, of the eligible population of girls, only 44% reported to have received the pre-matric scholarship. Among those who reported having received the scholarship, significant variation was noted in the reported monetary benefit received.

The main challenges in accessing scholarships include: Delayed receipt of the benefits – across districts, parents and girls reported delayed receipt of the monetary benefit. In some cases, it was said that the benefits were received after a year. In Tonk some girls and parents said that they received the scholarship benefits once in three years; Need for significant documentation to access the scheme was also reported as a major challenge. Parents felt that arranging, updating, and linking the various documents required to access the scholarships was complicated, tedious and time consuming. Several parents said that while they had tried once or twice to enable complete documentation; they had not been successful and henceforth had stopped trying. Some also said that they were unable to submit the various documents on time, and hence could not access the scholarships. Besides, money had to be spent to ensure documentation – in getting certificates made, notarization, getting photocopies, payments to be made at the *E-mitrakendra*. In Dausa families said that Rs. 500 – 1000 are spent in getting the documents together. Poor access to banks and block offices, which were far from the village, also made it difficult for parents to arrange for all the documents.

**Box 1 : An ideal scholarship scheme, from the perspective of girls and their parents**

- Provision of a fixed amount to each child, which would be sufficient to cover all educational costs, including private tuitions (increase from amounts provided at present suggested).
- Benefits provided on time - monthly or twice a year; 42 per cent girls and parents reported the ideal frequency for receipt of scholarship benefits to be twice a year.
- Easy documentation and renewal – it was suggested that all required documents could be gathered at the time of admission; and that the scholarship could be renewed automatically.
- After a girl completes secondary education – it was suggested that the Government bear all expenses of her education and waive fees up to college.
- Easy disbursement (as done for material benefits such as books, cycle, scooty; cash transfers seen as tedious, given frequent delays).

## **Continuing Barriers to Girls Secondary Education**

The study also focused on understanding some of the continuing barriers to girls' education. It was evident that absence of Secondary schools within vicinity was one of the reasons for girls discontinuing their studies. There were also concerns around safe passage, especially on lonely/deserted roads and spots. Sexual harassment (eve-teasing) by boys enroute the school and in the school were also concerns raised by girls and their parents. The parents also raised the

issue of additional financial resources for private coaching/tuitions for girls' higher education. While parents were willing to invest these resources in their sons, the same was not the case for their daughters.

### **Covid-19: Concerns and Challenges to Girls Education**

Girls' education has been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. The present study also corroborates the findings of studies mentioned earlier that show poor access of girls to online education. Only 11% of 666 girls surveyed, reported to have accessed online classes. Lack of devices like smart phones and computers, lack of internet and the need for girls to be engaged in household chores were highlighted as key concerns. Girls reported facing significant challenges in understanding the online classes/videos shared. Out of the girls who did have phones, some of them did not have any money to get it recharged, so it served no purpose for them.

The majority of teachers (both at the school and college levels) in rural areas took little interest in organizing e-learning classes for their students since they are not well equipped for the same due to non-availability of internet connectivity and lack of specific student centric learning material. Interactions with girls revealed that they think of schools as not just a space for classes and studies, but also a space where they meet peers, build and expand their networks, interact with their friends and have spaces to talk about themselves, their families and seek support. The pandemic has deprived them of this space.

They reported that while in schools, they understood the language that their teachers spoke and their manner of teaching, the same was not the case with the online videos.

Girls and parents expressed concern about completion of syllabus, exams and promotion to the next class. Parents felt that the girls may forget what was taught earlier. Further, given the loss of income/ livelihoods, parents and girls reported that they may not be able to afford tuitions/ private classes anymore.

Other than education, lack of access to mid-day meals, IFA tablets and sanitary pads distributed through school were reported to be a challenge during the COVID-19 lockdown.

65% girls were reported to have greater stress and anxiety in the current times of COVID-19 and 70% reported that they have to spend greater time on household activities and chores. Girls stated that shut-down of economic activity and educational institutions has led to girls bearing the major burden of household work. Many girls said that due to the reduced income and resources of family members, there was a lot of tension in their homes, the environment was worsening day by day and the tension of survival and the future is looming on everyone's minds. They said that there was a lot of arguing, shouting and violence in own homes as well as in their neighborhoods.



Shut-down of schools has restricted the mobility of girls and thus put under strain their opportunities for their future. This has led to girls being pressurized into early marriages. Some parents asserted that since the girls would not be able to complete their schooling cycles due to closure of schools, their marriage would reduce economic burden of the household.

There is increased control over girls' sexuality and surveillance on their movement outside their homes by the male members in the house since all members are confined to the home for a long time.

COVID-19 has had an impact, on girls' education, their health and well-being. While more than 90% girls reported to have enrolled back into schools; with families suffering from income and livelihood losses, in the absence of strong support mechanisms/scholarships, educational progress of girls is likely to suffer.

While acknowledging the efforts made by the Government in addressing some of the barriers and challenges to girls' education, parents and girls provided recommendations for further improvements. These include: Improvements in the infrastructure and quality of education in Government schools and measures to ensure safety for girls enroute and in schools. Enhancement in scholarships and other support materials, and support for vocational and skill-based training were also suggested. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, greater scholarship support and access to online education was requested.

Families also requested support for livelihoods, income, and food security. Teachers highlighted the need for further motivation and awareness on girls' education; the need for clear communication on the promotion policy and integration of students post school opening was also mentioned. PRI members suggested that extra classes for students in schools or the opening of coaching centres in villages be initiated.

### **Section III: Conclusions and Way Forward**

The factors contributing to poor participation of girls in education are well substantiated by evidence presented above. The underlying challenges of educating girls, especially those from marginalized communities include: entrenched patriarchy and deep-rooted gender biases in society that affects education of girls; multiple marginalization of girls from Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) creates a complex web that impedes ability of girls to complete schooling.

The existing gender inequalities and hierarchies were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown increased domestic work and responsibilities; mobility of girls was restricted; and girls were also disadvantaged due to the digital divide as they did not have access to telephones.

To sustain the gains and progress on girls' education over the years, mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing crises, is essential. The immediate need is to focus on interventions to retain girls in schools and help them overcome the learning loss. In addition, there need to be larger multi-sectoral interventions to address the more contextual challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The importance of secondary education needs to be flagged. This paper points out that greater efforts must be made in planning and tracking of girls and ensuring their re-enrollment in schools. The state must streamline the various incentives including scholarships to ensure that girls complete their education cycles and look forward to a brighter future. School committees, women's groups, and the community members (including men and boys) need to be mobilized.

Some of the other recommendations that follow include:

### **Effective digital learning**

In analysing the response and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is pertinent to ensure girls access to education. While efforts have been made by the state government to enable online education, it is essential that a greater effort be made to enable access to online education, through community-based interventions with facilitated learning. Home visits and strengthening telephone communication between teachers and girls to support learning and keeping girls connected to schools through remedial classes to enable girls to cope with/overcome the learning loss.

### **Streamlining incentives/scholarships**

The perception survey highlighted that the scholarships are an important enabler for girls' continued education. Immediate interventions to address some of the challenges to enable a larger number of girls to access the scheme is recommended. Provision of special scholarships and strengthening access to the pre-matric scholarship scheme through engagement with communities to emphasize the importance of girls' education and agency is required.

### **Ensuring safe spaces for girls**

Ensuring safe spaces for girls in schools, through institutionalization and implementation of sexual harassment policies, communication campaigns with girls and boys – on sexual harassment, its management, coupled with strong complaint and redressal mechanisms should be put in place. Alongside, strong implementation of child protection systems (through VCPCs) to safeguard girls from child marriage, child labour or abuse should be ensured.

### **Addressing health and nutrition needs**

Nutrition and health support in the form of mid-day meals, IFA tablets and sanitary pads, which were earlier provided through the school health program need to be resumed on priority. Gradual reopening of schools as recommended by girls and parents, or community-based classes in small batches could be considered.

**Strengthening the public-school system**

The importance of public education must be recognized. It gives social protection to all children, boys and girls. In pandemic times, it has been seen that there has been a flight from private schools to public schools. Due to loss of income of parents, children in private schools are much more vulnerable as they are uncertain whether they will return to school. The future implication of this is that public schools will see an upsurge in enrolment. These schools must be prepared for such a situation. It is critical therefore to invest more in public schools at this point not only from a gender perspective but from the perspective of all children.

The looming uncertainties thrown up by the pandemic are self-evident. As majority of girls and boys are hopeful of returning to school, it is imperative that the schools are ready to address both the academic/learning as well as psychosocial needs of children to ensure a smooth transition and continuity of learning. Every school has to prioritize the most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners hardest hit by closures: first by tracking those who are at risk of not returning to school and providing incentives to the poorest families; second by ensuring that schools offer catch up and remedial learning programmes; third by boosting school health and nutrition. All these provide strong incentives. This recovery must advance social inclusion and gender equality through education.

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