Impact of **Covid-19** in rural India and its **effect on girls**

Insights from the field

educate girls

Founder's Insights

The world is still recovering from the effects of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns affected everyone but had a disproportionate effect on the poorest of the world. Along with the lockdowns, came the closure of schools which influenced education of children worldwide. Globally, the peak of the pandemic in 2020, saw nearly 1.6 billion learners[1] in over 190 countries affected due to the closure of schools. In India, closure of 1.5 million schools in 2020 has impacted 247 million children enrolled in elementary and secondary schools.[2] Girls, especially those from the marginalized communities, are the most vulnerable in times like these. A report by UNESCO in August 2020 pointed out that once schools reopen, *11 million girls across the world are at risk of not returning to school.*[3]

In this context, Educate Girls wanted to understand the changes brought about by the pandemic in the lives of such vulnerable girls in India and how it may have affected their chances to return to school. In November and December of 2021, Educate Girls conducted a study with mothers, girls, and boys to estimate the impact of the pandemic on girls aged 5-18 in the communities we work with. Educate Girls currently has government partnerships in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh and operates in over 20,000 villages across these three states, all of which have substantial populations of vulnerable girls.

The findings of the study are clear – the barriers to girls' education are greater than ever before and we need to fight greater odds to ensure these girls go to school, don't drop out, and continue learning. The impact is most acute for adolescent girls. The study highlighted the stories of girls and the long-term effect the pandemic has left on their lives. The girls speak about wanting to return to school to connect with their peers but mention that they must manage this with the expectations others have of them. The girls have to play a balancing act; coping with the increased household burden, pressure of marriage, and the need to provide for their families along with schooling. As a society, we carry a huge risk and responsibility for the future of these girls that may be lost to the system if we don't act soon.

Over the upcoming years, Educate Girls will continue to investigate deeper into the long-term effects of the pandemic on these girls. We will continue to work closely with the government, donors, and our communities to ensure every girl is back in school. We hope that together we can create a path that ensures every girl is in school and learning well.

> "We are immensely grateful to all those who contributed to this study. We thank all the mothers, girls, and boys who shared their experiences with us, and our field partners who ensured timely and accurate data collection. We are especially grateful to Dalberg Global Development Advisors for supporting us in the design of this study and acting as advisors to us throughout the process. This study would not have been possible without all this support.

Safeena Husain
Founder and Board Member
Educate Girls

---

[1] "One year into COVID-19 education disruption: Where do we stand?." 19 Mar. 2021, https://en.unesco.org/news/one-year-covid-19-education-disruption-where-do-we-stand.

[2] "COVID-19: Schools for more than 168 million children globally have ...." https://www.unicef.org/india/press-releases/covid-19-schools-more-168-million-children-globally-have-been-completely-closed.

[3] "Keeping girls in the picture - UNESCO." https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/girlseducation.

Context
of the study

By July 2021, the Delta variant of the Coronavirus was spreading rapidly in the country. This second wave of the virus spread faster than the first one and quickly reached the rural populations of India. It took many lives in its wake and left many families devastated. The country had to reinstate lockdowns and increase restrictions and schools continued to remain shut. The schools in urban and rural areas of India had been closed for almost one and a half years now. Once the wave subsided, in October 2021, the situation seemed to be coming back to normal and schools started re-opening.

In November 2021, Educate Girls (EG) undertook a study to assess how these waves of the pandemic had affected the lives of girls in the rural communities where it worked and their ability to resume school education. At this stage, in some parts of India, the schools had opened up and this allowed the study to explore whether girls had started going to school.

The study focuses on girls aged 5-18. It entails a literature review of existing publications on the effect of COVID on children and females. The literature review coupled with Educate Girls' work in the region informed the design of the study. Through the study, we spoke to mothers, adolescent girls and boys across 900+ rural households in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Within these states, 11 districts were selected to represent each economic region where EG works. In MP, the study was conducted in Dhar, Sidhi, Alirajpur and Khandwa. In Rajasthan, Udaipur, Bundi, Jalore and Ajmer, and in UP, Fatehpur, Unnao and Rae Bareli were part of the study. From each state 32 villages were sampled using proportional sampling methodology using Census 2011 data.

Though the study focused on girls aged 5 – 18 years, about half of the participants consisted of boys to establish a comparative analysis. For children younger than 11 years of age, the survey was conducted with their mothers. For adolescents, both mother and the child were surveyed.

Total number of 5 – 11 year old **girls** covered by the study:

699

Total number of 5-11 year old **boys** covered by the study:

620

Total number of 12 – 18 year old **girls** covered:

1218

Total number of 12-18 year old **boys** covered:

673

A minimum of 10 households (HHs) were covered per village. In case more than one eligible respondent was found in one household, one individual was selected randomly using the Kish grid. The surveyors picked every tenth household to ensure randomness in the sample selection. In each household, the surveyor collected details of children present in the household and then interviewed the mother and/or adolescents.

The study used a mixed methods approach. An extensive quantitative tool was used across all sampled households, where mothers, adolescent boys, and girls were surveyed. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with groups of mothers, adolescent girls, and boys in 14 villages across the three states.

Key
findings

Increased Financial Distress and School Attendance

Out of every **10** **households that were surveyed,**

8 **households have lost at least half of their income** as compared to pre-pandemic times, and

4 **households have reported loss of most of their income** compared to pre-pandemic times. Financial distress was most pronounced in UP, with

2 **out of 3** **households surveyed reported that they lost most of their income** during the pandemic.

Image for representation purpose only

Income loss has been crippling for her family as Rakhi (name changed), a mother of three mentions, "From three meals a day, we have come down to two meals after the lockdown. During the lockdown, we ate just one meal a day of dry rotis. I don't remember eating any vegetables for 2 months straight during the lockdown"

Rakhi goes on to mention the extent of difficulties that she and her family have faced. "It's been 2 years, we have not even bought any new clothes for our children, not even on Diwali. There has been no celebration in our house ever since the first Covid-19 lockdown.

As schools had opened in some geographies, the survey also aimed to explore the proportion of girls returning to school. In villages where schools had opened about

94% girls **96%** boys

said they are attending school.

23%

However, the proportion of adolescent girls not attending school **(23%)** *was nearly double* that of adolescent boys not attending school.

When asked, both adolescent boys and girls who dropped out during the pandemic cited financial constraints as the primary reason for not returning to school. Financial distress had a strong association with children not returning to school and girls were more affected than boys.

At the time of the study, the number of adolescent girls not in school is

2.3 times

higher in households that have lost *most* of their income than in those that have lost *half* of their income compared to pre-pandemic.

Image for representation purpose only

" Ever since the pandemic decimated her family's income, Meena (name changed) wakes up early to make agarbattis (incense sticks) before leaving for school. Her work has become a matter of her family's survival. Juggling the burden of household chores, work, and school has become a reality not just for Meena but for many girls in disadvantaged rural communities across the states that Educate Girls works in.

Bordering 2 districts, Meena's village comprises mainly marginal farmers and daily wage laborers, with the overall economic condition of the residents being poor. In this village, almost all the residents have lost most of their regular income in the pandemic.

A shy girl who barely spoke, Meena said she was enrolled in school before the pandemic-induced lockdown. However, after school reopened, she is not able to go every day. She mentions that her family is still struggling to make ends meet and she feels that it is her responsibility to pitch in, "anything that a family member can do to support the household finances, they should do", she strongly opines overcoming her shy self.

Increased Burden of Households Chores

Pre-pandemic girls spent less time on household chores than post-pandemic. For all girls, the number of hours spent on household chores has **increased by more than 1 hour a day to an average of over 3.5 hours per day.**

The majority of this increase is due to duties that must be completed in the morning before they go for school. The increase in the number of hours spent on household chores is greater for adolescent girls (15-18 years).

Evidence from lower-income countries where inherent gender inequalities exist points to the fact that the lockdown has resulted in an increased burden of household chores on girls.[4]

[4] "What do we know about the effects of COVID-19 on girls' return to ...." 22 Sep. 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2021/09/22/what-do-we-know-about-the-effects-of-covid-19-on-girls-return-to-school/.

> "My life revolved around work, and when I was not working, I had to take up my family members' share of work. When schools closed due to Covid-19, I thought I could relax a little but the situation at home was completely the opposite", reported a 17-year-old adolescent girl from Salumber, Rajasthan.

The survey found that older adolescent girls between 14 – 18 years have to take on the bulk of the household chores in comparison to adolescent boys. This is not unlike the traditional scenario in which older adolescent girls take on the majority of home chores. Dasra's report from 2017 titled "Enhancing the Employability of India's adolescents" states "Adolescent girls work as many as 120 - 150% more hours than boys in Indian households."[5]

A study conducted across Nepal and India found that adolescent girls have experienced a significant increase in household domestic responsibilities since the pandemic. They were always doing more domestic chores than their male counterparts, and during Covid, this burden has increased a lot.[6] The study also found that this increased responsibility had left girls with much less time to study during the lockdown.

Adolescent girls in group discussions expressed that one of the primary reasons for them wanting to return to school was to get a break from the pressure of household chores during the lockdown. An August 2020 'Girls-Not-Brides' study also highlighted that out-of-school girls are overburdened at home and are being forced to get married, resulting in increased chances of early pregnancy and exposure to violent behavior prevalent to domestic abuse and violence.[7]

---

[5] https://www.dasra.org/assets/uploads/resources/Best%20Foot%20Forward%20-%20Enhancing%20the%20Employability%20of%20India_s%20Adolescent%20Girls.pdf

[6] Adolescents in the Time of COVID: Findings from India and Nepal; MDPI; https://www.mdpi.com/2673-7051/2/1/1

[7] https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1571/GNB_Rajasthan_Impact_of_COVID_19_on_adolescents_in_Rajasthan_2020.pdf.

Burden of Early Marriage

In-depth conversations during the focus group discussions with adolescent girls aged 12 - 18 years revealed that *many girls, both enrolled and drop - outs (before lockdown), have been married or engaged during the lockdown period.* In Uttar Pradesh across two discussions, roughly

30% of participating girls were either married or engaged. In Rajasthan, girls in all discussions mentioned that there has been an increase in proposals or interest for their marriage.

Image for representation purpose only

Rashmi, (name changed) from Salumber in Udaipur District, Rajasthan, is a 17-year-old girl who was enrolled in 10th grade when schools shut down due to Covid. "Initially it was fun when schools closed down. We did not have to go to school every day, we could relax and wake up late. But after a few months, it started getting quite boring and there was so much work at home!"

Rashmi comes from an economically stronger (compared to the sort of income loss others faced) family who have been able to sustain themselves by mitigating income losses during Covid. She belongs to an upper caste (Rajput) and even mentions that there is no major hurdle for her to go back to school. Just like her, her siblings, who are all younger than her, were also in school before lockdown and have resumed on re-opening.

"I was happy when schools reopened. Thankfully we got a break from all the housework." Rashmi shared exuberantly, as she emphasized that she was fed up with the amount of household chores that she had to do every day. Though she is happy to be back in school, in further discussions she reluctantly shares that she is only attending, one or two days a week and is not keen to share further. Her cousin who came to the discussion adds, "Rashmi is not very keen to study. She doesn't really like to go to school." When Rashmi is asked more about her irregular attendance, "I am scared to be back in school as teachers will scold me. I am not very good at studies and I am scared."

When discussing further, Rashmi's cousins also mention that Rashmi is currently married and got married during the lockdown period, about a year back. Rashmi is still not eager to speak about it and only adds, "I don't really know why my parents got me married. I can't say."

"She was married because she doesn't study, and doesn't go to school", Rashmi's cousin adds.

Currently, Rashmi is going to school, supporting her parents at home with the chores, and spending time on her in-laws' farm supporting the harvest period. "On days I go to school, I do this work during the morning or evening. But now since it is harvest time I go for 'cutting' (wheat) every day."

Interactions with girls, boys and their parents across study districts and villages have expressed how challenging the lockdown situation was. Unlike Rashmi's household, many others have faced acute loss of income and are struggling to make their basic ends meet. During FGDs many girls mentioned aggravated poverty during lockdown, coupled with other circumstances, have left them at risk of early marriage.

Image for representation purpose only

"

Asima *(named changed) is a 14-year-old girl residing in Mau, Unnao, Uttar Pradesh. She is one of the girls under 18 years of age, who have been engaged or married in the village during lockdown.*

Mau is an industrial town with an ancient thriving saree fabric industry that employs the majority of the locals. Minority communities form the biggest population group with 58% of residents being Muslim. Despite a strong economy, the position of women and girls does not reflect the same progress. The town has a sex ratio of 950 and female literacy stands at 63.63 percent. Overall Unnao district has a female literacy rate of 57.8 percent, with 14 percent girls married before 18 years of age.

In this setting, Asima, who was never particularly strong at studies and was never really interested in them, has decided not to complete her education and has not re-enrolled in school. Asima was last enrolled in 6th grade when schools shut down. In fact, in a discussion with eight girls, three of them were married, of which, one was married before and two were engaged/

married during the lockdown. All three do not plan to continue schooling.

"Before lockdown, when I was going to school, my parents did not put too much pressure on me to get married. I come from a poor family and during the lockdown we lost almost everything. It was very difficult to manage. I was getting a fair bit of interest in marriage, so when a good match came, my parents got me engaged. I will be getting married soon as well." says Asima when explaining why she got engaged. "The cost of wedding is low during Covid, so my parents thought it was the best time to get me married," she added. "A lot of families are planning weddings at this time as it can be done at lower cost than regular times."

Despite being engaged, Asima could still be in school and continue her schooling, but it was more a change in priorities and aspirations for her and her family. "I'll get married soon and go and live with my in-laws. Doesn't make sense to go back to school right now."

Asima's mother who was also there with her added, "Actually the school is very far away. Right now, there is so much work at home and her father is also busy with work outside. There is no one free to drop and pick her up from school. Also, she is the eldest of all her sisters, and if she goes back to school, who will help with all the housework? There is so much to do every day!"

When asked about when Asima would get married and start living with her in-laws, the mother was not able to share anything definite, saying "Soon, I think. Let's see what her father is planning." While Asima's marriage may happen within the year, it is clear that given the current circumstances in her home, school and education is not a priority, and she will not be able to resume regular schooling anymore.

"

[8] Census 2011

[9] NFHS 4: http://rchiips.org/nfhs/FCTS/UP/UP_Factsheet_156_Unnao.pdf

Image for representation purpose only

> *Asima's friend, **Sabina** (name changed) 16 years old hails from the same village and used to go to the same school as Asima. However, Sabina has dropped out even before the Covid pandemic and lockdown happened.*
>
> *"My mother passed away three years back. I had to stay home to take care of everything at home. My father goes out to work, and I have three younger brothers and sisters. Who would manage the house? Who would take care of my brothers and sisters?", mentions Sabina when explaining why she had to stop going to school.*
>
> *Sabina however explains that 3 years back when she stopped going to school, it was supposed to be a temporary arrangement. She was in the 5th grade, and before enrolling in 6th, she had to start devoting her entire time to domestic chores. "That year my father and I would plan that once things were a little better at home, I could go back to school." Indicating that the plan for her was to take a break from school to manage the home, and she may have had the opportunity to return to some form of schooling. Her brothers and sister were able to continue their schooling because she dropped out and stayed home.*
>
> *Sabina's siblings have also re-enrolled in school after lockdown, but she has not and now she probably never will resume school as during the lockdown her father got her married. "I can't exactly say why I was married. I guess my father found a good match for me. But mainly I think it's because money is very tight for us now. During the lockdown, my father lost all his income. He has my younger sister and brothers to think about as well. Getting married during Covid times also means less expenditure. So, in a way it's a good time to get married." explains Sabina.*

However, during the quantitative survey, most parents and adolescent girls reported that the girls were not married, and neither did they get engaged (or spoken for) during the lockdown and overall Covid period while schools were shut. The study found that only

1% of adolescent girls admitted to being married while that number is

2% for adolescent boys.

4% of adolescent girls and

2% of adolescent boys have said there is an increase in the number of marriage proposals after lockdown. The desire to be compliant with legal norms may have prevented families from reporting marriage or engagement but the stories point towards the prevalent social norm in these areas.

Girls'
burden here to stay

The study indicates that 3 out of 4 adolescent girls will continue to carry the burden of household chores even when schools reopen. During FGDs, mothers mentioned that there has been an increase in chores for adolescents and younger girls. Girls would help with household work even before lockdown, but since the workload has increased during lockdown when girls are now going back to school, mothers are trying to figure out the best way for their daughters to manage household work and schooling. During discussions, mothers mentioned that girls are waking up earlier to complete their household tasks before school and even after.

Mothers of children aged 5 to 11 in Sidhi district of Madhya Pradesh believe that girls are far more helpful with domestic work than boys of the same age. According to most mothers, girls can help with a variety of chores, including more intensive and skilled work like cooking. Boys on the other hand, only help when they feel like it and mothers cannot always rely on them to help out.

As the study was conducted just as schools were reopening Educate Girls will explore in the next phase of research whether household burden on girls have changed post reopening of schools.

Opportunities ahead

The study found that teachers and peers played a key role in keeping adolescent girls connected to learning and bringing them back to school.

1. **Teachers** play a significant role in ensuring girls come to school and stay engaged with learning. During the pandemic, the study found, teacher connection played a major role in keeping girls connected to learning. 91% of older adolescent girls (15-18 years of age) surveyed who were contacted by a teacher are still attending school. The chances of dropout from the school of girls in this age group are 3 times higher if a teacher had not contacted them during the pandemic than if they had been contacted.

2. **Peer connect** is also seen to have a strong influence on keeping older adolescent girls in school. During the pandemic, significantly fewer adolescent girls (69%) surveyed were in touch with their peers compared to adolescent boys (82%). However, the study found a strong correlation between older adolescent girls who have been in touch with their peers and their attendance in school. Of those who were in touch, 85% are back in school while it is only 68% for those who were not in touch with their peers.

3. **Hots spots & Community engagement.** Along with leveraging their relationships with peers and teachers, there is an immediate need to identify hotspots and provide targeted support to these vulnerable girls. Working on the age-old patriarchal mindsets and providing girls access to learning will be tantamount to get them to attend school regularly. Educate Girls has rolled out a community-based learning program to enthuse confidence and promote learning among out-of-school girls to help them return to school. Educate Girls is also working closely with the community through our 10,000+ community volunteers to build a community movement towards girl's education. These volunteers with our field staff work to ensure enrolment, retention, and learning of all out-of- school girls.

Conclusion

The pandemic has affected both boys and girls, but the most acute effect has been felt by adolescent girls aged 15-18 years. As the study has highlighted, due to the pandemic the pressures on adolescent girls have increased. Along with the growing pressure of marriage, they have also had to take on more responsibilities at the household level. **This has taken them further away from schools and their peers, something that has also been aggravated by a dramatic loss of income in many households.**

Adolescent girls yearned to return to school to be able to meet their peers. As schools reopen, those who return to school will have to continue to find balance between school and household work. For many others, returning to school will require the combined effort of their community, their parents, their schools, and the government bodies operating in their ecosystems. In the upcoming years, Educate Girls will continue to investigate the long-term effects of the pandemic on these girls and continue to conduct field-level intervention to support vulnerable at-risk girls.

About Educate Girls

Educate Girls is a non-profit that works with India's most rural and remote communities to ensure all girls go to school. Established in 2007, Educate Girls currently has government partnerships in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh and operates in 20,000+ villages across these three states. Educate Girls works closely with the community through thousands of community volunteers to raise awareness about girls' education. It supports the government's effort to ensure every girl goes to school, stays in school and improves their foundational skills in literacy and numeracy. Educate Girls' goal is to improve access and quality of education for over 15 million children cumulatively by 2024.