

Building back better:

Gender-responsive strategies to address the impact of COVID-19 on girls' education

According to UNESCO almost **1.8 billion students** around the world have been affected by school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Around **320 million** of them are in India.¹

New research suggests 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



Just a few months of interruption in learning has a greater impact on girls than boys, and will disproportionately affect marginalised girls from scheduled castes and tribes, religious minorities or those from families who have lost their livelihoods during the pandemic in India:



Prior to the pandemic, girls were already twice as likely as boys to have less than four years of education.³



Government online learning provisions are likely to deepen education inequity, given that under half of urban households and **14.9%** of rural households have internet access.⁴



Prevailing norms mean that girls are often the least likely members of the household to access the internet, and the unequal burden of domestic and care work that girls shoulder creates additional barriers to access distance learning.



Media reporting suggests that the economic impact of Covid-19 on families may increase the risk of early dropout from education, as girls become more vulnerable to child marriage, child labour, trafficking, violence or sexual abuse.⁵

The pressure on teachers may ultimately exacerbate India's teacher shortage once the pandemic passes:

- Teachers have not been trained to develop online learning alternatives, increasing stress and reducing the quality of distance learning provisions.
- Female teachers may face the additional burden of childcare and managing household chores during and after the pandemic, increasing their chance of leaving the profession.

The economic impact of the pandemic may reduce government funding to education:

- Even if education's share of the national budget remains the same post-pandemic, lower GDP could lead to reduced public revenue, leaving India with proportionally lower funds for education.
- The Ministry of Human Resource Development has deprioritised education to a Category C expenditure (the lowest classification),⁶ which will restrict expenditure to within **15%** of that budgeted for at least Q1 and Q2 2020-21.^{7,8}

Education is already underfunded in India – receiving just

3.3%

of the 2020-21 Union Budget – and Covid-19 is likely to exacerbate this further.

RESPONSE

Implement measures so girls can keep learning during school closures

The central and state governments should:



Continue essential care services during school closures – such as Iron Folic Acid and sanitary pad provision, psycho-social support, and school feeding – to maintain good health and hygiene, mitigate trauma, address hunger and malnutrition and limit negative coping mechanisms.



Develop diverse 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.



Ensure home visits and telephone communication between teachers and students, to support learning and keep girls connected to the school.



Promote alliance between local women's groups, civil society organisations (CSOs) and VLCPCs to provide immediate support to girls at risk.

RECOVERY

Develop gender-responsive plans so girls can return to school

The central and state governments should:



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



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



Make secondary education free for girls with immediate effect.



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



Communicate timelines, benchmarks and standards when planning the safe reopening of schools – working in close collaboration with the Ministry of Health and other partners.



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).



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

The central and state governments should:



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



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

The central and state governments should:



Create safe spaces for girls within the community for social and emotional wellbeing as well as recreational and educational activities in small groups.



Provide daycare 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 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 now for future public health emergencies based on feedback and lessons learned.



References

- ¹ UNESCO (2020) COVID-19 Impact by Education. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>
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- ³ 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>
- ⁴ Government of India (2019) Key Indicators of Household Social Consumption on Education in India.; http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/KI_Education_75th_Final.pdf
- ⁵ The Times of India (2020) Article: Govt intervened to stop over 5584 child marriage during coronavirus-induced lockdown. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/govt-intervened-to-stop-over-5584-child-marriage-during-coronavirus-induced-lockdown/articleshow/76661071.cms>
- ⁶ Government of India (2020) Memorandum: Cash Management System in Central Government - Modified Exchequer Control Based Expenditure Management. https://dea.gov.in/sites/default/files/modified%20Cash%20Management%20System%20-%20guidelines%20OM%20dated%208.4.2020_0.pdf
- ⁷ Bloomberg (2020) Article: India Extends Spending Curbs For Government Departments. <https://www.bloombergquint.com/economy-finance/india-extends-spending-curbs-for-government-departments>
- ⁸ The Wire (2020) Article: Lockdown Is Disrupting a Generation's Education. What Can Be Done? <https://thewire.in/education/coronavirus-lockdown-education-students>

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For further details contact: Mitra Ranjan, RTE Forum national.rteforum@gmail.com

