Artha-Journal of Social Sciences
2021, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1-15
ISSN 0975-329X | https: //doi: 10.12724/ajss.56.1

Interrogating COVID-19 from a Gender Lens: The Pandemic as a Silent Killer of Educational Aspirations and Achievements of Girls

R Indira*

Abstract

COVID 19, which has been disrupting lives and livelihoods for over a year, is leaving a trail of damages that have blocked pathways of progress, especially for marginalised groups. Initially, it was treated as a major health hazard and the entire discourse centred around how we could escape from being attacked by the virus. But as times rolled by, the realisation that the pandemic was upsetting future life chances of many groups that were already experiencing deprivation dawned on us. In this group, fall millions of girls whose hopes for an empowered future through formal schooling have gone into disarray, because when gender intersects with marginality, the intensity of the impact is stronger. With lockdowns resulting in forced school closures, not only was there a sudden rise in the number of out-of-school children, but intrafamilial violence also multiplied. This article attempts to analyse the impact of COVID-19 from a gender perspective and examines the dent it has made in the educational development of girl children.

Keywords: gender, COVID-19, physical classes and online classes, pandemic as violence, roadmap for the future

* Former Professor of Sociology, University of Mysore, Mysuru. Scholar-in-Residence, Centre for Women's Studies, Bangalore University, Bengaluru, India; ramaraoindira@gmail.com

1. Introduction

COVID-19 could reverse the limited but important progress that has been made on gender equality and women's rights (Guterres, 2020). This observation of the UN Secretary-General brings to fore the need to revisit the pandemic from a gender lens. Women and girls are facing social risks which are directly related to gender-induced inequalities. Hence, analysing the impact of COVID-19 from a gender framework is basic for understanding the invisible damage the pandemic has done to the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable groups.

While the COVID-19 crisis affects everyone, women and girls face specific and often disproportionate economic, health, and social risks due to deeply entrenched inequalities, social norms, and unequal power relations. Understanding the gender-differentiated impacts of the COVID-19 crisis through sex-disaggregated data is fundamental to designing policy responses that reduce vulnerable conditions and strengthen women's agency, placing gender equality at their centre. This is not only about rectifying long standing inequalities but also about building a more just and resilient world (Rivera, Hsu, Esbry, & Dugarova, 2020).

The need to question COVID-19 from a gender lens has also been brought out by UN Women (2021) when it observed:

> A profound shock to our societies and economies, the COVID-19 pandemic underscores society's reliance on women both on the front line and at home, while simultaneously exposing structural inequalities across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection. In times of crisis, when resources are strained and institutional capacity is limited, women and girls face disproportionate impacts with far-reaching consequences that are only further amplified in contexts of fragility, conflict, and emergencies. Hard-fought gains for women's rights are also under threat.

Patriarchal norms and practices put several blocks in the path of women and girl children from experiencing 'equal right as an entitlement.' In times of calamities, either natural or human-

induced, they bear the impact in a more severe manner because of the inherent deprivations they suffer from. As the World Bank Group on Gender (2020) put it, experiences with earlier pandemics have shown that women and girls "can be especially active actors for change, while they can experience the effects of the crisis in different (and often more negative) ways" (p. 1). A similar point of view was echoed by the *Bole Kishori–Corona Ki Kahani, Kishoriyon ki Jubaani* initiative:

> the impact on women and adolescent girls was multifold as along with emotional stress, they were subjected to violence, absence of freedom, difficulty in accessing services and economic challenges. The National Commission for Women in India has also reported a surge in reported cases of violence in the country. The lack of access and disruption of social networks have aggravated the risk of violence for women and adolescent girls. The pandemic has highlighted all the inequities that exist in our society, with the most marginalised communities and identities bearing the brunt of poor health systems, poor response mechanisms, increased violence, and lack of access to technology. In our society, girls are trapped in patriarchal norms and end up being passive and voiceless and abide by the decisions made by the male members of the family, especially in times of crisis. With the lockdown in place and no one to approach for help, adolescent girls and women were forced to compromise and stay in abusive and unsafe homes and communities. (Vacha Charitable Trust, 2020, p. 2)

The policy note from World Bank Group on Gender which was released just as the COVID-19 pandemic was making inroads on a global scale even as early as April 2020 had observed thus:

> Evidence from infectious disease outbreaks similar to COVID-19 indicates that women and girls can be affected in particular ways, and in some areas, face more negative impacts than men. Gender gaps in outcomes across endowments, agency and economic opportunity persist across countries. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be amplified by those pre-existing gender differences. For the most part, the negative impacts can be expected to

> exacerbate (i.e., more individuals are affected) and deepen (i.e., the conditions/disadvantages of some individuals worsen). Gender gaps will be affected differently depending on the context and specific characteristics of different groups of women (see above). In addition, those same differences may call for differential roles in the efforts to fight the crisis, especially in the first phase of prevention and containment, but also in the follow-up. As an example, the role of women as caregivers in households and communities places them in a privileged position in communication and prevention efforts. Keeping the gender implications of COVID-19 insight can therefore allow for a more effective response and action. (p. 3)

While day-to-day accounts of the effects of COVID-19 refer to the visible impact as measured in terms of positive cases, recovery and deaths, many other unseen consequences have bypassed the attention of both the state and civil society. Among others, one of the strongest impacts of COVID-19 has been the roadblock it has created for the educational aspirations and attainments of girl children in many countries across the world. Because education is a tool for girls and women to expand their ability to make decisions affecting their lives, and also build out-of-home networks, the damage that the pandemic has caused to their educational pursuits, is bound to have a long-term negative effect, which cannot be set right easily. In the section that follows, an attempt has been made to assess the major damages that COVID-19 has wrought on the future educational dreams of girl children.

2. The Pandemic as an Educational Setback

When COVID-19 struck this world, the initial reaction was one of disbelief. When we began to realise the damage it could cause to life, the only priority was to escape from the pandemic and run for safety. We were surrounded by narratives of human suffering and did not see through the dormant disasters that were waiting to happen. Since many of these threats were invisible and did not seem to have an immediate impact on the lives of people, they did not receive the kind of attention that was required to be bestowed.

One such imperceptible effect of COVID-19 was the silent blow it dealt with the institution of education.

There is now a growing concern that COVID-19 might intensify gender barriers in general, and increase the gender gap in education, in particular. Girls are at greater risk than boys in the matter of being discriminated against in terms of access to technology, being burdened with household chores and forced marriage. Before COVID-19, India had 30 million out-of-school children, out of which 40 per cent were adolescent girls. It is projected that post-COVID-19, close to 10 million secondary school girls might drop out and a large number of these can be from India.

The negative impact of the pandemic on girls' education expresses itself in multiple ways, as the closure of schools has a cascading effect on their lives. Since formal schooling also has the power to enhance the quality of their lives and contribute to their wellbeing, the need for girls to be in schools is unquestionable. Acosta & Evans (2020) provide a schematic diagram of how COVID-19 can affect the lives of girl children if they are deprived of educational access, by presenting insights obtained from experiences with earlier calamities that have hit humankind.

It is imperative to generate and analyse data on the impact of COVID-19 on education from a gender angle because we also need to identify a roadmap for rebuilding the lives of millions of girls in countries across the world, whose lives and livelihoods have gone askew. In the ensuing pages an attempt has been made to analyse the impact of the pandemic on the education of girl children by identifying a few key areas.

3. Non-enrolment of Children in Primary Schools

One of the most disturbing trends emerging in the COVID-19 times is an increase in the number of children not joining schools, either because schools are closed or because of economic constraints. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) noted that 5.3 per cent of rural children have not enrolled in school this year, as compared to 1.8 per cent in 2018. School enrolments in the last decade had seen constant improvement with the proportion going up from 12 per cent in 2008-08-09 to 21 per cent in 2015-16. The Gross

Enrolment Ratio was higher for girls than boys across all educational levels (Menon, 2020). But the downward trend has especially affected the enrolment of girls because in many families, parents have lost their livelihood bases, and this has dealt a blow to the admission of girl children to primary school.

When girl children are in school it is not just their knowledge levels that are enhanced; the gains accruing out of schooling are multiple and inter-connected. As Vaid (2004) has observed:

> the benefits of schooling are unquestionable. According to the human capital theory, labour productivity is a direct function of the amount of schooling received. Higher schooling is expected to increase cognitive development and leads to economic modernisation. The individual and social returns from women's education are believed to be exceptionally high especially where the lowering of fertility and infant and child mortality rates are concerned. In addition, rising levels of education of women lead to improvements in nutrition and health care facilities and the improvement of children's educational achievements. (p. 3928)

A similar point of view has been echoed by UNICEF (n.d.a) when it noted,

> girls who receive an education are less likely to marry young and more likely to lead healthy, productive lives. They earn higher incomes, participate in the decisions that most affect them, and build better futures for themselves and their families. Girls' education strengthens economies and reduces inequality. It contributes to more stable, resilient societies that give all individuals – including boys and men – the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

One of the positive shifts which had taken place in many emerging economies vis-à-vis school enrolment was that there was a steady rise in the number of children enrolled in primary school, especially in the last decade. In India, The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2010) and the National Policy on

Early Childhood Care and Education (2013) had a definite bearing on children in the primary school age group joining school. The percentage of out-of-school children had reduced from 13.46 million in 2006 to 6.1 million even by 2014 (UNICEF, n.d.b). But with the closure of schools or fear of the pandemic, new enrolments have been severely affected, and as always, the axe has fallen on girl children.

COVID-19 induced migration is another cause for this non-enrollment of new batches of students into primary schools as they had to accompany their parents who were on their way home due to the closure of workplaces, especially in urban areas. Both migrant and displaced children faced the threat of losing vital classroom time or disappearing completely from the educational scene. It is estimated that the pandemic has affected the schools of:

> 1.5 billion students worldwide and is likely to exacerbate the vulnerabilities of the millions of migrant and displaced learners around the world. In many cases, these marginalized children have already missed critical time in the classroom and are at risk of falling even further behind. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, refugee children were twice as likely to be out of school than other children. Migrant and displaced children face numerous obstacles accessing classrooms, ranging from enrolment issues to lack of available instruction to language barriers. For many learners living in displacement, their education will now be more limited or disappear completely. (You, Lindt, Allen, Hansen, Beise, & Blumel, 2020, p. 36)

4. The Shift from Physical Classes to Virtual Classes: How did it Affect Educational Attainment of Girls?

Another blow that the closure of schools dealt with the educational attainment of girl children was the shift to online classes. The idea of a 'virtual class' was perhaps the only viable alternative to the classroom, but given the gender bias inherent in access to technology, a large number of girl children, especially in vulnerable groups did not possess the appropriate digital tool required to participate in online classes. Leave alone education in the virtual

mode, there is an inherent gender bias in the use of technology itself. In many families in the socio-economically vulnerable groups, girl children do not get easy access to mobile phones as compared to their male counterparts. Even if their families have mobile phones, the technology required to access online classes is beyond their economic reach.

Rivera, Hsu, Esbry, Rivera, Hsu, Esbry, & Dugarova, (2020) point out that for

> For many girls in low-income countries, access to education was already a challenge before the outbreak. Across high, medium, and low human development countries, less than 60 percent of women use the internet. The average percentage of female internet users is less than 30 percent for countries with medium or low human development. The closure of schools can widen the gender digital divide due to unequal access to the internet and technologies. (p. 8)

The policy note by the World Bank Group on Gender (2020) also expressed its concern when it noted that:

> existing gender inequalities in the use of digital resources and IT will therefore affect access to education for girls vis-à-vis boys over that period. As an example, across low and middle-income countries, women are still 8% less likely than men to own a mobile phone, and 20% less likely to use the Internet on a mobile, which would limit their capacity to keep up with home-schooling materials.

In India, it is estimated that 38.2 percent of children do not have access to smartphones. As observed by Sonawane (2020):

> the potential impacts of COVID-19 on girls' education are numerous. The most direct impact has been through the shutting down of schools to curb the spread of the virus. Since then, distance learning facilities (online platforms, TV broadcasting, radio, etc.) have been adopted to facilitate children's learning during school closures. However, it has failed to reach all students due to the massive digital disparity across wealth, location, and gender. In India, the

> poorest girls and those living in rural areas have much less access to technology than boys. There exists a 50% gender gap in mobile internet users in India where 21% of women and 42% of men use mobile internet. Moreover, an assessment on issues faced by adolescents during COVID-19 found that more boys than girls had access to digital infrastructures such as mobile phones, internet services, radio, and media. With such low access to technology, digital schooling will further disengage girls from education and widen the educational inequalities among learners.

A similar situation prevails in many other countries as well. Internet access or an uninterrupted supply of electricity are luxuries for those living in many remote or rural regions. In sub-Saharan Africa, where more than a quarter of the world's refugees reside, 89 percent of learners do not have household computers and 82 percent lack internet access. In Jordan, which houses nearly 120, 000 Syrian refugees a large number of children were already deprived of education because of war. The closure of schools resulted in 18,000 students being out of school, and the only source of learning is the national television broadcast. Though UNCHR is trying to help these children, it is not an easy task to enhance their learning abilities (Dunmore & Cherri, 2020).

Experience has clearly shown that the shift from physical classrooms to the online mode has further intensified the digital divide and raises serious questions about education being the 'leveller.'

5. The Shadow Pandemic: Invisible Forms of Violence against Girl Children

As noted in the earlier part of this article, around the world the pandemic has resulted in many forms of 'invisible violence', most of which is rooted in the family itself. Given the gendered impact of COVID-19, girls have borne the impact of the pandemic with greater severity than their male counterparts. Often, the forms and intensity of violence they experience in their homes are hidden under the cover of the home being projected as the safest shelter for girls and women. However, many of them live in the shadow of

violence, which need not necessarily express itself in the form of physical abuse but deprive them of opportunities for social mobility. When schools were closed due to the lockdown and they had to remain at home, girls not only had to shoulder the burden of domestic work but were also cut off from external support networks.

It is also true that when girls stay at home, due to the closure of schools, they easily transform into 'readymade' labour. Girls in some middle- and low-income countries are generally expected to take on household and family care duties, which leave them less time for learning at home.

Though enrolment ratios of male and female children into lower primary school is almost equal, it is a universally accepted truth that as the level of education increases, the number of girl children declines in many countries. While nearly every child who joins a primary school generally completes their primary education globally, this ratio keeps on decreasing in every higher level of their schooling. Poor educational attainment affects the life-long opportunities of girls in various ways. It reduces the expected earnings in adulthood and increases dependency. Premature school dropout leads to early marriage and early childbirth, both of which affect the child mother and future generations. Lack of education also deprives girls of an agency that could empower them to counter violence at home and in the community at large.

Closure of schools has led to another unforeseen consequence, that being the deprival of access to information for girls. Schools provide social networks which connect students. Given the fact that even today many rural girls do not have access to the digital mode to stay connected, the school was a meeting point for them for experience sharing, clarifying doubts, especially those relating to such matters as personal hygiene and reproductive health. But with opportunities for physical mobility having closed, information channels have been shut.

Another unforeseen consequence of COVID-19 on school children was the stoppage of the mid-day meals programme due to school closures. The programme had addressed two issues at the same time- hunger and school attendance. For many children, especially

from poor families, the midday meal was the only source of nutritious food and when the programme was discontinued the children often went hungry. There was some arrangement for giving food grains, but it was too meagre to satisfy the dietary needs of growing children. Also, the supply was not regular. With poverty levels rising, there were many instances of poor families sending their sons for wage work and getting their underage daughters married.

When adolescent girls had to compulsorily remain at home, not only their domestic work burdens increased, but their vulnerability to sexual violence also rose. Adolescent girls are especially exposed to risks of "early marriage, abuse, and of sexual exploitation as schools close-especially when adults in the home are hospitalized or deceased, and children stay alone or in the care of strangers" (World Bank Group on Gender, 2020, p. 13). That there could be a close relationship between the outbreak of epidemics and sexual abuse was evident when schools were closed in Sierra Leone to counter the spread of Ebola. Not only did the risk of child marriage increase but experiences from this west African country have shown that "the death of adult male family members may also leave women and girls in the household particularly vulnerable and exposed" (World Bank Group on Gender, 2020, p. 13). Reports from the Democratic Republic of Congo indicated that sexual exploitation was common by state officials and community members in the guise of enforcing quarantine.

One of the primary reasons for the dropout of girl children is the loss of livelihoods. Often intra-household allocation of resources for girl children is disproportionately low and the opportunity cost of girls' education is considered higher than that of boys. As families go through economic hardships, they likely reconsider the above costs associated with their daughters' education. This is especially true of girls in secondary schools because often high school education comes with costs. The male bias that is seen both in the allocation of assets and freedom of movement results in girls experiencing the negative impact of any exigency, whether human-induced or a natural disaster. According to a UNICEF report:

> Around the world, 132 million girls are out of school, including 34.3 million of primary school age, 30 million of

> lower-secondary school age, and 67.4 million of upper-secondary school age. In countries affected by conflict, girls are more than twice as likely to be out of school than girls living in non-affected countries.

6. School Closures and Early Marriage: The Vicious Cycle Deepens

An inevitable consequence of school closure has been the unprecedented increase in the number of child marriages. A news item appearing in Times of India based on data from the Department of Women and Child Welfare and Child Helpline revealed that in the Mysore district of Karnataka, child marriages had doubled between the time the pandemic broke down and a year later. While the number of reported child marriages was 120 cases per year till 2020, between April 2020 and March 2021, this number had gone up to about 200 cases. One of the primary reasons identified by the study was the closure of schools (The Times of India, 2021). In an International Women's Day 2021 release UNICEF gave a caution that by the time the current decade ended there might be more than ten million additional child marriages primarily due to COVID-19 induced school closures. The spike in early marriages seems to be an emerging trend in many countries. As Affoum and Recavarren (2020) observed:

> These days, we often talk about the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and a struggling global economy. What many are not discussing is the advent of another sinister pandemic: evidence is showing an alarming increase in all forms of gender-based violence during these unprecedented times. For example, as economies shut down and stay-at-home orders become our new normal, an unspoken and damaging effect of the pandemic is a spike in child marriages globally. The COVID-19 pandemic is estimated to disrupt the efforts made so far to end child marriage and to result in 13 million more girls forced into early marriages between 2020 and 2030. Evidence of an increase in child marriages is already emerging from places such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi and Nepal.

With the sanction given to home-based marriages during the lockdown in Karnataka, for example, the fear is that the number of child marriages will further increase because families can now conduct these illegal marriages in the privacy of their homes without attracting attention from social activists or government functionaries.

7. Roadmap for the Future

Both the state and civil society must respond to setting right the crisis that has been created by the pandemic. One of the crucial interventions, especially by those in advantaged groups, would be to provide digital access to girl children from vulnerable groups so that uninterrupted learning is facilitated. It is also necessary that academic institutions which showcase their state-of-the-art technological know-how to attract rich clientele must now come forward to share their institutional space with children from the neighbourhood, whose schools have been shut. If lockdown does not permit free movement, these institutions can identify local youth with digital skills and train them to function as teachers to the children whose learning has been put on hold.

Special concentration needs to be bestowed on the education of adolescent girls who are the most vulnerable among out-of-school children. Neighbourhood centres must be set up so that they find a space not only for rebuilding their academic competencies but also for creating social networks which function as the 'agency' for information sharing and awareness building. Gender disaggregated data should be collected through micro studies so that when schools reopen, enrolment and attendance trends could be monitored. Given the fact that school closures have resulted in many adolescent girls being married, a serious effort must be made to trace these girls and their families, and they are brought back to school, and legal action initiated against those responsible for organising such illegal marriages. With many children losing both their parents to the pandemic, one of the most threatening emerging dangers is the possibility of adolescent girls being trafficked after adoption by unscrupulous persons posing as their benefactors. It is thus very critical for us to create an institutional mechanism that would provide a safe 'living' as well as a 'learning'

space for girl children if there is a serious intention to set right the damages wrought by the pandemic.

References

Acosta, A. M., & Evans, D. (2020). *COVID-19 and girls' education: What we know so far and what we expect*. https://www.cgdev.org/blog/covid-19-and-girls-education-what-we-know-so-far-and-what-we-expect-happen

Affoum, N., & Recavarren, I. S. (2020). Child marriage: The unspoken consequence of COVID-19. https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/child-marriage-unspoken-consequence-covid-19

Dunmore, C., & Cherri, R. (2020). *Syrian refugees adapt to life under Coronavirus lockdown in Jordan camps.* https:// www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2020/4/5e84a3584/syrian-refugees-adapt-life-under-coronavirus-lockdown-jordan-camps.html

Gutteres, A. (2020). *Opening remarks at joint press conference on the high-level event on financing for development in the era of COVID-19 and beyond.* https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-05-28/remarks-press-conference-financing-for-development-era-of-covid-19-and-beyond

Menon, S. (2020). Education in India needs an overhaul. *The Times of India*. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/developing-contemporary-india/education-in-india-needs-an-overhaul

Rivera, C., Hsu, Y., Esbry, F. P., & Dugarova, E. (2020). *Gender inequality and the COVID-19 crisis: A human development perspective*. http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/covid-19_and_human_development_-_gender_dashboards_final.pdf

Sonawane, S. (December 1, 2020). *Measures needed to mitigate the impact of covid-19 on girls' education.* https:// www.cbgaindia.org/ blog/ gendered -impact-covid-19-school-education

The Times of India. (2021). *Child marriages double in Mysuru district amid pandemic.* https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mysuru/child-marriages-double-in-mysuru-district-amid-pandemic/articleshow/82226107.cms

UNICEF. (n.d.a). *Girls' education: Gender equality in education benefits every child.* https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education

UNICEF. (n.d.b). *Every girl and boy in school and learning.*https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/education

UN Women. (2021). *How COVID-19 impacts women and girls*. https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/explainer/covid19/en/index.html

Vacha Charitable Trust. (2020). *Girls speak out: Story of Corona through girls' narratives.* https:// drive.google.com/ file/d/ 1mNANfU0 CqUm PPOLKEPpB18nNmlJMsugd/view

Vaid, D. (2004). Gendered inequality in educational transition. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *39*(35), 3927-3938. https:// www.epw.in/ journal/ 2004/35/special-articles/gendered-inequality-educational-transitions.html

World Bank Group. (2020). *Gender dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic.*https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33622/Gender-Dimensions-of-the-COVID-19-Pandemic.pdf

You, D., Lindt, N., Allen, R., Hansen, C., Beise, J. & Blumel, S. (2020). Migrant and displaced children in the age of COVID-19: How the pandemic is impacting them and what can we do to help. *Migration Policy Practice*, *10*(2). 32-39. https:// www.unicef.org/ media/ 83546/file/Migrant-and-displaced-children-in-the-age-of-COVID-19.pdf