

## **An Interrogation of the Lingering Impact of the Pandemic on Women's Education in India**

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### **Abstract**

Socio-political impact of the Covid 19 pandemic has been far reaching and in India, besides other aspects, it has very adversely affected education, particularly girls' and women's education. Even after the pandemic, education of this segment of population continues to bear the burnt of the catastrophe. This paper explores the nature of this malady at both pan India level and at the level of our own state West Bengal so as to make some humble suggestions about ways of overcoming this affection.

*Key words: Impact of Covid 19, Gender Inequality, Girls' education, Women's education, Child Marriage, Digital Education, Public Education System.*

Pandemics in the past have invariably disrupted the socio-political order of countries afflicted by it, even to the extent of ushering in far reaching changes, and the pandemic caused by Corona virus which ravaged the world for the last couple of years is no exception to this. As nations including India locked their borders, closed air space and the global supply chain got disrupted, putting a question mark on the process of globalization, the need for self reliance, particularly for a huge, densely populated country like India in essential sectors like food grain production, basic manufacturing, and very importantly, in pharmaceutical industries was felt quite strongly, calling for a recalibration of economic activities. Imposition of nation wide lockdown, the resultant miseries of migrant workers, millions losing their livelihood as many small businesses could not sustain themselves, public health structure on the brink of collapse, valiant struggle of health workers to save as many lives as possible, relentless drive to immunize millions of countrymen, all these are still fresh in public memory as the world and India have slowly come out of the dark days of the pandemic recently and are limping back to the normal way of life. But one vital aspect of our life which still bear the deep scar of the pandemic is the education sector and girls' and women's education are the areas where the severe adverse impact of the pandemic continue to be most palpable. This paper undertakes an interrogation of this malady, ie adverse impact of the pandemic on women's education in India in general and in our own state West Bengal in particular which is still quite extant in the post pandemic world, so as to make some humble suggestions about possible ways of mitigating them.

### **Global scenario:**

At the peak of the pandemic in 2020, Secretary General of United Nations (UN) António Guterres expressed serious concern about the terribly unsettling impact of the pandemic on the status of women worldwide, aggravating gender inequality. He ruefully noted that imposition of lockdowns and quarantines by nations across the globe, while essential for restricting the contagion, increased the risk of violence towards women trapped with abusive partners.

There was an alarming global surge in domestic violence and illiterate or poorly educated women in developing countries, being poorly informed about redressal mechanisms, became the worst victims. Guterres was even more concerned about the fact that girls were having their education cut short in developing world as families facing economic hardship always consider girls' education to be expendable.<sup>1</sup> According to an UN Report, the closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic affected an estimated 94 per cent of all students worldwide, or 1.6 billion children and youth. It is estimated that 40 per cent of the poorest countries did not support at-risk students during the pandemic, resulting in limited access to quality and inclusive learning modalities and safety nets to those who needed them the most. Girls were particularly affected by the limited availability of time to study at home. Many faced increased burdens of caring for sick family members, fetching water, cooking, and caring for younger siblings. Students also faced limited access to basic needs and mental health issues.<sup>2</sup>

As schools reopened after the pandemic subsided a bit, many girls are being left behind. In March 2021, UNESCO estimated that 11 million girls might not return to class after the reopening of schools. For girls living in areas affected by conflict and natural disasters, the likelihood of returning to school has been even lower. Data from various projects show that the majority of the marginalised students accessed remote learning through the use of printed materials. Television, radio, and internet-based options were mostly inaccessible in rural and remote areas and in the poorest households and that badly affected girl students as well.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Impact of the Pandemic on Indian Education Scenario:**

While compared to many other developing countries, India has managed better the crisis situation induced by the pandemic as immunization process has covered almost the entire adult population and proving wrong the predictions of many international agencies, food crisis could be averted and supply chain resumed normal flow relatively quickly. Nevertheless, the inimical impact on education from primary to upper levels and specifically on girl students have been extremely upsetting and lingered, much to the chagrin of all right minded citizens. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), conducted annually by Pratham and the National Achievement Survey (NAS), carried out every three years by the central government, studies the state of the education system and highlights learning levels, enrolment rates, and major gaps in the system, among other things. These reports reveal that while children are graduating to a higher class every year, very few are performing at their expected levels.

The pandemic has prompted a shift to online education and this is likely to further impact these trends. The ASER 2020 report revealed that 5.3 percent of rural children aged 6-10 years did not enroll in school in 2020, compared to 1.8 percent in 2018. Though exact figure is not available, exerts fear that overwhelming segment of those children not getting enrolled at all are girls.<sup>4</sup>

In August 2021, Educational Minister Dharmendra Pradhan himself admitted that around 15 crore children are currently out of education system. The Unified District Information System for Education reported similar dropout numbers. The figure for dropouts at the secondary level was as high as 17%, and then there are children who have never been enrolled. These challenges amplified with the impact of temporary school closures due to Covid-19.

Research indicated that these numbers would only increase due to the long-term effect of the pandemic. However, girls are more at risk as, according to the National Right to Education forum's policy brief, 10 million girls are at risk of dropping out.

Education in India always had persistent issues such as access, continuity, learning gaps, among other issues which exacerbate dropouts. The pandemic has added newer challenges and amplified a few others. Unemployment has been rising since the Covid-19 pandemic started in early 2020, which has pushed parents to prioritize survival over children's education, especially fees in private schools.

Challenges such as gaps in learning and access to quality education existed for children from marginalized communities even before the pandemic. However, the digital divide and loss of learning continuity have further increased these gaps and decreased confidence in children. In a study by Child Fund India, 64% of the children expressed that they may drop out if not provided additional educational support.<sup>5</sup>

A recent parliamentary committee has further corroborated findings of other studies. It has found that the Covid crisis has disproportionately affected girls when it comes to education. The figure for dropouts at the secondary level was as high as 17 percent, and there are children who have never been enrolled. The committee on women empowerment, in its report presented during the Winter Session of Parliament in December 2021, found that school closure in India affected 320 million children enrolled from pre-primary to tertiary levels of education. It has been estimated that of these, about 158 million are female students. According to a newspaper report, the committee has observed that in the post-pandemic scenario, the probability of more adolescent girls dropping out of school permanently to help with household tasks and childcare due to the economic hardships of their families is very high. "As per Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) data for 2018-19, the Gross Enrolment Ratio of girls decreased from 96.72 in elementary classes to 76.93 in secondary classes and to 50.84 in higher secondary classes. It also pointed out that the dropout ratio of girls during 2019-20 was 15.1," the report stated. Rights groups and NGOs have said that the real number of school dropouts is much more than the figures acknowledged by the government. They have also expressed fears that the disproportionately high number of girls dropping out of school could open them for exploitation, like child labour or being married away at a young age.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Scenario in West Bengal:**

Impact of the pandemic on children's and particularly minor and adolescent girls' right to education and other basic rights in West Bengal has been quite dismal and even after the receding of the pandemic, the scenario continues to be bleak.

According to a report published by United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), there will be an additional 10 million child marriages across the world before the decade ends. The rise in number of child marriages in West Bengal, ever since the outbreak of the pandemic lends credence to the ominous prediction of the world body. Societal pressure, abject poverty and lack awareness have led many families in remote rural areas to marry away their girl children before the legal age. Many of these child brides are often trafficked to brothels in other part of the country and even abroad.

According to the Department of Women and Child Welfare of India, the number of child marriages has risen sharply across the country. There have been studies by various organisations that have shown that the number of child marriages has increased considerably in several Indian states and West Bengal is one of those.

A survey conducted in West Bengal by the Cartis India partners, Campaign against Child Labour (CACL) and Right to Education Forum (RTE Forum) – covering 2,154 children and their families including 173 differently-abled children across 19 districts of West Bengal through 32 organisations, members of WB CACL and RTE forum in 2021 provides insight into the sorry state of affairs so far as child rights and situation of girl children are concerned.

On 24th August 2020, Report on Rapid Assessment on the Status of Child Rights in WB was released through the virtual platform in the presence of Ms. Ananya Chakraborty (Chairperson, West Bengal Commission for Protection of Child Rights).

The highlights of the study showcased that 71% of kids have no access to digital education. Seventeen per cent of the surveyed children made do with one or two meals a day, and 11 per cent of the sick could not access any medical treatment. Only 21.5 per cent of children from lower classes had access to online education at the pre-primary and primary level while the percentage for those from higher socio-economic background stood at 53.2 per cent at the higher secondary level.

“At least Bengal’s data is better than the national data. Across India, only 14 per cent of the school children have been able to continue their education,” said Prabir Basu, Joint Convener of RTE Forum (Campaign).

Ambarish Rai (National Convener, Right to Education Forum), strongly spoke on child stress due to the consequences of COVID 19 and increase school dropout, increasing child labour. ‘Online education system and its transformation of education system need critical review. Resource allocation must be made mandatory, the functionality of the school management committee and formalizing education system by bringing trained and qualified teachers were some of his suggestion. He ended by saying that ‘ We want education as RIGHT and not as a CHARITY’.

Anindit Roy Chowdhury, director of Programmes and Policy at Save the Children India, after conducting a study on status of girl children in Sundarban area said it has been seen that pandemic induced economic hardship, climate change leading to natural disaster, migration and agrarian crisis has pushed more families into economic distress and increased the vulnerability of girls. “The investment on girl child education and food shortage is affected and many families get their children (particularly girls) married. Working in the field, we have observed families making decisions about getting girl child married particularly in high risk disaster zones anticipating crisis in the household,” he said.<sup>7</sup>

“The end result of the report is very disturbing, I would say practically the scenario is even worse. The survey has been done with children residing in the areas with the presence of organisations to support them... We would like to bring it to the notice of the state government so that the policymakers can strategize to improve the situation,” said the Convenor WB Campaign and Child Labour.

“This study has shown us stark realities of children during the lockdown and the need for relooking government policies, digital education is not the alternative, need to provide education in persons and more so for special children”, shared Asha Ekka, Caritas India State Manager for West Bengal. “Greater responsibility and empowering of school management committees, strengthening the existing Child Protection systems and make them functional, Establishment of CWCs in West Bengal, Mapping of Child Labour Hotspots”, proposed Asha.

The study came with major recommendations in the field of education, protection, health and nutrition.

As it suggested, special measures need to be taken for children with disabilities, displaced children of migrant labours and children who are otherwise socially disadvantaged. The education system needs to be empathetic, embracing introducing evaluation systems that discover the abilities in the children undermining their lapses.

The education system needs to involve the communities by way of the School Management Committee. This is the time when community participation, the participation of mothers of children in running schools has become crucial. The teaching fraternity, parents and community members have to work together to ensure that every child is included in the education system.

The SMC can play an important role in creating awareness regarding safety and hygiene in schools and among children and involve in building infrastructure and necessary arrangements for health-hygiene with the guideline to save the children from COVID-19 in school. Proper facilities for menstruating female students are absolutely necessary.

Regular meetings with parents to encourage them to send female children to school and be aware of their child's progress can be beneficial.

Government needs to ensure livelihood of the guardians to stop child marriage, trafficking and child labour.

A large number of children received some form of support through PDS, Mid-Day Meal and ICDS Centres. But the fact remains that almost 1/5 of the children did not get enough food to eat during the pandemic. Measures should be taken by Strengthening Public distribution system, Anganwadi supplementary food distribution system and Mid-day meal distribution system and parents must be educated about the nutritional need of girl child.

Another study by CJP (Citizens for Justice and Peace) have found out that Malda, Murshidabad and Birbhum districts of West Bengal now have a large number of poor migrant workers who have returned home. Child marriage has increased at a substantial rate in these three districts and almost 25 percent of girls were married off before they reached 18 years of age. So these regions need targeted attention.<sup>8</sup>

To prevent further dropouts and ensure that each child, especially from vulnerable groups, girls, tribal children, children from minority or migrating groups, etc., receives quality education as per India's commitment to sustainable development goals, here are a few recommendations:

- State and non-state actors should work together to identify girl children from the special vulnerable groups through rigorous monitoring, locating them, and ensuring that they are back in schools.
- School management committees (smcs) can monitor these efforts in coordination with the panchayati raj institutions (pri), block and district authorities, and encourage parents to keep children in school during regular meetings of smc with parents, community and local authorities.
- Public education system must be made more robust by increasing financial allocation for the public education sector. Besides, teachers should be adequately trained to adapt to the hybrid mode of education which is becoming the norm in post pandemic world. They should be imparted necessary technical skill to make use of digital mode of education alongside the conventional mode.

## Concluding observations

An anonymous wise person once commented, 'if you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate a nation'. Numerous studies worldwide have shown that 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.

Status of women in India presents a fascinating study of extremely contrasting scenario. People here pay fervent obeisance to various goddesses who are worshipped as embodiment of *sakti* (power), while even today, all noteworthy indices still signal the continued prevalence of a deeply patriarchal matrix with often noticeable misogynistic moorings.

In fact, some of the indices even portend a worsening of the conditions of Indian women despite tall claims made by the movers and shakers of Indian society, particularly by political leaders belonging to the ruling dispensation about the 'phenomenal advancement' made by Indian women in different walks of lives, about their stupendous success in breaking newer and newer glass ceilings.

Indian women, at the beginning of the journey of the republic, were fortunate to have equal voting rights, equal legal status and equitable access to education, profession etc. Offered by the constitution of India, one of the most progressive, liberal constitutions of the world.

Framers of our constitution, particularly titans like Dr B R Ambedkar and pandit Nehru, despite being aware of the backward condition of Indian women, deprived of education and victims of evil practices like early marriage, dowry and domestic violence, in their wisdom, decided in favour of granting equal voting rights to Indian women.

It was not really an act of condescension but rather an acknowledgement of the political acumen of Indian women who had participated in good numbers in all facets of our freedom struggle ranging from the non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements under Gandhiji's leadership to extremist movements led by the likes of master Surjya Sen and even in the ambitious, path-breaking military ventures led by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

Indian women have come a long way from the time of preparation of the first electoral roll in 1950 when the country's first election commissioner Sukumar Sen could not allow 28 lakh, women, to vote as these women simply refused to give their proper names in the electoral rolls and insisted that they be identified as "a's mother, b's wife etc.", as societal norms dictated women's existence to be defined in terms of their relationship with their male relatives. Sen's insistence that the name of the voter was an essential part of his or her identity of being a citizen of the country played a significant role in making women conscious of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Over the years, the participation of women voters in our electoral process increased steadily and in the last general election of 2019, as per EC record, the percentage of women voters' participation (almost 68 per cent) exceeded that of men. The literacy rate among women has gone up noticeably (71 per cent) though it still trails the male literacy rate (84 per cent) as per official data.

The natural sex ratio of India was around 105 boys per 100 girls till the 1980s when prenatal ultrasound became widely available and abortion, which was legalised in 1971, became more widespread. The sex gap duly yawned. According to the 2011 census, India had a birth ratio of 111 males to 100 females. This

was despite longstanding policies to mitigate the problem. Fetal sex determination was outlawed in 1994; the restriction was and is routinely flouted by doctors. Yet a new report from the Pew Research Centre shows that the sex gap has at last begun to normalise. It suggests India's current sex ratio at birth is 108 males per 100 females, thus indicating that the evil practice of female feticide is abating slowly.

The number of female graduates has also soared remarkably in the country. By sheer grit and determination, women have overcome many hurdles to make their mark in different walks of life, from science to literature, social work to entertainment, caregiving to sports, bringing laurels to the country and making an invaluable contribution to the progress and well-being of the country, and yet, deep-seated gender bias continues to be a contributing factor to social schisms characterising today's India. Despite the share of women legislators in the Lok Sabha peaking at 14.39 per cent as of June 2019, India is still worse than 140 countries in the world in terms of representation of women in parliament. The global average for the share of women parliamentarians stood at 24.6 per cent in 2019, as per Inter-parliamentary Union data. Women have held the posts of president and prime minister in India, as well as chief ministers of various states. Charismatic women politicians like Indira Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Mayavati and Mamata Bannerjee have been trailblazers in India's vibrant electoral democratic set-up.

Nevertheless, political parties continue to be resistant to the prospect of fielding more women candidates in elections, due to various prejudices like women's perceived inability to devote the required time and energy to political activity while simultaneously managing domestic preoccupations. Despite many new laws to prevent domestic abuse and sexual violence committed against women, such incidents are still rampant.

The onslaught of rightist, majoritarian political forces seem to have harmed women's progress considerably by interfering with their choices in areas like choosing a partner and by reiterating the virtue of women's traditional role as the ideal wife and mother, while attempting to restrict her access to the public space. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, female employment in India fell steeply and plummeted to 9 per cent in 2022, an alarming trend flagged by the World Economic Forum.<sup>9</sup>

Though women in India represent 48 per cent of the population, they contribute only around 17 per cent of the GDP compared to 40 per cent in China. Denial of economic freedom is likely to have a cascading effect on women's access to health, proper nutrition, and decision-making power in family matters and overall harm their agency. Hence, the demons of patriarchy and gender discrimination are yet to be slayed and Indian women's battle to acquire their rightful place in society continues. Education is the most powerful weapon women can use in this battle and hence, all-out efforts are needed to make education accessible to every girl child of India.

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