Gendered impact of COVID-19 on education of school-aged children in Bihar

1. Background and context

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected marginalised sections globally. With school closures being substituted largely with online education, underprivileged children have been the worst hit. Not surprisingly, girls get affected more than boys\(^1\). In India, several girls at the intersections of gender, class, and other structural hierarchies like caste, have little or no access to the internet or digital education. They are likely to be the first to be whisked away from their studies towards domestic duties.

Prior to the pandemic, girls were already twice as likely as boys to have less than four years of education. Even boys face the burden of their gender: the economic crisis brought about by the pandemic is going to push them towards child labour. Bihar, one of the biggest recipients of return migrants in the post-Lockdown phase – has faced loss of income from remittance, local job losses, and severe financial crisis.

We studied 1470 households\(^2\) in rural and peri-urban areas of nine districts in the state (East Champaran, Fatuha, Patna, Kishanganj, Muzaffarpur, Nalanda, Patna, Rohtas and Samastipur). Our sample was composed mostly of marginalised communities (38% SC/STs, 14% minorities and less than 4% General Category). Most male members 70% were employed in low-skilled labour (10% had their own land), while 20% of women were doing low-skilled labour jobs to supplement the family income. Almost two-thirds of the female members were not engaged in any occupation outside the household, mostly being involved in domestic chores.

Majority of respondents (68%) reported facing food and cash crunch, and only 7% reported no food or cash
shortage. The level of distress caused by Covid-19 and lockdown was high in these families. We interviewed a total of 1470 children (56% girls and 44% boys) between the age group of 10 to 18 years mostly from vulnerable backgrounds. Of these, 87% were enrolled in government schools. Our data reveals girls studying in classes lower than their age, suggesting breaks and re-admission in their schooling even prior to the pandemic.

2. Responses and support to mitigate economic distress

The Government of India had announced additional ration through existing PDS system and the state government had also instructed Anganwadi centres to distribute food.

A vast majority (92%) of the families reported receiving uncooked food or ration, masks and soaps from the government. But when it came to other measures, our data reveals much exclusion of such families from the government systems. Close to one-fifth of the respondents said they did not possess a ration card, only one-fifth reported any meal distribution happening in the Anganwadi centres. About 57% of the families reported having received some sort of cash transfer, with only 26% of them reporting it for the Jan-Dhan Yojana and about 17% of them also reported receiving cash transfers under the new scheme, PM Garib Kalyan Yojana. Only 9% families received cash transfer for the already existing Ujjwala Yojana and about 11% reported receiving cash transfer from other existing sources (Figure 1).

Only 41% of the respondents reported receiving support from the Education department towards the continuity of education, and about 38% reported receiving support from civil society organisations.

3. Key findings: Impact of Covid-19 on education and schooling in Bihar

3.1 Disruptions in learning: technology-enabled learning poor substitute for school

The disruptions in school calendar prior to the pandemic were clearly visible in the data, which only intensified due to the pandemic.

Presence of gadgets did not ensure access, and in several instances, suggests a gendered access to technology: our data reveals very low uptake (11%) of educational programmes on free TV channels despite the fact that 48% students had access to a TV at home. This could be due to telecast timings being in the morning, which is when children are expected to help their families with domestic chores, or outside on the farms. Likewise, with mobile phones where most children reported having a phone at home but only 33% said that had access. This number was even lower for girls at 29% compared to 38% for boys. In 66% cases, phones belonged to the male member of the household. Access to internet was also extremely limited with only 39% of the children claiming to have access.

FIGURE 1: Cash transfers by Government
3.2 Disproportionate burden of domestic chores and care work on girls

Time-use data reveals a clearly gendered pattern with 76% girls spending their time on chores and care work and 81% boys spending time on leisure activities. In contrast, only 55% girls reported having any time for leisure, and only 29% boys reported spending anytime on care work or chores. This reflects the prevalent patriarchal norms of the region, where boys are not expected to engage in chores or domestic work even in the times of crises (Figure 2).

3.3 Life was better before Covid-19

Absence of mobility, time away from school and peer, pressures of chores and care work all this meant children perceived their life to be worse now as compared to pre-Covid-19 days, with 87% children (89% girls and 83% boys) reporting their life was better before the lockdown. A slightly higher percentage of girls is obvious, given their restricted life and school being the rare opportunity to go out. When asked why, the most commonly cited reason (76%) was being able to study and the second (22%) was that they could earlier meet their friends.

3.4 Majority, including boys, uncertain about returning to school

A high proportion of the children (41% for girls and boys both) were uncertain of their return to school; only 57% children said a hopeful yes. Therefore, the situation calls for urgent measures to be taken to ensure that gains made in the realms of education in Bihar, especially for girls, are not lost and that education systems develop resilience to public health crises and other disasters.

4. Key recommendations

Education has suffered, with a high proportion of children not being able to access any alternative measures in practice. Girls are the worst affected as they have been primarily engaged in chores and care work and further confined to domesticity and remain largely excluded from use of any alternative mode of education. The fear of large-scale dropout seems real with Bihar having one of the highest incidences of child marriages in India. While the state prepares to reopen schools, in addition to the measure stated in the SOP, the following measures need to be taken to ensure all children - specifically girls - do not drop out:

Response: If school closures continue or have to be re-implemented, there is a need to –

- Continue essential care services during school closures — such as Iron Folic Acid and sanitary pad provision, psychosocial support, and mid-day meals — to maintain good health and hygiene, mitigate trauma, address hunger and malnutrition and limit negative coping mechanisms.
- Ensure home visits and telephone communication between teachers and students, to support learning and keep girls connected to the school.
- Develop diverse and low-cost distance learning material —radio, TV, SMS, printed material, peer-to-peer and parent resources — which reaches girls equitably.
- Ensure a strong child protection safety net as mandated by the Integrated Child Protection Scheme — across all village and block Child Protection Committees (VLCPCs and BLCPCs) — to safeguard girls from child marriage, child labour or abuse.

**FIGURE 2:** Time use pattern as reported by children
Recovery: Inclusive and measures for continued learning –
- Enlist women’s groups like Mahila Samakhya and Kishori Sangha at the village level to help children, especially girls continue educational and social support.
- Engage GP and VLCPCs to give a clear message that any form of child abuse would not be tolerated by the government.
- Move away from cash transfers towards distribution of books and uniforms.
- Make secondary and higher secondary education free for girls (currently only tuition is free)
- Develop outreach programmes with civil society to encourage girls to re-enrol.
- Establish systems to monitor girls’ re-enrolment as mandated by the NEP-2020 and make this data publicly available.
- Provide learning and counselling support to marginalised girls transitioning between primary and secondary level (as per the NEP-2020).
- Ensure adequate mental health support is available particularly to Covid-19 infected children.
- Provide effective teacher training on gender responsive and inclusive schools specifically designed for children who have been left out due to the digital divide.

Resilience: Build back better with gender at the centre –
- Create safe spaces for girls within the community for social and emotional wellbeing as well as recreational and educational activities in small groups.
- Provide day-care and early childhood care services under Integrated Child Development Scheme for extended hours to alleviate the burden of childcare from older siblings.
- Ensure functional WASH facilities in all schools and train teachers to provide gender-equitable personal, social and health education, incorporating specific guidance to prevent further outbreaks of coronavirus.
- Incorporate comprehensive sexuality education into the curriculum to mitigate risks of rising sexual violence and abuse during emergencies.
- Hire and train more female teachers to promote increased girls’ enrolment and retention.
- Scale up and expand access to digital learning and other low-cost alternative education provision.
- Ensure teachers, parents and community actors have the knowledge and skills to deal with instances of gender-based violence and prevent sexual exploitation and abuse, including information on safe referral practices and online safety.
- Build gender-responsive contingency plans for education now for future public health emergencies based on feedback and lessons learned.

References
1. A recent study by Malala Fund shows that increased rates of poverty, household responsibilities, child labour, teenage pregnancy may prevent as many as 20 million secondary school-aged girls around the world from ever returning to the classroom.
2. India Champions for Girls’ Education, an initiative, supported by Malala Fund, is made up of education champions across civil society who are working to speed up progress towards girls’ education. This study was developed, designed and conducted by CBPS on behalf of India Champions for Girls’ Education
3. In light of the pandemic and job losses, the Government had announced direct cash transfers of Rs.1500 to women account holders and advance transfers were allowed for a number of existing cash transfer schemes to mitigate the immediate effects of the pandemic.
4. Government schools in Bihar had stopped functioning from mid-February 2020, even before the pandemic, because of the teachers strike, which is still, not been called off during the lockdown. Only 31% of the students reported that the syllabus was completed for the previous academic year.
5. SOP developed by Ministry of Education (http://seshagun.gov.in/sites/default/files/update/SOP_Guidelines_forreopeningschools_0.pdf)