

ACCESS TO EDUCATION: MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES DURING COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted drastically every sphere of life. While the economic growth faced a major backdrop across the globe, cases of rising domestic violence also sprung out during this time. One such major concern was regarding the education system. Although the problems created due to this similarly impacted every student as physical classes were discontinued but the situation was even more worsening for the students from marginalized communities particularly girls from rural areas. According to a report, the number of girl student dropouts might outnumber boy student dropouts in the rural India during this time. Ten million girls in India might drop out of secondary school due to the COVID-19 pandemic, where the majority is from rural areas.¹ COVID-19 took jobs of a large number of the rural population in India which put the parents in a situation where they could only afford to educate only 1 or 2 child and in this, further education to most of the girl children is denied. They are now compelled to do domestic work or to work in the fields or even some are compelled to get married, quashing all their dreams of a better tomorrow. The pandemic has affected 158 million girl students in India, impacting their dreams of a formal education and of better lives.² Apart from this, unlike urban population, a large number of them had no access to online medium of education which further pushed the girl students to a place from where they had no accessibility to education even if their parents allowed. Inaccessibility to online medium not only includes smart phones, the problem is also with digital learning and Internet connectivity. Ignorance of these also came up as a major challenge for them.

All these drawbacks have violated the fundamental right of right to education mainly of the girl children of rural India. The pandemic has not only repudiated their right to education but

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¹ 10 million girls at risk of dropping out of school because of the COVID-19 pandemic: RTE Forum, Available at: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/10-million-girls-at-risk-of-dropping-out-of-school-because-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-says-rte-forum-policy-brief/article33662229.ece>, (Accessed on: 30th October, 2021)

² More girl students drop out as pandemic sharpens digital gender divide: The Statesman <https://www.thestatesman.com/education/girl-students-drop-pandemic-sharpens-digital-gender-divide-1502981296.html>, (Accessed on 30th October, 2021)

moreover they are pushed so backward that they are left with no means to retrieve this right. In this article, we will focus on the fundamental right, the drawbacks infringing it and the possible measures required to mitigate this impact.

RIGHT TO EDUCATION DURING PANDEMIC

India provides the fundamental right of right to education under Article 21-A of the constitution which states that free and compulsory primary education to be given to all children of the age 6 to 14 years. It has come into force from April 1, 2010 through the enforcement of Right to Education Act and since then this article acquires the same legal status as that of right of life under Article 21 and other fundamental rights of the constitution. The fact that India itself is the home of 19% of world's children shows the importance this article holds within it and the impact this RTE Act has brought. It has been seen from a report that finishing the primary and secondary education of the girl child by 2030 will solely increase the Gross Domestic Product of many developing countries including India by 10% over next decade.³ But with the outburst of the covid-19 cases in the country, all these developments faced a major downfall. The order of the Centre to shut down physical classes left the school authorities with only option of conducting online classes which further proved to be a backdrop for the education of the marginalized communities particularly the girls from rural areas. In India the accessibility of mobile phones or digital platforms are very much gender biased. The poorest girls and those living in rural areas of India have much less access to technology than boys where 69% of girls and 79% of boys use mobile internet.⁴ One possible reason to this could be that due to the pandemic a major number of rural population faced job loss and unemployment and thus could afford the education of only 1 or 2 children where the boy child of the family is getting preferred. Those girls of rural areas who managed to get enrolled in Government schools because of free accessibility to education yet again found themselves behind the 4 walls of their houses with no access to education because their families are not willing or capable of providing them mobile phones or internet access and even if they do then some rural areas have very poor or low internet connectivity. Their potential opportunity of a better tomorrow by the means of

³ *Keeping girls in school seen worth billions to developing nations like India, could boost GDP by 10% over next decade: Report*, Hindustan Times, Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/more-lifestyle/keeping-girls-in-school-seen-worth-billions-to-developing-nations-could-boost-gdp-by-10/story-0f3rnSedKAokWNcOw0mjoJ.html>, (Accessed on 31st October, 2021)

⁴ *Assessment of issues faced by adolescent girls and boys during COVID-19 and the lockdown: Centre for Catalyzing Change*, Available at: [https://www.c3india.org/uploads/news/Youth_survey_\(low_Res\).pdf](https://www.c3india.org/uploads/news/Youth_survey_(low_Res).pdf), (Accessed on 31st October, 2021)

education pulled down compelling them to do the domestic chores and responsibilities and even early marriages.

Besides the closure of schools and inaccessibility of online medium, the corona virus infection and the deaths caused due to it became another reason impacting girl's education. If any member of a rural family got infected by the virus then the expenses of his treatment are now balanced by the expenses of the education of the girl child of the family. Other than this, if any loss of livelihood due to COVID-19 mainly the death of the male member of the family has occurred then the girl child are more likely to leave their schooling mid-way and start earning for the family like household helpers or in the fields. The probable reason behind this is that still in the rural India the gender based disparities are very much in practice. The boy child of the family is seen as an asset to the family because he will earn for the family in the future and thus providing him with higher access to education is always preferred whereas, the girl child is seen to be as someone belonging from someone else's house "*Paraye Ghar Ki*" right from her birth and thus the family consider that marrying her as early as possible will free them from the liability of raising a girl child and the marriage will ensure safety to her future and thus till the time she is in the family she should earn for the family because education would bring no good to her. This pandemic became a major reason behind acceleration in this practice. The Child Line India has reported a 17% increase in distress calls related to early marriage of girls in June and July 2020 as compared to 2019.⁵

All these reasons due to the pandemic have proved to violate the fundamental right of right to education of many rural girl child and the core basis of adding the Article 21-A in the Indian constitution through 86th amendment Act on December 12, 2002⁶ faced a major setback because a large number of girl child particularly from rural areas have dropped out from schools and have no or minimum access to mobile phones and internet, majorly from secondary level. The foremost reason behind giving any right the status of fundamental right is majorly because it could not be denied and whenever it is denied one could believe that immediate measures would be taken against it by the judiciary and the Government of India restoring the right as early as possible. But in this case when a major number of girl child of rural India are being denied of

⁵ Shivani Sonawane, *The gendered impact of COVID-19 on school education: Opinions*, Available at: <https://www.cbgaindia.org/blog/gendered-impact-covid-19-school-education>, (Accessed on 31st October, 2021)

⁶ The Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment), 2002, Available at: <https://www.india.gov.in/my-government/constitution-india/amendments/constitution-india-eighty-sixth-amendment-act-2002>, (Accessed on: 31st October, 2021)

this fundamental right no such steps or measures are taken.

CONCLUSION

In order to combat this crisis, there are some possible measures that could be taken by the Government of India. First, to make sure that this marginalized population is getting access to the e-learning after the closure of schools by providing them mobile phones and a stable internet connectivity. Secondly, those coming from poor family should get free access to these or printed textbooks and study materials. Thirdly, as stated above only the primary education is included in the Article 21-A of the Constitution and thus the children belonging from age 6-14 years only would receive free education. The main concern is that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in dropping out of a large number of girl children from secondary level in rural areas as a result of economic burden of the parents. Measures should be taken to decrease the expenses of their education by waving off the admission charges or examination fees. Incorporating the secondary level of education along with primary level in the Article 21-A of the constitution would be another major step in this regard. Fourthly, job opportunities and employment to be given to at least one elder member of the family who's the only bread-earner has died because of the corona virus infection or has lost his job during the pandemic. This would majorly help the girl child of the family as now they wouldn't be compelled to work or get married by quitting their education. Fifthly, the schools should be re-opened but with gender responsive policies. During this pandemic when physical classes couldn't be started full- fledgedly, the measure of starting the classes with minimum or limited strength with mainly those sections of students who couldn't access online medium of education particularly the girl child of rural India so that they are not deprived of their right of right to education.

The girl children have mere or no knowledge about their fundamental right and even before that they are getting deprived of it. In this situation how could they even claim it? This is where the Government of India becomes responsible to take aforementioned or other required steps and measures in this regard to provide the fundamental right of right to education to every such girl child who are being deprived of it.