Impact of COVID on Girl Education:
Insights on Current Landscape and Way Forward

Faced with a complete shutdown of the education system, loss of livelihood and not enough food on the table, vulnerable families across India are once again opting for a quick-fix solution to tide over economic pressures. Have we imagined what it means for our girls? Over the last couple of weeks as a part of a project engagement in Sattva, we had the opportunity to see this disparity in action. As schools show no signs of reopening due to the second COVID wave,13 non profits in India were interviewed based on their work at the grassroots to understand the growing gender gap in accessibility and sustainment of learning. In this article, we have attempted to synthesise some of our major findings from the engagement, validate them further with data and practitioner perspectives and share informed recommendations on the solution.

I. Major Findings
1. Deprioritisation of girl education and a surge in child marriages

A survey by Right to Education Forum in November 2020[1] found that about 54% of girls were uncertain about returning back to school post reopening. COVID-19 has resulted in widespread loss of livelihoods and parents have become reliant on their children, both boys and girls, to supplement their earnings. However, parents are heavily dependent on adolescent girls to take care of the household and younger siblings, thus holding a strong preference to educate a male child instead[2]. Another grave problem emerging in the context of COVID-19 is related to the rise of child marriages in several states. Breakthrough, an organisation working closely on gender based violence, shared findings on high child marriage within Rajasthan and West Bengal while Odisha was found to have high prevalence of abuse and discrimination against girls. Last year between April and December, Childline India received 5000 calls on reports of child marriages at national level, and a total of 2,180 child marriage cases were from Karnataka alone[3].

2. Lack of agency and challenges in accessing / using digital means of learning

In rural and underserved communities, adolescent girls lack significant agency over learning with insufficient access to nutritious food, sanitation and basic technology required to attend online classes. Ground reports and interviews with nonprofits suggest that in families that own a limited number of devices, parents often prioritise boys over girls for more screen time.

> Home environment is not always conducive to learning especially for lower socioeconomic strata girls in states like UP, MP, Jharkhand and Bihar- Shivangi Singh (Founder of Drishtikon)

For tribal populated areas like Chattisgarph, Odisha and Jharkhand, exclusion from learning through online mediums happens because of low network connectivity in remote locations and poor digital literacy. Schools, especially in rural areas, have not been able to overcome the challenges posed by remote learning, with a lack of teacher and parent capability to adapt to digital mediums due to limited/no guidance on the same.

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[1] RTE Survey 2020
[2] Oxfam Inequality Report 2020 ; How the COVID-19 crisis is affecting child labour in India
[3] Sattva Primary interviews with Education Nonprofits

3. Lack of mentorship and emotional support for girls to continue learning

Several nonprofits participating in our interviews have also emphasised that girls have suffered from a severe loss of learning and are not confident of coping with academic demands after school reopens. Even though the government started several schemes like classes on TV or online, the feedback was that the girls could not really understand what was happening in those lessons and there was no one to turn to for additional help (majority of these low income girls were first generational learners). Primarily, a loss of foundational learning like reading, writing, conceptual thinking and math came up repeatedly from nonprofits like C3 and Pratham. Beyond academic loss, practitioners have also highlighted the condition of poor emotional health for girls due to financial burden, loss of peer support, gender based violence and lack of mentorship.

> A focus on multiple layers is critical when dealing with learning loss of girls: what is she being taught, are her teachers supportive, what is her home situation, what is her community situation
> - Quest Alliance

III. Way Forward

The problem statement around education of girls has taken a multidimensional disposition and this calls for an urgent collaborative action by all key stakeholders in the ecosystem. Apart from emphasis on socio-emotional learning, foundational skills and mental well being, there is a need to strengthen frontline workers and drive campaigns on child marriages in high burden states like Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Karnataka and Northeast. Nonprofits and governments can work with mohalla classes and community level teachers who were key last mile support in establishing connections with girls. Multiple organisations have to work together at block and district levels to solve for increased financial burden, digital literacy and nutrition. In addition, strategic philanthropy would need to commit flexible funding to anchor such initiatives at scale.

Parents
- **Proactively seek support** from Civil Society Organisations and government schemes to reduce burden on girls
- **Enabling learning at home** through access to devices, prioritising online learning and building their capability

Civil Society Organisations / Child Protection Committees
- Addressing economic considerations of parents including loss of livelihoods are beyond the scope of most education focused nonprofits. **A collaborative effort is recommended between organisations** dealing with multiple relevant thematic issues.

Teachers
- **Prioritise conceptual learning and foundational skills of primary grade** and focus on grouping girls by learning level instead of age
- **Build agency and confidence of secondary grade** girls through regular well being check ins and ensure support to cope with learning doubts

Strategic Philanthropy
- **Build online pedagogy, content, resources and platforms** that can bridge learning gaps and enable digital literacy options for low income and marginalised girls
- **Drive catalytic and innovative financing** to scale mental health helpline and counselling services given the huge volume of distress and abuse with girls.

SMC/Principal/ ASHA Workers
- **Anchor a mental health sensitisation program to educate all staff members** on identifying symptoms of trauma and dealing with children well being issues.
- **Support Village Child Protection Committees and National Helpline services** like Childline India to increase tracking cases in susceptible areas.

Government
- **Create and facilitate a nexus of different civil society organizations** to build both foundational and socio-emotional learning
- **Mid-day meals need to be revived** on an urgent basis with adequate and safe logistical arrangements to deliver nutritious meals in urban slums as well as rural and tribal areas. [4]

Figure: Recommendations as per Stakeholder Roles

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[4] Sattva Primary interviews with Education Nonprofits ; Primary Interview with Shivangi Singh, Founder of Drishtikona