

# Post Covid Girl Child Drop Out Pattern: A Case Study of West Bengal

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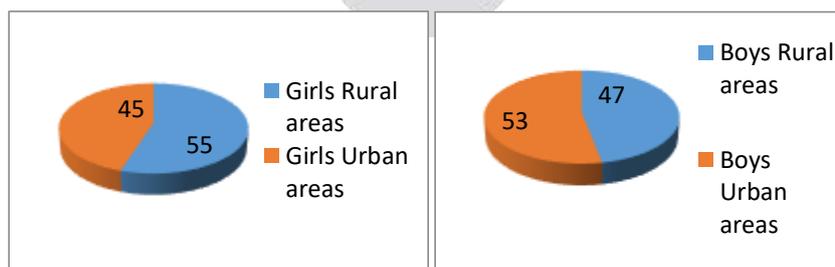
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**Abstract:** This article is about the drop out of the girl child of West Bengal after COVID. Half of Bengal's girls aged 15 to 24 have stopped attending schools and are at home without vocational training. A survey by the Union Government reveals that these girls are working in households rather than completing their education or taking skill-training courses to earn a living. When the figure of such girls in Bengal is 49.9 per cent, it is 43.8 per cent in the country. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation decided to conduct a National Sample Survey from January to December 2020 but the deadline was extended to December 2021 because of the Covid pandemic. The number of girls sitting at home is much higher in rural areas than in urban pockets.

**Keywords:** Girl child, Drop out, West Bengal, Rural areas

## Introduction:

Many girls and boys were forced to leave school and work as migrants because of the Covid pandemic, according to educationists. Several of them believe that the one-time grant for girls turned 18 under the State Government's Kanyashree scheme may also have contributed to the situation and early and underage marriages. School dropout rate among girls highest is in Bengal. The number of girls getting married before they turn 18 is the highest in West Bengal, according to a survey conducted 2023. Out of 100 such girls, 45 of them get married before they are 21 years old. The Kanyashree scheme offers a one-time grant of Rs 25,000 to girls who have turned 25 and come from families earning up to Rs 1,20,000 a year. When a girl has lost both parents or is physically disabled (40 per cent disability) or an inmate of a juvenile justice home, the family bar does not apply.



Source: Secondary data. All values are in percentages

During the pandemic, many girls and boys stopped pursuing their education as many families could not afford smart phones for online classes. Many families decided to get their daughters married with the help of the Government's one-time grant. Due to the parents' inability to continue their daughters' studies, many underage marriages were reported to the district administration. According to State Education Department records, the number of Class X board examinees in 2023 decreased by 2 lakh due to the pandemic. There were examples of underage

girls fleeing from family captivity to avoid their marriage and reporting to the local police or administration. “We will study the report thoroughly to ascertain the exact reasons behind the girls sitting at home and are engaged in household works without availing Government’s schemes for vocational training programmes,” said an official of the State Government’s Women and Child Welfare Department.<sup>1</sup>

### **Study area, research methodology and source of data:**

My area of study is the entire district of West Bengal, the eastern state of India. My entire study is based on many sources. Secondary data obtained from many libraries and websites as well as online published articles and Newspapers. Some statistical tools, techniques and diagrams are used to describe the collected data and tables and photographs are also found in this work as well.

### **Problems & findings:**

Schools in West Bengal reopened for offline classes in February but many students haven’t returned .A girl, who does not have access to internet facilities and gadgets, uses a microscope as she attends an open-air class outside a house with its walls converted into black boards following the closure of their schools due to the corona virus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, at Joba Attpara village in Paschim Bardhaman district in West Bengal, on September 13, 2021. Swarupa Mondal Gomes, Headmistress of Kolkata’s Lee Memorial Girls’ High School, found that several of the students hadn’t joined back when schools in West Bengal reopened for offline classes around the middle of February this year after a pandemic-forced closure of nearly two years, “Even one child lost and left untraced is a guilt upon us. The thought of what might have happened to them, their safety and security — it worries us. These children come from the least privileged backgrounds of society, and them dropping out points to our responsibility towards society as educators,” said Dr. Mondal Gomes, whose concern is representative of that faced by Government-aided schools across Kolkata and West Bengal. While for students of private schools, the mode of education merely shifted from the offline to online mode once lockdowns began to be enforced due to COVID-19, the students of Government-run schools, with hardly any access to smart phones or networks, had no such luxury. For them, the prolonged closure meant a prolonged break from learning, leading to many dropping out. Lee Memorial Girls’ High School alone has lost at least 25 students. “Due to the confinement at home, these children lost over 20 months of school days and learning atmosphere. Since they come mainly from not-so-financially-sound backgrounds, online learning was not very effective as many students were unable to attend classes due to lack of any digital device at their disposal,” Dr. Mondal Gomes said. “They lost track of studies and some of them were completely lost from our reach and still are. We were unable to communicate with them. Their parents had lost their livelihood and were financially distressed. Education, for them, turned into a luxury beyond their reach.

In some cases, their parents separated, each choosing their own way and refusing to take responsibility of the child. We heard about a few being left at the care of grandparents or some relative. A few of them became child labourers. Two of them were married off,” she added. “In fact, once offline classes resumed, very few children were back to school at first. It required a lot of phone calls to parents, convincing them that their children would be safe in school. The children too, it was observed, had become very reluctant to come back to school and stay confined for so many hours at a stretch. They had lost their attention span. Concentration was very low,” she explained. “Many children had migrated back to villages as their families found it very difficult to sustain themselves in the city. Transfer certificates were not collected. Their parents didn’t want to pick up the phones,” Dr. Mondal Gomes said. “Today, the teachers are working hard to keep the children engaged. They have lost the habit of writing at a stretch. Some appear withdrawn. Learning gap has widened. It’s a difficult path ahead for us. However, the most difficult task is to trace the lost children back and bring them to the world of education and learning,” she said.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pranab Mondal; *The new Indian express*, Sunday, April, 02, 2023

<sup>2</sup> Biswanath Ghosh; Kolkata ‘Still tracing lost children to bring them back to the world of learning’ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/still-tracing-lost-children-to-bring-them-back-to-the-world-of-learning/article65347931.ece>; April 23, 2022 05:06 pm



Express Photo by Ganesh Shirsekar

### **Covid-19 widens learning gap in West Bengal: ASER**

The basic reading and numerical abilities of school children in West Bengal have substantially reduced as Covid-19 brought classroom learning to a halt for a prolonged period, according to a survey carried out among 11,189 children across 17 districts of the state. The survey, carried out by the Pratham Education Foundation and West Bengal-based Liver Foundation in December 2021, found that only 27.7 per cent of children in class 3 could read class 2 level text, as against 36.6 per cent in 2018 and 32.9 per cent in 2014. About 48 per cent of students in class 5 can read class 2 level text, down from 50.5 per cent in 2018, 50.2 per cent in 2016 and 51.8 per cent in 2014. The findings once again underlined the role of the Covid-induced disruptions in causing erosion of steady gains in learning levels made over the last decade. Speaking at the virtual launch of the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, West Bengal) on Wednesday, Nobel laureate economist Professor Abhijit Banerjee said that the findings of the report should serve as a reminder that as schools reopen, teaching should be focused primarily on the existing learning abilities of children rather than grade-level curriculum. “When schools reopen, the focus should not be on grade-level teaching only. Children will make quick progress if they are made to start from where they are in terms of foundational learning,” Banerjee said.

#### **Need to check widening gap:**

The findings of the Pratham Foundation-led field surveys in these states (Karnataka, Chhattisgarh and now West Bengal) have established the need for urgent interventions to address the widening learning gaps among children. As schools reopen, focus should be on helping children who have fallen behind to catch up to minimise the risk of dropouts. Pratham Education Foundation CEO Rukmini Banerji shared the highlights of the report. “Before moving into teaching-learning activities at grade level, it is essential that children are given time and opportunity to develop appropriate physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, pre-math and language skills,” she said while the survey has captured a jump in the enrolment of children in Government schools in Bengal from 88.1 per cent in 2018 to 91.5 per cent in 2021, the real measure will be the number of enrolled students who return to schools after they reopen for in-person classes.

In a report released in January by ASER, based on a survey carried out in October-November 2021 found that the percentage of children in class 2 who can at least read words has dropped from 66.2 per cent in 2018 to 53 per cent in 2021. Alarming, it has gone below 2014 levels of 54.8 per cent. The survey also found a decline in arithmetic levels with the percentage of children in class 1 who can at least recognise single-digit numbers reducing from 77.8 per cent in 2018 to 68.5 per cent in 2021, going far below the 2014 levels of 74 per cent. “A drop in arithmetic ability is also visible among older children. For example, the proportion of children in class 3 who can do subtraction fell by 8.2 percentage points from 35.5 per cent in 2018 to 27.3 per cent in 2021 between 2018 and 2021,” the report said. Among children of class 5, 25.9 per cent were found capable of doing simple division, as against 29.2 per cent in 2018. Previously, the ASER report of Karnataka, based on a survey in March, had painted a similar picture of widening learning gaps in the state too. Dr Abhijit Chowdhury of the Liver Foundation, which works closely with the West Bengal Government in many areas, said that the findings of the survey was a clear reflection that digital education cannot ensure the holistic development of a child<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>.<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/covid-widens-learning-gap-west-bengal-aser-7763873/> February 10, 2022 03:56IST

## **Bengal school drop out rise**

According to the information from the board, 2, 00,000 candidates are not appearing in the secondary examination even after registering their names. The board claims this has happened due to the effect of the pandemic. According to other sources, the number of candidates has fallen due to drop-outs. WBBSE President Ramanuja Gangopadhyay said: "This has happened due to the pandemic. Many people don't take the exam voluntarily because they are not prepared. Many could not pass the test. Due to Covid, there have been several school dismissals. Last year, 10, 98,775 students took part in the secondary examination in West Bengal. According to information from the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education (WBBSE) there is a fall of more than 4, 00,000 students in one year. Among the examinees, the number of boys is very less than girls. In this year's secondary examination, the number of boys is 2, 90,172 and the number of girls is 3, 58,000. However, counter questions to this claim by the Board president have been raised. Many people say during the pandemic, online education was not conducted properly.



Image courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

In this context, the All Bengal Teachers Association (ABTA) General Secretary Sukumar Pyne told *People's Reporter*: "There is a shortage of teachers in many schools in the state where the student-teacher ratio is supposed to be 30:1. In many places, it is not. There are such schools in the city of Kolkata where the number of students is 280 and the number of teachers is 54. Again, the number of teachers is less in proportion to the number of students in Jangalmahal. Many have taken transfers in exchange for money through the Utsashree portal." Pyne also said that "in the past, several students have dropped out of school. Many have dropped out due to poverty also, lack of infrastructure in Government schools. As a result, common people are turning toward the private education system. There are about two lakh teacher vacancies in the state but they are not being filled."

It is to be noted that in response to a question regarding school dropouts in Parliament Minister of State for Education Subhash Sarkar said the number of primary school dropouts was high in five states of the country -- Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh. The total number of primary school dropouts in these five states is 9, 30,531. Out of these students, 5, 02,771 are boys and 4, 27,728 are girls. According to the statistics presented by the Union Minister, the number of school dropouts in class 10 is 3, 22,418. So, the number of boys is 1, 94,000 and the number of girls is 1, 28,000. The top five states in this regard are Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa, Gujarat, and Assam. A Central Government Project Approval Board (PAB) statistic revealed that the dropout rate in class 10 in West Bengal is over 15% which is higher than the national average (14.6%). The dropout rate has increased significantly in 10 districts.<sup>4</sup>



Image courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

<sup>4</sup>.<https://www.newslick.in/Bengal-School-Dropouts-Rise-Number-Candidates-Secondary-Exam-Falls-4-Lakh-Due-Pandemic> 11 Feb 2023

### **Blow to education, childhood**

While some reports indicated that children were at greater risk in the subsequent third wave of the pandemic, activists and civil society groups in West Bengal contended that the real impact of the pandemic on children lay in their complete disengagement with education. “Schools here are shut since April 2020, barring between February and April 2021, when some classes were held for grades 9-12. This has severely affected children’s education especially those from poor, marginalized backgrounds, whose parents are not educated, who don’t have the means to send them for private tuitions,” said Sourav Roy, Secretary, Democratic Students Organization, which is among several groups in the state demanding reopening of schools.

Roy and his colleagues said they had noticed a sharp spike in instances of children accompanying their parents for work since the first wave, and such children were unlikely to return to school even when schools reopened. “The threat facing girls is greater, because families often feel that at least their daughter will be able to eat and live well after marriage. Plus, there would be one less mouth to feed at home,” said Roy. Their concerns were corroborated in reports in the Bengali media, which stated that even beneficiaries of Kanyashree, the state government’s scholarship scheme for girl children in school, were working alongside their parents, or had been married off in the past year and a half.

### **Disruption in survey methodology**

While surveys to identify dropouts as mandated in the Right to Education rules are generally conducted in August-September every year, no survey was conducted in West Bengal in 2020, whereas the process has been kick started in some areas this year. But several people associated with the survey in Asansol, West Bengal’s second largest city, said the usual survey methodology was severely disrupted by the pandemic and related restrictions. This is because normally, school teachers made a note of children who remained absent from school long periods, which was collated by the school management and passed on to para teachers. The latter then undertook home visits, often in close collaboration with Integrated Child Development Scheme personnel and other community workers to assess if children had dropped out from school and the reasons for the same. But the suspension of physical classes in state since April 2020 meant that teachers were unaware about instances of discontinuation in education. “I have not met students physically once for over a year and a half, and only about 10-15 percent attend online classes. So even I am in the dark about whether students are keeping up with studies,” said a Government school teacher, requesting anonymity.

Para teachers said this complicated and added to their work burden as they had to visit nearly all homes likely to have cases of dropout, instead of visiting homes of children who did not attend school for long periods. They also had to contend with lack of clear guidelines and communication from the administration during the ongoing survey, which introduced fresh challenges, they said. “Every year before the survey, the local School Inspector briefs us about protocols, including the base date from which we are supposed to compute the age of children. But this year, no such meeting was organized, neither was there a mention of the base date in the official order, which created much confusion,” said Narendra Moitra, para teacher in the Gourandi Ramkrishna Soibolini Institution in Asansol. Moitra and other para teachers said it took them weeks to clarify the base date with the School Inspector’s office, which was communicated to them verbally, leaving open the scope for discrepancy. Para teachers were also asked to collect information on all children aged 0-14 years and 14-18 years in their area in addition to dropouts during the ongoing survey, but were not provided with a list of such children. “It took us nearly a month to collect data from different sources including administrative offices on households with children aged 0-14 years in their area, which we had to visit. This not only delayed the survey process but required us to work in closer collaboration with ICDS workers and booth level officers, who have a deep understanding of and familiarity with the local community” said Baby Parween, para teacher in the Rabbania Girls High School in Asansol.

### **Hazards of home visit, gaps in data**

Kana Mukherjee, a retired ICDS worker who undertook home visits for survey work with para teachers, noted that in many cases, families did not let her and her colleagues enter their homes, forget providing information about whether their children had dropped out of school. “Most families were reluctant to engage with us, possibly because they were scared of infection. Many did not open the door, and many others accused us of being child-lifters. Many also asked to see ID cards saying we were surveyors – which we do not have... We had to persuade them a lot, and explain our position and the purpose of the survey in detail to earn their trust. Even then, in many cases, we failed to collect the required information,” said Mukherjee.

Para teachers like Moitra and Parween who undertook home visits echoed Mukherjee’s concerns. They said the proportion of people who did not provide information was far larger than pre-pandemic years, which meant the data

generated during the survey was incomplete. Even then, Mukherjee and her colleagues were able to identify four dropouts in the assigned area despite the constraints and challenges. All four were girls, in variation with dropout trends in the state from previous years that show the rate is nearly same for boys and girls but these figures were provisional, and one girl's name was subsequently struck off from the list, although her younger sister's name featured in it.

In fact, the case of the sisters named Poonam Harijan and Suman Harijan shows that while the pandemic was contributing to school dropout and child labour, all instances were unlikely to be recorded in official databases. Both sisters were students in class 9 at the National Institute of Open Schooling in Asansol before schools were closed on account of the pandemic. They lived with and were supported by their mother Radha Harijan, who worked in several households through the day to earn Rs. 5000; her husband abandoned the family when the girls were still little. Radha Harijan was keen that the girls continue their studies "as that is the only way to progress," whereas the school they were enrolled in offered free education, including textbooks. "But the school is closed since April last year, and we have been pushed deeper into poverty as I lost work in some households," said Radha Harijan, who shares a one room tenement in a barrack with her two daughters. "We don't have money to pay fees for private schools, or to buy mobile phones for online classes. In fact, since our mother's earnings took a hit after the pandemic, we had to take up work alongside her to support household expenses," said Suman Harijan. Although both the Harijan sisters were completely detached from formal education for a long period, and entered the ranks of child labour in the early months of the pandemic, only Suman's name featured in the revised provisional list of dropouts. This was because although both sisters were minors when schools closed and they began working in households, Poonam attained 18 years of age as on the base date (September 2020), putting her outside the scope of the survey.

### **Impact on interventions**

Policy experts said the lack of comprehensive, reliable data on school dropouts was severely affecting Government efforts to design interventions addressing emerging concerns. "Scarcity of adequate data, especially during the pandemic, has been a big challenge in multiple ways. Large scale studies on the impact of COVID on the status of education of children are yet to be conducted; hence currently we do not have sufficient data to gauge the impact of pandemic on various child protection issues including child labour, child marriage and child trafficking. But grassroots level data/information and some anecdotal evidences reflect on the increased vulnerability of children," said Priti Mahara, Director, Policy, Research and Advocacy at CRY – Child Rights and You. "Having an easily accessible real-time and comprehensive database on various child development indicators would have certainly enabled us to measure the exact scale of the disruptions caused by the pandemic and quantify losses incurred, and thereby helping evidence-based planning and interventions to address and perhaps reverse some of the negative impacts of the pandemic on children," she added<sup>5</sup>.

### **Increase in school dropout rates for girl child is alarming, states UNICEF India:**

Schools in India have almost completely reopened. This reopening of schools in India takes place after a massive decrease in the number of cases due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, as per a UNICEF India Report, the rate of dropouts, especially the girl child can pave way for a very alarming situation for India.

Schools in India have almost completely reopened. This reopening of schools in India takes place after a massive decrease in the number of cases due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, due to schools closing or shifting to online mode of education for the past two years, a UNICEF India report suggests that the dropout rate of the girl child has increased. These dropout rates of girl students have increased ever since the COVID-19 pandemic hit India. Over the past 2 years, schools have reopened, closed and then reopened again due to the number of cases in the country. Due to this turbulence education of school children in India from all classes took a toll. Education of school children in India Taliban's ban on girls' education to cause irreparable damage if not reversed, says UN Special Envoy Deborah Lyons. "With the current situation, we might be risking a lost generation of children who may never return to school. The impact on girls is disproportionately worse," stated UNICEF India Representative, Yasumasa Kimura.

As per the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2020-21, the annual dropout rate for secondary level education in India stands at 14.6%. In 2021, UNICEF India provided technical support to the government and its partners to help 15.5 million children out of which 50.5% are girls, in 17 states to continue

<sup>5</sup>. Aritra Bhattacharya; the writer is a Kolkata based freelance contributor COVID Has Made Many Kids In West Bengal Dropouts, But There's No Official Data On; Aug 25, 2021, 12:31 IST.

learning from home. Multiple State Governments have rolled out scholarship funds, schemes and more to encourage to the girl child to go back to school and sponsor their education to combat the increase in dropout rates of the girl child due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

### **Drive in West Bengal to bring pandemic dropouts back to class**



Order by the directorate of school education asks district education officers to identify students who have not been attending schools a number of students have dropped out as the widespread pandemic-induced economic distress forced them to take jobs, at times outside the state, for a few hundred rupees, an official in the Education Department said. The State Education Department has initiated steps to bring back to class students who have had to drop out of the schools due to financial constraints during the Covid pandemic. An order issued by the Directorate of the School Education on July 13 says the district education officers will identify the students who have not been attending schools, with help from anganwadi workers, Asha (accredited social health activist) workers, health workers and other Government officials. The order says: "Children who have been absent from his or her school for 30 consecutive working days....That all children above the age of 14 years who do not fall under the purview of RTE (Right to Education) Act but have had to drop out of school due to financial constraint... shall be treated as an out of school child".

*The Telegraph* had reported in December that the headmaster and some teachers of a school at Hingalganj in North 24-Parganas district were visiting the homes of dropout children to try and bring them back to school. A number of students have dropped out as the widespread pandemic-induced economic distress forced them to take jobs, at times outside the state, for a few hundred rupees, an official in the education department said. Supriya Panja, headmaster of The Park Institution in Shyambazar, said he had sent para teachers on Wednesday to trace the students who had dropped out. "The dropout level is maximum at the level of Class IX and X. Financial hardships faced by families are forcing students to take up odd jobs," the headmaster said. This newspaper had reported on June 30 that the department had asked the heads of Government-run and aided schools to take steps to improve attendance, which was not satisfactory on the day the schools reopened after a prolonged summer vacation in June. The head of an institution, while explaining the factors behind the slide in attendance, said many underprivileged families had sent sons or daughters to work during the Covid pandemic. An official of the education department said the dropout was being reported from private schools as well, as the children of many guardians who could not afford fees have been forced to discontinue studies. "A few of them have got their children enrolled at Government aided schools," he said.

The July 13 order says the data of the children who need financial assistance for education can be forwarded to the district education officers. "The officers can request the schools concerned to waive fees for such children, and then provide these children with scholarships, and or provide financial aid through donors, NGOs. After exploring all possibilities to meet the financial assistance, if any further funding is required, the nodal officer may approach the Government for reimbursement," says the order. *The Telegraph* had reported on November 18 that the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2021, released by the NGO Pratham, recorded a drop of more than 8 percentage points in private school enrolment from 2018 to 2021. This drop is accompanied by a rise of 6 percentage points in Government school enrolment. The Bengal Government's order says "all categories of schools - aided, unaided and private - will try to include children who have lost both or either of the parents after April 2020", under the provision of Section 12 (1) (c) of the RTE Act. The section states private unaided schools will provide free education to children from disadvantaged and weaker sections.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>. Danita Yadav <https://www.timesnownews.com/education/increase-in-school-dropout-rates-for-girl-child-is-alarming-states-unicef-india-article-90591261> Updated Apr 1, 2022 | 04:48 PM IST.

<sup>7</sup>. Subhankar chowdhury; published 22.07.22.6.55 *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraphindia.com>.

### **Impact on dropout rates**

According to UNESCO, approximately 0.32 billion students in India have been affected by school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO 2020).<sup>8</sup> Of these, almost 84% reside in rural areas while 70% attend Government schools. As of 2015, the average dropout rate across secondary schools in India was 17.06% with higher numbers for rural areas (NUEPA 2016). Past evidence suggests that short term disruptions in schooling often lead to permanent dropouts among the poor (Reddy and Sinha 2010).<sup>9</sup> One reason for this is the loss of parents' employment for which child labour is leveraged as a substitute. The inevitable economic backlash of the lockdown is likely to reduce the earning capacity for many poor households and may increase the opportunity cost of sending children to school, especially in rural India. As a result, children may be pushed into the labour market (Bharadwaj et al. 2019).<sup>10</sup> Dropout rates are likely to be even more severe for girls who are often left out of household resource allocation decisions (Prakash et al. 2017).<sup>11</sup> Girls may also be required to undertake additional household responsibilities as parents increase their own labour hours to cope with economic distress. Similarly, these economic shocks are likely to have a greater impact on children from communities that are marginalized on the basis of their caste, tribe and religion, and already experience higher dropout rates (NUEPA 2016).<sup>12</sup> Dropping out, in turn, may lead to increases in child marriages, domestic violence, early pregnancies and a plethora of other development issues (Birchall 2018).<sup>13</sup> Without school fee waivers in the interim, dropout rates are likely to get further exacerbated as educational expenses become unaffordable for many. Although some states Governments such as those of Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Jharkhand tried to initiate waivers for tuition and other school expenses during the lockdown period, private schools were unwilling to implement these measures.

### **Impact on inequality and disparity**

A key step taken by some educational institutions to ensure continuation of curriculum has been to shift lectures online, requiring both students and teachers to use personal home computers and reliable internet. If school and university examinations happen as scheduled, without compensatory classes, it is likely to disadvantage students who cannot access these computer and network resources. However, postponement of examinations can cause a delay for students in entering the job market. The discourse on education during the lockdown period has been essentially focused on online or televised learning. In fact, the only mention of education in the Government of India's USD 260 billion fiscal stimulus package is in the context of online and digital learning platforms. A number of Indian states including Mizoram, West Bengal and Kashmir have implemented daily televised lectures as the Human Resource Development (education) Ministry ties up with television service providers to allocate specific channels for this purpose. However, these measures preclude the rural and urban poor with limited or no access to electricity and network resources. Moreover, online classes are being facilitated largely for students who attend urban private

<sup>8</sup>. UNESCO. (2020). School closures caused by Coronavirus (Covid-19). Retrieved May 8, 2020, from <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.

<sup>9</sup>. Reddy, A. N., & Sinha, S. (2010). School dropouts or Pushouts? Overcoming barriers for the right to education. Retrieved from <http://www.create-rpc.org>

<sup>10</sup>. Bharadwaj, P., Lakdawala, L. K., & Li, N. (2019). Perverse consequences of well intentioned regulation: Evidence from India's child labor ban. *Journal of the European Economic Association.*, vol 18, pp,1158–1195. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvz059>.

<sup>11</sup>. Prakash, R., Beattie, T., Javalkar, P., Bhattacharjee, P., Ramanaik, S., Thalinja, R., Murthy, S., Davey, C., Blanchard, J., Watts, C., Collumbien, M., Moses, S., Heise, L., & Isac, S. (2017). Correlates of school dropout and absenteeism among adolescent girls from marginalized community in North Karnataka, South India. *Journal of Adolescence*, vol 61, pp,64–76. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2017.09.007>.

<sup>12</sup>. NUEPA. (2016). School education in India: Flash Statistics. New Delhi. <http://www.dise.in/Downloads/Publications/Documents/U-DISE-SchoolEducationInIndia-2015-16.pdf>

<sup>13</sup>. Birchall, Jenny. (2018). "Early Marriage, Pregnancy and Girl Child School Dropout | Resource Centre." <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/early-marriage-pregnancy-and-girl-child-school-dropout>.

schools, and already outperform government school students on most indicators of learning (Annual Status of Education Report 2018).<sup>14</sup> The higher use of online learning platforms by private schools will increase this disparity.

### **Impact on nutrition and food security**

A vast majority of the relief and rehabilitation packages announced in the months following the nationwide lockdown in India have focused on economic rehabilitation. However, the education sector has remained absent from this effort, including in India's Central Government's 250 billion dollar stimulus package. The implications of lockdown-induced school and rural child-care centre closures on education and health outcomes for the urban and rural poor programmes especially focus on food and nutritional security of children who depend on school feeding and supplementary nutrition programs. The impacts are likely to be much more severe for girls as well as for children from already disadvantaged ethnic and caste groups.

One of the most important consequences of the lockdown and subsequent school closures has been the temporary suspension of mid-day meals and supplementary nutrition programs, which has widespread and important implications for the nutrition and food security of children across the nation. The Mid-day Meal (MDM) program in India is the largest school feeding program in the world (World Food Programme 2013),<sup>15</sup> catering to about 144 million children, with approximately 80% coverage across primary school students (Chowdhury 2019).<sup>16</sup> This flagship program aims to provide cooked meals to all Government primary school children, meeting a stipulated minimum calorie and protein requirement. Yet, nearly half of all Indian children are undernourished, both in terms of weight-for-age as well as height-for-age, with girls disproportionately affected (IIPS and ICF 2017).<sup>17</sup> Despite regional disparities in outreach and food quality, MDMs have been found to significantly improve enrolment, attendance, retention, learning outcomes, gender and social equity and most importantly nutrition (Afridi 2011; Sarma et al. 1995; Singh et al. 2014; Aurino et al. 2019).<sup>18</sup> The MDM program, besides eliminating classroom hunger, also addresses health issues such as micronutrient deficiencies and mass deforming. In case of economically disadvantaged families, MDM's school meals act more as a substitute rather than a complementary meal, protecting against endemic hunger for the entire family. The months of lockdown in India have already caused supply chain disruptions in the agriculture sector, leading to food shortages (Reardon et al. 2020).<sup>19</sup> Interruption in school feeding programs is thus likely to exacerbate food insecurity, particularly for those who are already under-nourished, especially girls, who like older women, eat last and eat less at home, compared to boys and men. Similarly, disruption in the supplementary nutrition program delivered under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme is likely to affect over 100 million pregnant and lactating mothers, and children under the age of 6, who rely on Anganwadi centres (rural child care centres) for both cooked meals and take home rations to meet basic nutritional needs. Lack of access to school feeding and supplementary nutrition programs is likely to further endanger already precarious food security for urban and rural poor, which may have long term health and economic impacts.

<sup>14</sup>. Annual Status of Education Report. (2018). ASER 2018 - ASER Centre. Retrieved May 8, 2020, from <http://www.asercentre.org/Keywords/p/337.html>.

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<sup>17</sup>. International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. (2017). *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4)*, 2015–16: India. Mumbai: IIPS. <http://rchiips.org/NFHS/NFHS-4Reports/India.pdf/>

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<sup>19</sup>. Reardon, T., Mishra, A., Nuthalapati, C. S. R., Bellamare, M. F., & Zilberman, D. (2020). COVID-19's disruption of India's transformed food supply chains. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 55(18). Retrieved from <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/18/commentary/covid-19s-disruption-indias-transformed-food.html>.

There is also the issue of mental stress and trauma that young children may be facing, both as a result of reduced mobility due to the lockdown and the economic stress being faced by families- an issue that has remained largely absent from the current discourse. In such a context, collaborative effort between the public sector, the private sector, and the civil society would be critical for educational and social rehabilitation of affected children. As health and economy occupies the centre stage, educational and nutritional considerations must not be forgotten so as to not undo the hard-earned gains in these sectors over the past few decades.<sup>20</sup> New Delhi: Education ministry data shows 35 lakh children are currently out of school, which includes those who dropped out during the pandemic. Satish Yadav, a security guard at a mall in Faridabad, lost his job during the lockdown imposed amid the second Covid wave. The 45-year-old, a father of two, then started selling fruits on a pushcart to support his family. The new job ensured a steady income but it was not enough to continue both his children studies. And, so, Yadav's older child — the daughter — had to drop out of school. He said "I will only be able to teach my son with the limited means that I have and I want to focus on doing just that right now," Yadav said. His son studies in Class 5 and his daughter was a student of Class 9. As a fruit-seller, he makes less than Rs 10,000 a month, while as a guard he would earn nearly double. Suman Verma is a single mother of a daughter who is about to turn 18 next year. Verma, a resident of Delhi's Nangloi area, does not want to send her daughter to school after she too lost a big chunk of her income during the lockdown. Verma works as a house help and the lockdown cost her job in four of the houses she worked. Verma now works at just one house as help and babysitter. While she would earlier earn Rs 15,000 a month, she now makes only Rs 5,000 — which she said was enough only to feed herself and her daughter. "I cannot send my daughter to school. She will turn 18 next year, I will get her married. I have saved some money for her marriage," she said. Yadav and Verma are just two examples of how the pandemic — and the ensuing lockdowns — affected education in India, especially for children from lower and middle-income families.

Another survey report 'Emergency Report on School Education', led by economist Jean Dreze, also states that 37 per cent of children in rural areas dropped out of school because of the pandemic. The survey was conducted in 15 states — Assam, Bihar, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. While the ministry data does not have separate figures on the number of girls who have dropped out, those shared by Bangalore based NGO Aahwahan Foundation — which works with schools catering to lower-income families across the country — reflect what *The Print* found anecdotally. The dropout trend was mostly among lower-middle-class families, migrant labourers and vendors among the schools that Aahwahan supports in Bangalore, 252 out of 1,702 children dropped out during Covid. Of this, 179 were girls. The situation is similar in Tamil Nadu and Kerala where 809 out of a combined total of 3,610 students dropped out, of which 565 were girls. In Odisha and West Bengal, similarly, 836 out of 3,864 students in Aahwahan-supported schools dropped out during Covid and 543 out of them were girls<sup>21</sup>

### **'Parents are planning to get them married'**

Prasant Barik, who looks after schools operating under Aahwahan Foundation in West Bengal, Odisha and Assam said, "People were pulling their kids out of school also, but in the past few months the trend has increased quite a lot." "In the schools we work with, we have noticed many girls dropping out after Class 9 and 10. Some of them have also called us up later and told us that their parents are planning to get them married and asked us for help to stop it," he added. These parents are not just vendors and daily wage labourers, but also those who had private jobs and have lost their jobs due to Covid. Mansi Jena, an Aahwahan volunteer working in Mumbai, claimed that in schools in Thane she found cases where students were driven to the brink of suicide because of their family's financial issues.

"A lot of parents lost their jobs during Covid. Vegetable shop vendors, house helps and daily wages labourers were not able to earn any money at all during the lockdown. They tell us that they will teach their sons and not their daughters. We face a lot of difficulties convincing the parents. Students went into depression and tried to commit suicide and we had to give them counselling," Jena said. She added that parents asked them for help to find jobs for their children at their NGO, rather than sending them to school. Another Aahwahan volunteer, Nivedita R.S., who works in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, too said that she has encountered cases where parents want to get their young daughters married because they cannot afford to teach them anymore. And like Yadav and Verma, other parents who spoke to *The Print*, but on condition of anonymity, said that owing to reduced income, they would prefer their children work and contribute to the family earnings, rather than send them to school. Many with young daughters added that they were keen to get them married and so preferred to have them pick up household skills rather than

<sup>20</sup>. Alvi Muzna & Gupta Manavi. *Food Security*; volume 12, pp,793–796 (2020) ;"Learning in times of lockdown: how Covid-19 is affecting education and food security in India Opinion Piece" <http://link.springer.com> Published: 07 July 2020.

<sup>21</sup>. Sharma Krithika; "My daughter's studies can wait': Covid pushes girl child out of school as family incomes drop";*The Print*; <http://theprint.in> 22 October, 2021 10:00 am IST

study. A parent from Kasargod told The Print on condition of anonymity, “My daughter has already finished Class 10 and I cannot afford to teach her any further. I am planning to get her married as soon as she turns 18.”

‘A very serious problem’ Professor R. Govinda, distinguished professor at the Council for Social Development and former vice-chancellor of National University of Educational Planning, said the problem of children dropping out from schools is very serious and not enough attention was being paid to it. There are two categories of children who have dropped out during the pandemic – poor that became poorer and had to leave studies. In this case, the girl child has to bear the brunt of financial burden. Second category is the children from lower middle-class families who were admitted in budget private schools.

### **Recommendation and Conclusions**

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Rules, 2010 mandate that the local administration must maintain a record of all children aged 0-14 years, including information on the school and class they are enrolled in, if they have dropped out of school and the reasons for the same. Rules also mandate that the record must be updated annually through a door-to-door household survey, and out of school children must be provided special training/ measures to address their requirements. Evidently, the surveys are designed to identify cases of dropouts or out of school children, which increase as children proceed from primary to middle to high school, data from previous years show. But while several news reports and research studies indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a spike in dropout rates and contributed to child labour and child marriage, especially among girls, there is little or no official data on dropouts. The Unified District Information System for Education Plus database under the Ministry of Education was last updated in 2019-20, before the pandemic arrived in India. The gap in official data is largely because most states – education is a state subject – did not initiate household surveys as mandated in the RTE rules during the pandemic fearing a spike in infection rates and heightened vulnerability for personnel conducting surveys. In such circumstances, experiences from an ongoing door-to-door survey in Asansol, West Bengal as mandated under the rules show that the pandemic has severely disrupted the usual survey methodology and introduced numerous challenges, affecting accuracy and reliability of generated data. Policy experts said the lack of comprehensive, reliable data on school dropouts was severely affecting Government efforts to plan and implement interventions addressing emerging concerns, including the heightened vulnerability of girls from had also projected that 1 crore girls are at the risk of dropping out of school because of the pandemic. The report had said that the pandemic could put girls at the risk of early marriage, trafficking and poverty.

What is the way forward? Policy makers and educators in other countries have responded in different ways to minimize the impact of the disruptions on students across all levels of education. In India economically disadvantaged students are being provided mobile data and computer subsidies to tide through the lockdown. The Global Partnership for Education has recently announced a \$250 million fund to help 67 developing countries (excluding India) cope with immediate and long-term disruptions to education as a result of the pandemic (GPE 2020).<sup>22</sup>

This fund, to be utilized with a special focus on girls and poor children, aims to encourage investments in learning resources that will reach those who will most likely be unable to resume learning when schools reopen. In India too, local solutions by several State Governments have been implemented, but there is scope for much more. Home delivered meals/dry ration to school and Angadwadi children in certain southern states (Kerala, Telangana, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh) have benefited millions of children and expecting mothers already. Other measures including data packages for students, TV broadcasted classes and regular SMS/IVR to parents for daily activities with children are currently underway.

Moving forward, the immediate need is to expand access to nutritious food for all children eligible for school feeding programs nationwide. In addition, re-directing locally produced horticultural crops to households under the MDM and ICDS umbrella can help improve nutrient content and diet diversity for children and provide temporary relief to farmers through local procurement, an idea that has proven to be successful in other contexts (Singh and Fernandes 2018).<sup>23</sup> Along with interventions in the education sector, initiatives are also needed to cushion the

<sup>22</sup>. GPE. (2020). Global Partnership for Education’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Retrieved June 26, 2020, from <https://www.globalpartnership.org/gpe-and-covid-19-pandemic?location=initial-view>.

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economic impact on poor families to discourage the use of child labour along with monitoring mechanisms set up to ensure children remain in school, whenever they re-open.<sup>24</sup>

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