



CHAMPIONS
FOR GIRLS'
EDUCATION

POLICY BRIEF

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



1. Background and context

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected marginalised sections globally, with school closure and online education emerging largely as the substitute, children from underprivileged backgrounds have been the worst hit. Not surprisingly, girls get more affected than boys¹. In India, numerous 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.

The North-Eastern state of Assam — with a history of internal disturbances, floods, communal and ethnic violence and internal displacements — has been even more vulnerable to the pandemic. We² surveyed 484 households in rural and peri-urban areas of five districts (Dhubri, Jorhat, Kokrajhar, Lakhimpur and Tinsukia), which have their own history of ethnic conflict, political movements and being highly flood-prone. Mostly employed in agriculture and tea estates, our sample was composed of 20% Muslims, 15% Christians, 29% SC/STs, and included indigenous Adivasi communities from central India working as labourers. Interestingly, only about one-fifth of the female members of the household said that they were doing unpaid domestic work and about 70% of the women in these areas were engaged in occupations outside the household. Other than adults, we also interviewed 484 adolescents (69% girls, 31% boys) aged 10 to 18 years, mostly in government schools (73%) and in private-unaided schools (13%).

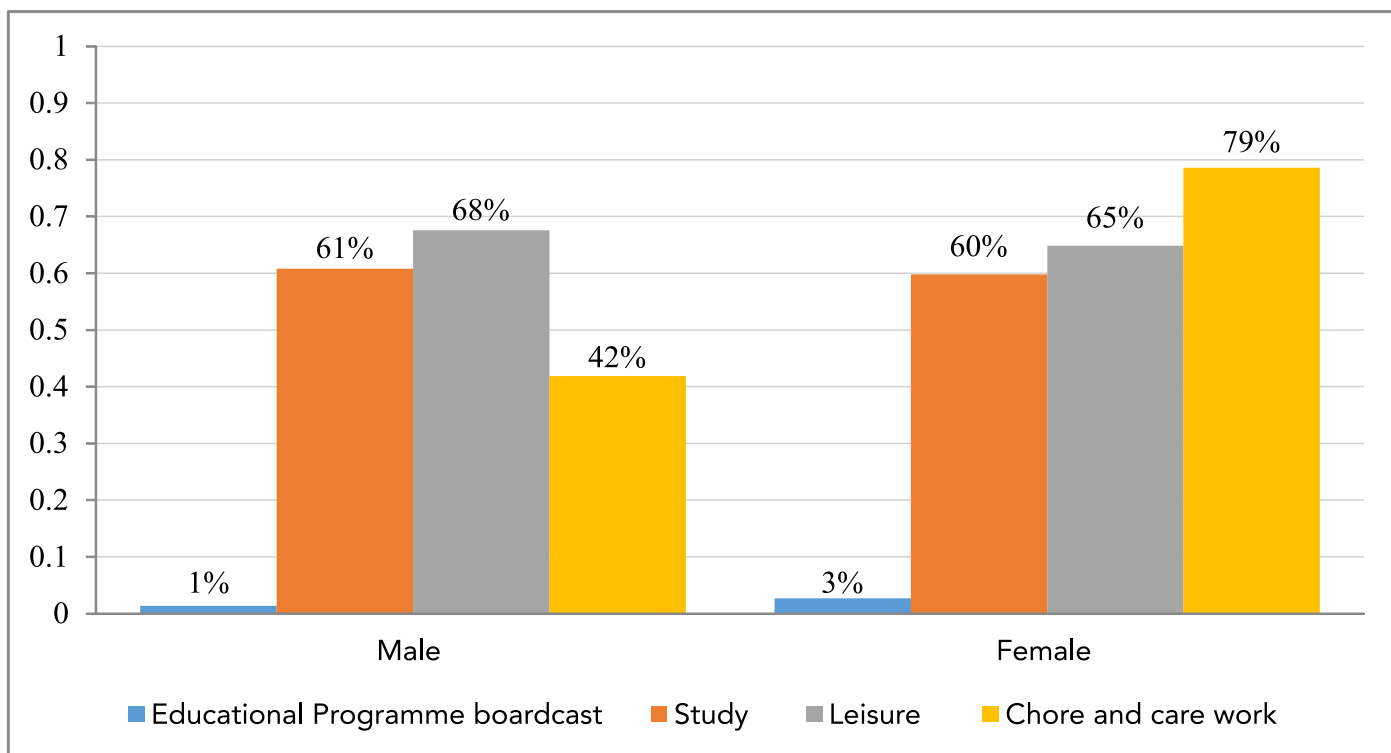


FIGURE 1: Time use pattern as reported by children

2. Responses and support to mitigate economic distress

RATION AND FOOD: Assam reported better access to ration and food services³ as compared to other states: 85% of the families reported having received additional ration and 83% of the families also reported that the Anganwadi centres in their villages were distributing food.

CASH TRANSFERS: The same is not true for cash transfers⁴ where the reach seems to be much lower, with 38% of them reporting that they received cash under the Jan-Dhan Yojana and 30% under the Ujjwala Yojana. Only about 7% of the families reported receiving cash transfers under PM Garib Kalyan Yojana, another measure announced during this period.

THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT also provided support for continuity of education of children with 56% of the respondents receiving some sort of support. This included mostly cash transfers for stipend and scholarships to purchase uniform (5%) and ration (uncooked food) (54%).

About 43% of the respondents said that they received help from civil society organisations and employers in the form of masks and sanitisers.

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

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

The state government has promoted TV-based educational programmes and mobile app-based learning⁵ as the main substitutes to the classrooms. We found that the presence of gadgets did not translate into real access or usage: 43% children in the sample had a TV at home, only 2% students reported watching such shows. Most children had a mobile phone at home, only 35% of the students could use it whenever they wanted to, with only 43% reporting unhindered access to the internet.

The access to technology for girls was even more limited: only 31% girls said that they always had access to a phone compared to 43% boys, with even more limited access to internet. This could possibly be because most phones (67%) belong to a male member of the family, and related issues of fear or distance perceived by girls, becomes a barrier to access.

3.2 Disproportionate burden of domestic chores and care work on girls

When it came to domestic chores (cooking, cleaning, fetching water, taking care of siblings and elderly in the household), a larger percentage of girls (79%) reported

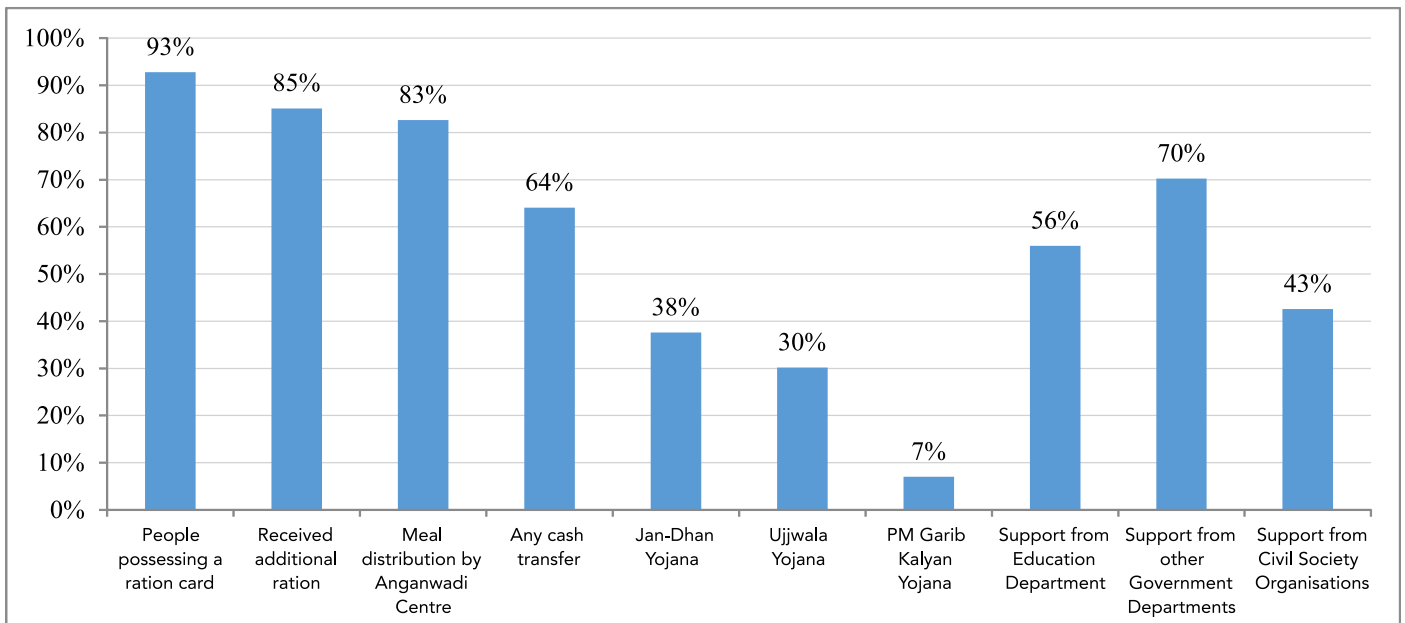


FIGURE 2: Support received by households

being engaged in such tasks, as compared to 42% boys. The converse was true for leisure, wherein a higher percentage of boys reported spending time on leisure (68%) as compared to their female counterparts (65%). About 60% of boys and girls also reported spending time on studies.

3.3 Life was better before Covid-19

Majority of the children (60%) said that their life was better before the lockdown with a marginally higher percentage of girls (62%) saying that as compared to boys (55%). This could be attributed to the restrictions they otherwise face, and school being the rare opportunity to get out of home. The top-stated reason (48%) for their preference of their pre-lockdown life, was being able to go to school and study; the second-most (17%) cited reason was that school enabled them to meet their friends. A greater number of boys (51%) as compared to girls (47%) cited loss of learning and missing out on school as a reason for life being better before. Also, 13% girls said that their life was better since they faced less scarcity in terms of money and food before the pandemic.

3.4 Majority, including boys, uncertain about returning to school

A high proportion (63%) of the children, were uncertain of their return to school. Only 34% children said a hopeful yes. This ambiguity was highest amongst boys, where 82% did not answer or said that they did not know.

4. Recommendations

With the Covid-19 induced economic shock and the floods in the state, the prolonged school closure has added another layer of uncertainty to children's education. This is worse since in this region, there is already a tenuous relationship that the children have with schools. The data clearly shows the impact on school-going children especially girls. Only 2% reported watching educational TV programmes, four-fifth of girls were engaged in chores and care-work with relatively less access to phones. Two-thirds of the children were not sure of returning to school. It is clear that there is no substitute for working strongly on education and empowerment of girls together, as social norms are aggravating the adverse impact of Covid-19 on girl's education. As states gear up to open schools, the comprehensive SOP⁶ developed will enable safety of children returning to schools. However, the following additional measures may help in ensuring reduced drop outs and better retention:

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

- Continue essential care services during school closures — like 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 — using 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.

Recovery: Measures to ensure return to schools:

- Enlist support of women's groups like Mahila Samakhyas and Kishori Sanghas to help children continue learning at the community level.
- Engage GP, local councils, VLCPCs etc to give a clear message that child abuse would not be tolerated.
- Make secondary and higher secondary education free for all girls.
- Develop mass community outreach programmes with civil society and youth leaders to encourage girls to re-enrol, particularly in rural areas.
- Establish systems to monitor girls' re-enrolment as mandated by the NEP-2020 and make this data publicly available.
- Provide learning and counselling support particularly to girls from marginalised belts transitioning between primary and secondary level (as per the NEP-2020).
- Ensure adequate mental health support for all children, particularly those who become infected/stigmatised.
- Effective teacher training on gender-responsive and inclusive schools for children excluded 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 on online safety.
- Build gender-responsive contingency plans for education for future public health emergencies based on feedback and lessons learned.

Developed by Neha Ghatak, Achala S Yareseeme and Jyotsna Jha, based on the study

"Life in the time of Covid-19: Mapping the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of school going children especially girls in India"

Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (2020) [for India Champions for Girls' Education]

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. The Government of India had announced additional ration through the existing PDS system and the state government had also instructed Anganwadi centres to distribute food.
4. 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. About 64% of the families reported having received some sort of cash transfer.
5. The Assam government launched 'BishwaVidhya Assam', to promote mobile-based learning.
6. SOPs developed by Ministry of Education. http://seshagun.gov.in/sites/default/files/update/SOP_Guidelines_for_reopening_schools_0.pdf

