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Gendered effects of COVID-19 school closures: India case study

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GENDERED EFFECTS OF COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES: INDIA CASE STUDY

BANGLADESH   **INDIA**   **KENYA**   **PAKISTAN**

AT A GLANCE

With sudden school closures in 2020, about 250 million children in India from preschool through high school faced disruptions to their education. A case study assessed the gendered impact of COVID-19 school closures on education, health, well-being, and protection of adolescents in India. Based on surveys and interviews in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, findings point to the digital divide for girls as well as shared barriers to effective remote learning. Informed by the evidence, the study presents recommendations to scale up efforts to improve remote learning, reduce digital divide and strengthen teacher support, with a particular attention to addressing gendered differences.

BACKGROUND

Population Council's GIRL Center was commissioned by UNESCO's Global Education's Gender Flagship to conduct a global study on the gendered impact of COVID-19 school closures, based on our review of published research and a large-scale survey of organizations focused on gender equality in education, as well as data from local communities in Bangladesh, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Mali and Pakistan.[1] This brief summarizes the **India** case study.[a]
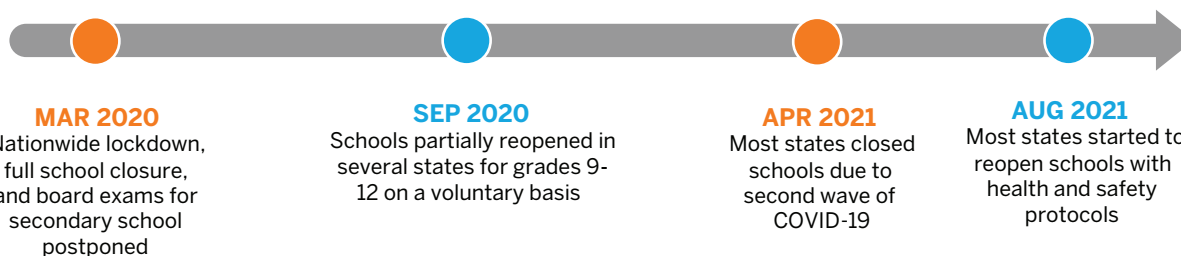
Education in India Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic

- **School system:** Schools are organized into three levels – primary (grades 1-5), middle (grades 6-8) and secondary (grades 9-12).

- **Government Education Initiatives:** With the Right to Education (RTE) Act as a foundation, numerous programs have promoted universal elementary and secondary education, as well as the education of girls over the last decade and a half.

- **Student Population:** Enrollment levels are approximately 96% for children aged 6-14, at an all-time high since 2009. Secondary education enrollment has also increased from 27 million to 55 million from 2000-01 to 2012-2013.

- **Gender Equity in Education:** While the gender gap in school enrollment, especially for elementary education, has substantially narrowed over the last two decades, the gap persists in reading and numeracy skills as well as secondary education completion (around 69% of females and 85% of boys ever went to school).

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[a] This case study was not included in the global study due to the halt in research during a severe wave of COVID-19 in India.

FIGURE 1. TIMELINE OF SCHOOL CLOSURES AND RE-OPENINGS IN INDIA DURING COVID-19

MAR 2020
Nationwide lockdown, full school closure, and board exams for secondary school postponed

SEP 2020
Schools partially reopened in several states for grades 9-12 on a voluntary basis

APR 2021
Most states closed schools due to second wave of COVID-19

AUG 2021
Most states started to reopen schools with health and safety protocols

COVID-19 School Closures

With sudden school closures in 2020, about 250 million children from preschool through high school faced disruptions to their education (Figure 1). In response, e-portals such as *Disksha*, *e-Pathshala*, and, National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) were created to facilitate remote learning, in addition to the government's television and radio broadcast of lessons to reach populations without digital media access. Despite efforts, a mere 18% of children in rural areas enrolled in government schools have accessed the video recordings, and 8% have attended live online classes.[2] Participation in live online classes among rural children in private schools is slightly higher at 18%.[2] Furthermore, the proportion of children aged 6 to 10 that are out of school increased from 2% to 5% between 2018 and 2020.[2]

Many state governments have issued a vaccine mandate for all teachers and school staff as well as their families. Recently the Ministry of Education finalized guidelines for safe school re-opening, including regular handwashing and safe hygiene practices, physical distancing, reduced number of students in class through shifts. Online classes remain an option for students who do not wish to attend in-person classes.[3]

Case Study

The case study was based on telephone surveys conducted using an existing cohort study of adolescents and young adults (UDAYA) in Bihar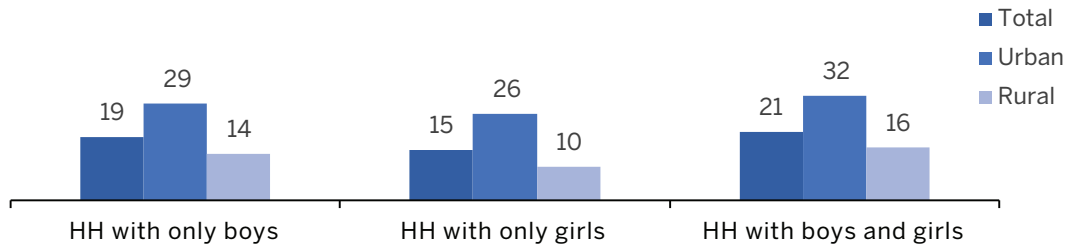 and Uttar Pradesh. In-depth interviews were conducted with adolescent boys and girls from households included in the UDAYA study, in age groups of 10-14 and 15-19. Parents, teachers, and other community stakeholders were also interviewed for their perspectives on education, health, well-being, and protection.

GENDERED EFFECTS ON LEARNING AND NON-EDUCATION OUTCOMES

Pre-existing Gender Expectations, Disparities and Limitations

- **Access to digital learning materials was not uniform for girls and boys.** Households with boys and girls who were studying had better access compared to households with only boys, and households with only girls were lowest in reporting continued learning online (Figure 2).

- There was a **significant digital divide among boys and girls** in access and usage. Similar gap was present in the use of high-tech tools for younger, rural students, and those from government schools.[4] Most students reported that they had accessed the material from group messaging apps whenever they had access to mobile phones.

- **Girls reported increased burden of household chores** as they were expected to help with domestic chores if they are at home. Boys did not report experiencing this, but recognized increased burden for their sisters. Few girls reported that they could not attend classes as they had to work in the morning hours.

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING CONTINUATION OF LEARNING VIA ONLINE MODES BY COMPOSITION OF CHILDREN BY SEX IN THE HOUSEHOLD, BIHAR AND UTTAR PRADESH, 2020

Legend:
- Total (dark blue)
- Urban (medium blue)
- Rural (light blue)

	HH with only boys	HH with only girls	HH with boys and girls
Total	19	15	21
Urban	29	26	32
Rural	14	10	16

Source: Population Council telephonic survey, May 2020.

FIGURE 3. VARIOUS MODES OF STUDY ADOPTED BY STUDENTS DURING LOCKDOWN, BIHAR AND UTTAR PRADESH, 2020

88% Self-study	13% Mobile apps	5% Online teachers	4% Home tutoring	1% TV program by Government

Source: Population Council telephonic survey, May 2020.

- **Many girls reported difficulties understanding the lesson shared on WhatsApp messages,** in addition to not being able to attend online classes. On the other hand, **many boys reported that they were receiving private tutoring** to aid with their studies and lessons. No girls reported being tutored during the COVID-19 school closures, though few adolescent girls reported that their teachers, parents or elder siblings helped them in their studies.

GENERAL EFFECTS ON LEARNING AND NON-EDUCATION OUTCOMES

Continuation of learning

- **Only about one-fifth of households reported that their children used digital modes to continue their studies.** Most of these households (81%) reported that students were self-studying, while 13% reported studying via mobile applications such as YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Only few reported that attending online classes conducted by their teachers, home tutoring, or government TV programs (Figure 3).

- Students from **urban areas and wealthier households were more likely to use digital modes** compared to their rural and poorer counterparts. Children from **marginalized groups** in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds were the **most impacted by the digital divide**.

    "Online learning is not successful in the villages but the children in cities are studying online. Children in villages don't have the smartphone for studies. There is just one phone at home and which they get in the evening, so they get homework through WhatsApp only...and they get it for very little time." (Female teacher aged 59 years, Uttar Pradesh)

Photo credit: UNICEF.

Barriers

- **Poor internet network coverage**, as reported by teachers, parents, and adolescents, was also a significant barrier to attending online classes.

- Logistical issues were also a challenge for many adolescents, especially for marginalized groups, including **lack of notebooks and pens**, as well as availability of **rooms or other places to attend online classes**.

- Most teachers raised concern regarding **poor attendance** of students and **inactive participation** in online classes. **Lack of technical knowledge among teachers as well as students** hindered access to online portals, though there were various government initiatives undertaken to help students and teachers.

Perceived impact on learning and returning to school

- Most parents were **concerned about not being able to attend online classes due to lack of digital access**, but given economic hardships at home, there was little recognition of learning loss and many were fine with school promotion without exams.

- Most adolescents, parents, and teachers were **keen for safe school re-opening**, there were several noted concerns by teachers and parents but being in school is an utmost happy place for children not just for their education but also socializing with friends.

- Teachers have been guided to monitor children who need attention or extra help. Educators also mentioned employing innovative methods in few schools by setting up **in-person classes in community spaces for children without digital access** *(Mohalla classes)*.

Effects on non-education outcomes

- Most adolescents did not report any health issues, but few reported being in **stress due to disrupted studies** during COVID-19 school closures.

- Some expressed challenges related to food security, nutrition, as well as economic livelihoods.

  "We have our own farm of wheat and rice, but we have to buy pulses, oil etc. When my brother applied for job, he got a job in March'20; he got half months' salary or maybe not even half. So, we had faced

problems in buying the things"(Girl aged 18 years, Uttar Pradesh)

"There was too much of loss in [our] farm as father could not go to the farm, he could not spray the medicine. My father wasn't going for work and if he will not go to work, how would we get to eat. (Boy aged 12 years, Uttar Pradesh)

PERCEIVED SOLUTIONS FOR RE-OPENING AND RETENTION

Students, parents, teachers, and other education stakeholders reflected on potential solutions for school re-opening and retention in general, without specific consideration for gender differentials.

- **Assess students for likely dropouts** and provide counselling for their parents.

- **Conduct alternative small group sessions or classes in open community spaces**, as piloted in few districts of Uttar Pradesh.

- **Mandate adherence to guidelines** for hygiene, mask use, and social distancing for school re-opening.

- **Improve and promote low tech solutions** like television or radio to reach marginalized groups. While the government adopted such initiatives, adolescents and parents did not report utilizing these platforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT AND STAKEHOLDERS

- **Scale up efforts for remote learning adopted by the government** like e-portals, e-libraries, and televised classes.

- **Adopt measures to reduce the digital divide** to mitigate the risk of school dropout, especially for students from poorer and rural households as well as marginalized populations.

- **Introduce needs-based incentives** to promote remote learning, such as smartphones and free data bundles.

- **Adopt hybrid learning methods** as a routine for government schools, in conjunction with ongoing school re-openings with COVID-19 health and safety guidelines.

- **Prioritize ICT support for teachers** and **aid teachers in adopting new technologies** essential to create a conducive learning environment.

- **Regularly assess student learning needs** and **facilitate remedial teaching** to minimize loss in learning.

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