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

1. Background and context

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected marginalised sections globally. With most schools being closed, online education has emerged as a common substitute, children from underprivileged backgrounds have been the worst hit. Not surprisingly, gender has added an additional layer to this disenfranchisement. A recent study[1] 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.

Gendered impact of the pandemic may reverse the gains made in gender parity in education and empowerment unless addressed comprehensively. 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[2]. Even boys face the burden of their gender: the economic crisis brought about by the pandemic is going to push them towards child labour.

We[3] undertook a survey in July 2020 of 3176 households across 5 states in India - Assam (5 districts), Bihar (8 districts), Uttar Pradesh (11 districts) Telangana (4 districts), and Delhi (1 district) - in order to understand the impact of Covid-19 (and related lockdown) on marginalised families: their livelihoods, education of children especially girls, institutional support and policy landscape. One adult and a child (largely adolescent girls in the age-group of 10-18 years) were individually interviewed in each household surveyed.

The socio-economic profiles of families who were a part of the study, were tilted towards more marginalised groups: 36% OBCs, 39% SC/STs and 18% minorities. The adolescent girls and boys interviewed were in upper primary/early secondary (grades 6-8) [49%] and secondary (grades 9-10) [23%] grades. Therefore, most children were in formative years of learning and at critical phases of transition marked by the movement from upper-primary to secondary, or from secondary to senior secondary stages. The literature shows that most students drop out at transitional stages, between class 5 and 6 for elementary, 10 and 11 for secondary and between class 12 and higher education for tertiary.

About 87% of the male members worked in the unorganised sector – these were also the respondents who were more susceptible to job losses. And 86% of them reported not having enough employment opportunities. More than half the women in these households were primarily engaged in unpaid domestic household work and about one fourth of them were engaged in paid occupations in the unorganised sector. This reveals the vulnerable status of these families, especially in a situation when the demand for majority of the jobs they were involved in ceased to exist due to shrinkage of economic activities caused by the pandemic and associated restrictive measures. Seasonal, short-term and long-term migration was common, with almost half of the households reporting (UP 66% and Bihar 48%) that at least one of the family members works as a migrant in a different region.

The pandemic has adversely impacted livelihoods with more than four-fifths of the population saying that they did not have enough employment opportunities in their villages or areas during the time of this survey. This proportion was the highest in Bihar (93%) and UP (86%), the states that supply a sizeable number of migrant workers to other parts of the country. About 84% of them reported facing cash shortages (barring Telangana where only half of them said so). Among the households reporting cash shortages, about 47% said that they are facing shortage since the lockdown started in the end of March and about 15% felt the impact starting early May/June when they seem to have exhausted existing savings. Food shortage seems to have disproportionately affected the minorities, with 70% of them saying that there was not enough food at home.

2. Responses and support to mitigate economic distress

A large proportion[4] of households (85%) said that they received some kind of support from the government, however this support seemed inconsistent when analysed for the states (85% in UP, 68% in Assam, and 42% in Bihar). The most commonly distributed items received by the households included food items, cooked or uncooked. Only three-fourth of the households in Bihar reported receiving the additional ration from the PDS system. In UP, about one-third of our sample reported not receiving any additional ration. Our survey revealed that while Anganwadis were functional in states like Assam and Telangana, where 83% and 64% households respectively received food through them, the reach seemed to be limited in states like Bihar (20%) and UP (18%) with only one-fifth or less households receiving food through them.

About 54% of the households said that they received cash transfers into their bank accounts through various schemes. In UP, only 41% said they received any cash transfer, whereas this proportion was high in Telangana (87%), where a number of state government sponsored schemes have also been operational.

The Department of Education also transferred cash in certain states for specific purposes such as stipend, scholarships or purchase of uniform but only 12% of the entire sample reported receiving any such transfers during the pandemic.

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

School education has been hit the hardest because it caters to children who, unlike adults, are not in full control of their own lives. About 61% of the students said that the syllabus was not complete before school closure. When asked as to how much of the syllabus was left to be completed, about 27% said that the syllabus was incomplete for most of the subjects that they had undertaken. And only 35% of them said that syllabus was complete at least for a few subjects.

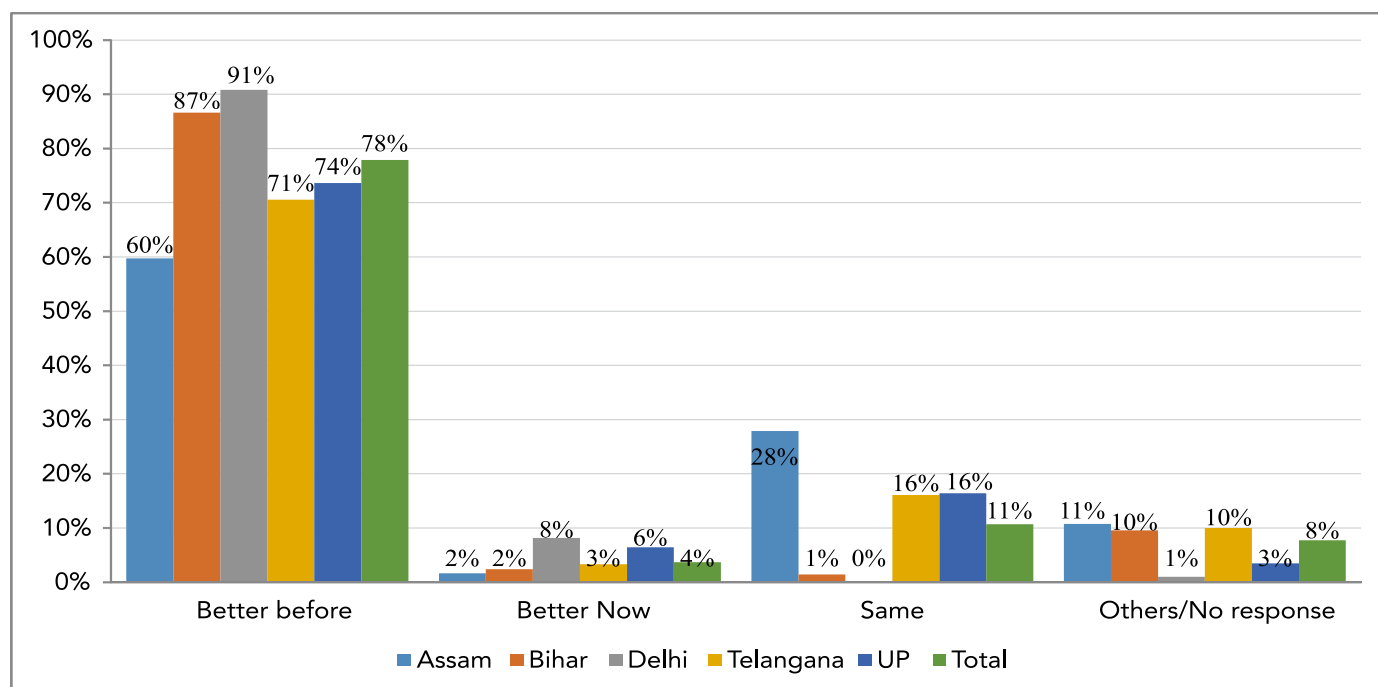## Life was better before the lockdown

FIGURE 1: Life Pre and Post Lockdown

When asked if life was better before Lockdown, there was not much variation in the answers between the genders, as 79% of the girls and 76% of the boys replied in the affirmative. Of them, 58% reported it was because they could go to school and study. The time-use data reveals that home proved to be a non-conducive learning environment with an alarming majority of girls (71%) being employed in care work (38% for boys in same category), while a higher proportion of boys (79%) reported spending time on leisure activities as against girls (60%). Similarly, 56% of boys as against 46% of girls reported spending any time on their studies.

Only 11% of the children reported to be viewing / listening to educational broadcast on TV or radio. This was despite the fact that more than half (52%) of the students had a television set at home, showing that the presence of a physical devise at home does not guarantee usage and access. In about 71% of the households, the phone belonged to a male member.

Despite having a phone at home, only 30% of the children said that they could access the phone any time they wanted to. This number segregated by gender showed further disparities in access to technological devices by girls, as only 26% of the girls said that they could access the phone present in the household whenever they wanted to, while a relatively larger proportion of boys (37%) said the same. Children from households who reported facing financial difficulties also reported relatively lower access to phones with only 38% of such children being confident about having access to a phone whenever there was a need, in comparison

to 53% adolescents belonging to households with no financial difficulties saying the same.

Uncertainties in going back to school

It was encouraging to note that a significant percentage (56%) of boys and girls were hopeful about their return to schools as soon as schools reopen. But alarmingly, a considerable proportion (37%) of adolescents did not respond to this question pointing to looming uncertainties. When disaggregated by types of school, the numbers for students who were ambiguous about their return were higher in private schools as compared to government schools. When corroborated with current economic status of the families, it clearly emerged that adolescents from households that are facing food and cash shortages are perceiving greater risk of not being able to go back to school in comparison to households which did not report any such difficulties. While 78% of boys and 76% of girls from households who did not have any food or cash shortage said that they would go back to school after the schools reopen, only 50% boys and girls from households who faced both cash and food shortage said the same.

4. Key recommendations

Two major findings of the survey clearly point to the gendered impact of the pandemic on girls' education:

– High engagement in domestic chores and care work

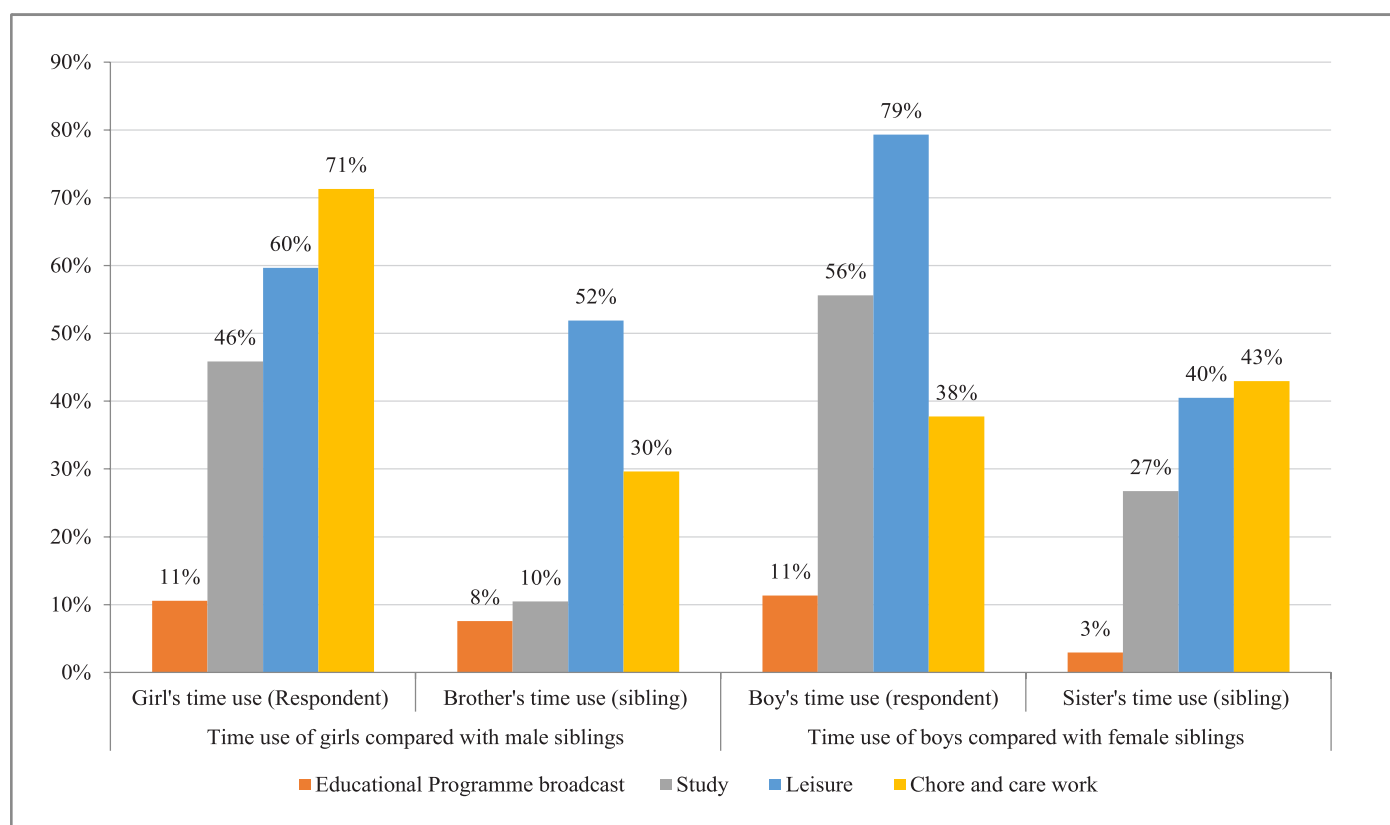# Limited and gendered access to technology

FIGURE 2: Intrahousehold time use: Respondents and Siblings

– Low access to devices such as phones for learning even if the family owns one

The gender disparity in both of these is high, and these, when combined with deeply prevalent social norms where girls' education remains much less-valued, may mean that the majority of these girls are not able to return to schools as and when they finally reopen. Although such instances are hard to gather through surveys like this because marriage of a girls before the age of 18 is a cognizable offence. The reports of early-marriages have been surfacing from various parts of the country[5].

It is obvious that structural barriers adding to disproportionate access to learning makes learning at home difficult. This, coupled with an education system which even in normal times is not known for guaranteeing a bridge to overcome gaps in learning for the marginalised sections, makes children and youth more vulnerable not only now but also in the future, by limiting their chances for education enabled social and economic mobility.

The Ministry of Education has brought out an SOP[6] for the phased re-opening of schools after 15th October 2020. While the very comprehensive SOP, if followed will ensure that marginalised students will not only return to schools but also make up for the learning gaps, it falls short of acknowledging the gendered impact of the pandemic on education and

the fact that families and communities' abilities to support children's educational journeys have been affected. Therefore, the system must gear up to ensure that such groups of children are adequately supported through responsive and inclusive policy measures. Some of these are suggested below.

Response: Implement measures so girls can keep learning during school closures:

- 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 — 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: Develop gender-responsive plans so girls can return to school:

- Establish systems to monitor girls' re-enrolment as mandated by the National Education Policy (NEP) and make this data publicly available.

- Develop mass community outreach programmes with civil society and youth leaders to encourage girls to re-enrol, particularly in rural areas.

- Provide scholarships, targeted cash transfers and other entitlements to retain the poorest girls in school, as per the NEP 2020 mandate.

- Make secondary education free for girls with immediate effect.

- Provide remedial tuition and counselling support, especially to girls transitioning between primary and secondary level, from marginalised communities, tribal areas and those in community schools (as per the NEP 2020).

- Within the school reopening plan, ensure adequate mental health support is available for all children, particularly those who become infected and are at risk of facing stigma.

- Keep finances flowing into education systems and ensure it benefits girls and boys equally:

  1. Ensure education's share of national and state budgets reaches 6% of GDP as mandated by the NEP 2020.

  2. Ensure that education financing is gender-responsive and operationalise the NEP's Gender Inclusion Fund to support school reopening and girls' re-enrolment in the immediate term.

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. Malala Fund (2020) Girls' education and COVID-19: What past shocks can teach us about mitigating the impact of pandemics. (https://www.malala.org/newsroom/archive/malala-fundreleases-report-girls-education-covid-19)

2. WIDE Database (2015) Indicator: 'Less than 4 years of schooling. 20-24, DHS, 2015'. (https:// www.education-inequalities.org/countries/india#?dimension=sex&group=all&year=latest)

3. 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.

4. Relief measures announced till the time of the survey included additional cash transfers through already existing schemes like the Jan-Dhan Yojana and the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, food or dry ration distribution through the existing Public Distribution System (PDS) and also creation of additional employment opportunities through the Atmanirbhar Bharat package which made an additional outlay of USD 5430 million for the existing Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme by expanding the number of days of guaranteed employment.

5. https://inbreakthrough.org/covid-19-early-marriages/

6. http://seshagun.gov.in/sites/default/files/update/SOP_Guidelines_for_reopening_schools_0.pdf