MISSING SCHOOL
Adolescent Girls Marginalised by Growing Divide during Lockdown

Findings of Rapid Assessment conducted by Pardada Pardadi, Rupantaran Foundation and Vaanavil, along with Praxis in May 2020
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1. INTRODUCTION
1.2 Background

There have been rapid changes happening since the government announced a lockdown across the country to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The Central and the State Governments have been making attempts at mitigating the existing scenario where several schemes are being provided to communities in order to lessen the impact on their livelihood. However, there is one section of the population - adolescent girls - who have been facing a humongous impact. The lockdown has created a growing divide on the education of adolescent girls and has disrupted their daily lives in many ways, affecting their health and wellbeing. In addition, there is the looming threat of drop-outs and adolescent girls being pushed into child labour, marriage and trafficking situations, endangering their lives.

In order to explore the impact in a deeper way, and to ensure that the voices of adolescent girls do not get lost in the lockdown din, Praxis, along with Vaanavil, Rupantaran Foundation and Pardada Pardadi Educational Society, conducted a rapid assessment via telephone with 290 adolescent girls to understand their plight. The study focused on two aspects, first, to understand the status of receipt under Public Distribution System and the central government sponsored welfare schemes and the challenges faced while accessing relief and entitlements. Second, it focused on the impact of education.

1.2 Sample

The research team interviewed 290 adolescent girls, between ages of 13 to 19, from Uttar Pradesh (215), Tamil Nadu (51) and West Bengal (24) in the second week of May 2020.
respondents were studying in Classes 7 to 12 as well as students from professional courses from various diversified communities.

2. FINDINGS - Problems Specific to Adolescent girls

Adolescent girls expressed their fear and confusion about the future. While many of the respondents were afraid that they were beginning to forget their lessons, those who were in Classes XII were worried about their exams and the future. The looming question was, ‘will we be able to continue our education’? They were worried about the papers that remained, the incomplete syllabus, the inability to study while at home because of the burden of household chores, the declining interest in studies and the fear of having to drop out. One respondent said, “I am the first generation in my house who is studying in Class VIII. School, tuition are all closed, I have a lot of problems. I do not understand what will happen.”

- Access to attend e-classes: The ongoing situation of the lockdown has impacted the education of adolescent girls – among the 290 respondents, 116 stated that they were unable to access e-classes through various online mediums as they either did not have a cell phone or were unable to recharge it due to their lack of income. 148 adolescent girls responded that they were able to access e-classes rotationally. Some respondents said that they missed their laboratory in school and were unable to spend time on e-classes because their brothers were given priority for use of cell phones. “I don't have a TV in my house, I have a basic mobile phone but no internet connectivity so it is very difficult.” One respondent mentioned that staring at the small screen for classes put pressure on her eyes and gave her periodic headaches.

- Time spent on studies before and after lockdown: 151 adolescent girls reported that the time spent on their studies has significantly decreased due to various circumstances such as lack of technical facilities, fights at home and domestic violence. 129 adolescent girls reported that their interest and time spent on their studies had increased as they were able to access online classes.

![Chart showing the percentage of respondents who could attend e-classes and spend as much or more time on studies as before lockdown.]

Nutrition, health and hygiene

- Nutrition and Food: As far as ‘nutrition and food’ is concerned, 104 adolescent girls reported that it has decreased due to various causes such as they lack of income, the usage of free ration rice has left them malnourished. With the lack of 3 meals per day
most of them stated that they feel fatigue, weak and have a weaker immune system. 177 respondents reported that there was no change in their nutrition or food taken and have been surviving using what’s available to them. The remaining mentioned that it was slightly manageable for them and their families. One respondent said, Adolescent girls are malnourished during the lockdown since they are not provided with nutritious food but with the ration provided it is just carbohydrates that they receive.” Another respondent said, “Every Friday, when schools were on, we were been given Vitamin and Iron Tablets for free to build a healthy immune system but due to lockdown we have not been able to access any health benefits.” Seven of the 24 respondents from West Bengal noted that they had to depend only on rice, and occasionally on pulses. They were unable to purchase vegetables or fish given the poor economic conditions of their families.

- **Access and use of Sanitary Napkins:** 204 Adolescent girls reported that they were unable to access sanitary napkins during the lockdown. The rationale stated were that most of the students were provided with sanitary napkins from their schools for free and few reported that the lack of income and accessibility was a hindrance due to which they had been using old rags during menstruation. A respondent said, “Free sanitary napkins had been provided to us every month through our school during our menstruation. But after the lockdown we have been unable to access it and hence the government has to provide it for free.” One respondent mentioned that it was uncomfortable to ask male relatives, who were most often the ones to step out during lockdown, to purchase sanitary pads.

- **Domestic Violence:** Among the 290 respondents, 247 adolescent girls stated that there were no changes in the domestic violence faced at home as they have been continually occurring. 20 adolescent girls reported that there has been an increase in the domestic violence faced at home due to several causes such as the mental pressure as there is lack of income, disruption in education. A few panellists from West Bengal noted that fathers would get angry if he was asked for money for some household expenses. Respondents spoke about the stress related to their incomplete education and uncertain future and mentioned that this depressed them.
Engaging with families: On a more positive note, 290 respondents were asked about engaging with family and spaces of freedom for spending more personal time during the lockdown. 267 respondents shared that they have been able to spend more time for themselves despite their daily routines.

Positive Impacts of Lockdown (n=290)

| MORE TIME FOR YOURSELF | 267 |
| MORE TIME WITH PARENTS | 254 |

Issues around child protection

The respondents echoed their worry about the future and the uncertainty. One respondent said that she would be pulled out of school as her parents could not afford stationery and books for her. Another respondent spoke about the fear of dropping out and having to go to work. “Maybe my father cannot afford my education any more, he will take me to work when the lockdown is over. I don't think I will study anymore,” a respondent from West Bengal’s Sunderbans region said. One of the respondents from Dinidgul district of Tamil Nadu said, “due to the loans taken during the lockdown, my parents would want to send me for mill work after the lockdown as they do not have much income to repay the loans taken.” One respondent mentioned from West Bengal that there were already cases of girls, whose marriages had been fixed. She also raised the concern that because of the hurried way in which marriages were being arranged, it was highly possible that young girls might get trafficked in the name of marriage. She also added that with the possibility of a number of adolescents (girls and boys) migrating with their families to cities for work once the lockdown was lifted, there was a scope of them being forced into vulnerable conditions such as bonded labour or trafficking, there also.

2.2 ACCESS TO COVID RELIEF

Not all have received relief: During the study, it was revealed that many respondents have not received relief from the government, including government supplies from ration shops. While in West Bengal, 21 of the 24 respondents had ration cards and all of them had received ration once during the last three months of March to May, in Uttar Pradesh, at least 4 households did not get ration even once and the largest number of 83 households received ration twice. 15% of the households had received ration thrice.
In Tamil Nadu, a large majority (88%) had received ration twice, and no household was left without getting ration.

- Of the three schemes related to providing relief, Ujjwala scheme seemed to be the one with the most success, as 21 of the 22 eligible in Tamil Nadu, 61 of 74 eligible in Uttar Pradesh and 10 of the 13 eligible in West Bengal had received a free cylinder. For old age pension, just around 50% of those eligible had registered for the pension. In Tamil Nadu, 6 of the 11 eligible were registered for the scheme and received the ex gratia sum promised. In Uttar Pradesh, only 39 of the 75 eligible persons were registered and of them, only 16 had received the pension. In West Bengal, five of the 13 are eligible and of them three had received the promised amount. As far as Kisan Samman Nidhi is concerned, one of the three eligible had received Rs 2000. In Uttar Pradesh, 73 of the 104 (70%) had received the amount. The respondents in West Bengal did not answer this question. 21 (7.2%) of the respondents said there had been at least one day in the last two months when they had not had a full meal. They were able to have access 1-2 meals in a day, which wasn’t even a proper full meal.

- **Indebtedness:** Out of the 290 families, 47 of the adolescent girls from Uttar Pradesh, 33 from Tamil Nadu and 4 from West Bengal states reported that their families had taken loans during the lockdown from various sources. While asked about the reasons of such burdens, they expressed the uncertainty of family income, which compelled them to take loans to buy grains and groceries and cover medical expenses and largely to manage the household expenses. Most of these families have taken loans from relatives, neighbours and from friends. Close to 29% families are indebted in less than two months since the lockdown, with loans taken in the informal loan space, where there is limited or no control on the pressures and interest rates that are being levied. This points to a likelihood of families being made more vulnerable and adolescent girls being pushed into situations of bonded labour to cover their family’s loans.

**Recommendations**

**School**

- Enrolling girl children in the National Scheme of Incentive to Girls for Secondary Education to avail of benefits could help with their Secondary Education as this will reduce the number of dropouts from classes 10 to 12.
- Offer a common (across urban and rural areas) means of enabling online classes for children so that there is no digital divide among the students, leading to unfair competition.
• Facilitation of peer learning groups among students might help students connect both for academics and emotional support.

Government
• The Kanyashree Prakalpa scheme could extend to all the classes and the stipend provided be increased to cover the current crisis
• Educational loans at minimal interests to support families to send their children for higher education
• Ensure door-to-door supply of sanitary napkins and iron tablets through the Government Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme.
• ICDS and primary health centres to provide telephonic support for those suffering from domestic violence and absence of emotional counselling
• Ease the enrollment in Dhanalakshmi scheme for school benefits and Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana for savings for Girl child’s education
• Further strengthen community-based child protection mechanisms such as Village-Level Child Protection Committees to prevent child trafficking and child marriage, especially in times of distress
• Strengthen labour laws to ensure that children and adolescents do not get forced into vulnerable work situations.

Other Recommendations
• Enable vocational training to address the educational needs of adolescent girls during the lockdown
• The use of virtual channels has exposed the digital divide among adolescent girls, especially those from rural areas. There could be community-based systems to enable inclusive education for all, so that those without television or internet access do not get left behind
• Enable civil-society collaborations that can work to ensure the basic needs and human rights of adolescent girls.