



## COVID19 Pandemic Voices from Margins

Webinar series Webinar 13:

Missing Adolescent Marginalised by Divide During Lockdown. School: Girls Growing

Date: May 20, 2020

Minutes

### Panelist profile:

**Panelist 1: Abhishek** is Co-founder and Director of Rupantaran Foundation, an organisation working with adolescents and youth on the issues of gender equity, child protection (trafficking and early marriage) and active citizenship in West Bengal. He believes in the urgent need of seeing the young generation as “objects” rather than “actors” of development process as despite representing a large proportion of the population, adolescent and youth are widely excluded from the decision making process, has limited agency and participation. He has been engaging young people in social change processes, advocating gender just society through Rupantaran and in other development spaces.

**Panelist 2: Moni** belongs from Anupshehr village in Bulandshahr district of Uttar Pradesh and recently has passed class 12th examination. She has four sisters and two brothers. Her father is a tailor and mother is a housewife. Moni wants to be an engineer because she loves to experiment with machines. Her hobbies are singing, teaching children and helping in household chores. Due to lockdown, she misses going out, classroom based group discussions and all those physical activities of play and exercise that used to be a daily routine in school.

**Panelist 3:** Karthika is 17 years old and studies in Class 12. She is from Ayyapatti village in Tamil Nadu’s Dindigul district. She is part of an Adolescents’ Girls’ group organised by Vaanavil team. Her father is a driver and her mother is a home-maker. She has a sister who has just completed her graduation.

**Panelist 4: Anu** is 17 years old and hails from Barauli village in Bulandshahr district in Uttar Pradesh and recently appeared for class 12th exams. She has three sisters and a brother, who is younger to her. She wants to become an engineer. Dancing is one of her favourite hobbies which became her saviour for boredom during lockdown. Her father is a cook (Halwai) and the mother is a homemaker. Anu was alone with her sister-in-law in the village till lockdown 2.0 and her parents recently returned back to village walking from Delhi along with other migrants.

**Panelist 5: Jayashree Mondal** is 19 years old and hails from Panchghara village, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. She is in graduation and has recently started college. She is part of Aikatan theatre group with adolescents in the 16-21 age-groups, with whom she puts up plays on child marriage and child labour issues. She has represented the youth of West Bengal at various national forums. She is

involved with Rupantaran as a volunteer, where she teaches students of Classes 7 and 8 geography, science and mathematics.

**Panelist 6: Bhavani** is 15 years old and studies in class 10th. She lives in Kurumbapatti village in Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu. Her sister is in Class 7 and her brother studies in Class 4. Her father is a construction worker and her mother is a vegetable vendor. She, along with her two siblings, lives with her maternal grandparents and studies here. Her parents live in Iyalur. With closure of schools, Bhavani fears many girls might be compelled to drop out of schools permanently and pushed into the workforce.

**Panelist 7: Sarulatha** from Praxis will present the study done with 290 adolescent girls from three districts spread across Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu.

**Panelist 8: Renuka** is part of the Pardada Pardadi family from the past decade. She is very compassionate about the causes of underserved. She has been involved in the social sector for almost four decades, and during this period she has been associated with causes such as gender, rural development, child rights, education and fair trade etc. She has been a part of many international charities. Her efforts and work in social sector has been recognized many times. She has received many awards for her work nationally. During her four decades of social service, Renuka has also authored and co-authored several books and articles.

**Mr. Tom Thomas, Moderator, Praxis:** Praxis is an Indian organization that focuses on various facets of participatory democracy. Praxis tries to bring the voices, concerns, and solutions of marginalized communities through several kinds of research and studies directly or through face to face meetings that happen physically or digitally between the community members, policymakers, media, activists, etc., This webinar series of COVID-19 Pandemic – Voices from Margins is a continuation of that attempt as during the lockdown days the major hope is to bring to the forefront the voices of the communities that are left unheard. As the days go by we are seeing more and more evidence of government keen on easing the burden of the middle class, banks, industries, etc and very little on the hardships and uncertainties of the poor, marginalized and migrant workers in general. We are seeing that the Supreme Court is keener that telling the government very little evidence of the government is seen. There have been a large number of webinars discussing the impact of lockdown on education as well as the impact specifically on adolescent girls. Of late, the government has also come up with a plan for tech-backed education to cater to the demands of students during the lockdown. However, the challenges that continue to remain are the basic absence of access to technology for girls. Today, we will be speaking to adolescent girls from rural areas of three states – Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu to hear from them what the challenges they are facing when it comes to education. The reality for these girls is skewed further because of patriarchal limitations on accessing resources – be it nutritious food, or mobile phones. Their priorities get pushed in the face of financial burdens the families are already facing in view of the lockdown, and the uncertainty of the future looms large over them. We are joined by three organisations – PardadaPardadi, Rupantaran Foundation and Vaanavil, which is working with adolescent girls on a range of issues from child protection to education and healthcare.

## Panelists Discussion

**Abhishek** in his keynote addressed about India having the largest cohort of adolescent girls and the webinar is an opportunity to talk about it. Every third person is an adolescent in India. We live in a highly patriarchal society where certain notions and practices make girls and women vulnerable. Certain notions such as considering girls as burden to be married off as early as possible or the practice by girls and women to eat in the last from whatever is left by male members leave them malnourished. Every second woman and girl is anaemic. The efforts of various social actors both government and non-governmental has helped to bring a large number of girls to the school but still boys are preferred over girls. According to census estimates, women lack behind by 16% in literacy level. The adolescent girls face all these gender issues of malnourishment and low literacy level on a daily basis. The pandemic and lockdown from past 50 days has impacted many families severely. This has caused loss of lives, livelihoods and people are now facing food crisis and have come a level down in the wealth pyramid. With the prolonged closure of schools and colleges the girls are staying at home which has affected their well being. Reports indicate a rise of 20% in cases of mental health in India.

Recently a news story was published in newspaper about a girl who committed suicide following an argument with her mother over the use of mobile phone. With series of lockdown and closure of schools and colleges, online learning has become the sole medium of education. However, this has severely impacted education of girls in India due to its associated challenges. In rural India with situations of extreme poverty put of 3 people 1 doesn't have a television and most of the people don't have smart phones. A large section of population lives in rural India. It can be said that 13% out of 20% of population belong to rural India. Lack of access to technology will widen the gap between haves and have nots. The privileged (haves) will not be lagging behind and make the most out of it but the ones who are at margins (have-nots) will be badly affected. These are some of the significant barriers for girl's education. In today's webinar issues such as missing schools, marginalised girls and growing digital divide will be unpacked and we will be listening directly from the adolescent girls.

**Moni** from Uttar Pradesh elucidated about the financial constraints and the difficulties in coping with e-classes. I have passed my class 12<sup>th</sup> exam from Pardada and Pardadi inter college. This is a non profit organisation which works for women empowerment. Presently, times are difficult and the Corona virus has spread in the entire world and this has also impacted my life. Now, everyone is studying through online education. I am facing a lot of challenges in accessing online learning properly due to network issues and the inability to get the recharge due to money constraints. Due to lockdown, my father has been sitting idle so arranging money for recharge becomes difficult. The financial constraint is a big challenge for me. The burden of household chores has also increased. My father asks my brother not to do household chores so I am burdened with entire load of work which affects my online classes. A pair of siblings comes home to take tuitions by me. The brother doesn't let his elder sister use the mobile saying the father has given him not her so it belongs to him. This reminds me of my time when I also needed a mobile phone but was denied and my father gave mobile phone to my brother. Presently both of us are facing issues in education. Going to school, playing, exercising and discussing with friends used to be a daily part of my routine which I miss a lot. Learning from online mediums makes it difficult to grasp theories as we are missing out on practical classes. And also it provides little scope for clarification and discussion.

Instances of domestic violence have increased in the lockdown due to people being at home all day without any work. Also the liquor shops are opened so the drunkards create lot of noise and fights is a common phenomenon in each household makes it challenging for girls to focus on studies. From past 2-3 days due to rains, electricity cuts have become a problem due to which we can't charge our mobile phones and attend to online classes.

Marriage is taking precedence over education of girls and many parents are thinking to marry off their daughters during lockdown period. People think this is the best time to get the girls married off as it will cut down many expenses such as treating several guests and one has to pay very minimum amount of dowry. One of my aunts is marrying off her daughter next month. Many girls will be married off and dropped out of school permanently. Usually girls are married off after 10-12<sup>th</sup> so people don't find it a problem to marry off them now. Food crisis is another issue being faced by girls. Prior to lockdown when girls used to go to school they used to have three meals in a day. Many people are selling off vegetables and trying hard to manage the home. Families that don't have Aadhar card/ ration card have not been provided with any ration and facing difficult times.

**Karthika** on her keynote emphasized about the drastic changes happening on health of adolescent girls amidst the lockdown. Since the lockdown adolescent girls have been facing several health issues as their food intake has been reduced. The access to food has been only through the free ration provided in the communities by the Government. With the consistent intake of just rice the adolescent girls have been facing multiple health issues as there is no nutritional value leaving them malnourished. Families have been deprived of work and following their lack of income the necessity for a balanced and nutritious meal is not a choice.

Before the lockdown the opportunities of having a nutritious and a balanced meal was an option to adolescent girls but having 3 meals a day with just carbohydrates intake has made them more anaemic, fatigue and dizzy quite often. The lack of proper immune system has made adolescent girls weaker and more prone to get effected or infected easily and the effects include reduction in weight, constipation and changes in menstrual health cycle. In schools' adolescent girls were offered Vitamin Tablets and sanitary napkins for free but there has been no support offered from the government since the lockdown which has led them to borrow money even for getting sanitary napkins. Previously "Sathu Maavu" has been provided only for pregnant women but the government needs to implement necessary actions like this in place for the health benefits of adolescent girls. Karthika said, "For a plant to grow it requires good soil, water, air and sunlight same as which for adolescent girls to be healthy they require nutritious food."

**Anu** is a student from Pardada and Paradadi Educational Society. I am 17 years old student coming from a small place from western part of Uttar Pradesh. I want to become from an Engineer and pursue my education from Banasthali Vidyapeeth. My father is a sweet maker and my mother is a housewife. I have three siblings.

Today I will talk about how lockdown has impacted my life and created difficulties. I don't have a smart phone which makes it difficult to do online classes. I have a key pad whose screen is very small and also my eyesight is also weak making it difficult to study. Being it a family phone, the calls create

disturbances during the online classes. There is no work and my parents are idle due to lockdown. I was stuck here alone with my sister-in-law. I was facing food crisis and it was PPES who helped me with ration. My parents went to Delhi for my mother's medical treatment and got stuck there when the lockdown was announced suddenly. I faced food crisis and was very scared of being alone. The liquor shops were open and the drunkard used to create nuisance. My parents came after lockdown 3.0 along with other migrants from Delhi.

The lives of girls in village have been impacted as well. Now the girls in village spend most of their time in household chores while being at school they used to study. In school the girls not only had opportunities to study but also access to nutritious food having meals containing vitamins and protein. Now people are dependent only on ration and consuming only carbohydrates. All these circumstances have pushed our family financially two years backwards.

Marriages are also being fixed during the lockdown and my cousin is getting married next month. If lockdown wouldn't have happened, she would have continued her education. The family doesn't have money so they will marry them off. People are losing over their livelihoods and savings during lockdown.

Due to prevalence of discriminatory practices and perceptions girls are not handed over phones in rural societies but it's the boys who will get it. Due to the fear due to cases of elopements of the parents don't give the phones for education, not even during this time. In the past there have been some cases of elopements where girls talked to boys and ran away with them. All the parents fear off elopements so they restrict girls from using phones. Online classes limit the scope of clarifications and discussions. The classroom education was more easy and comfortable for us and I miss my school. In schools medicines used to be free. In my locality, a girl is badly infected with a skin infection and hasn't received any treatment. A girls in nearby is badly affected with skin infection and has received any treatment as the family has no money. If the school was open, she would have be treated and given medicine for free.

**Jayashree Mondal** a volunteer of Rupantaran addressed about how the youth are also affected by the spread of COVID19 and it is important to hear their voices which through this meeting can be possible. School and colleges are shut as social distancing need to be maintained which is important too during this time. Now classes are held through internet and television, but in rural areas like us out of 5 households, every 2 would not own a television. One needs a smart phone to take classes online which are also not very commonly seen in these areas. So, we are not able to study through internet or online classes due to which students are facing a psychological pressure. I am not only talking about myself here as I will share narratives of a few students of 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> standards that I teach, and also about my friends. All of are facing mental health issues, if we were in school, we could have shared our problems with our teachers or friends. It is certainly not possible now to have discussions with our teachers or with friends since there is this lockdown. This is also creating mental health issues among us.

Our parents are not able to earn during the lockdown. There is no stable source of income, savings to survive. In this sort of situation where financial tension, food relate issues are more in consideration, for a girl it is worrisome to think of her future studies or whether she'll be able to continue with it at all, or how her tuition fees would be paid. In rural areas like us, child marriage or

child labour is normalised. When the lockdown will be lifted, it will increase more in numbers. As a reason, it can be said that, during the lockdown most of the families have borrowed money to buy food or other essentials which they would have to pay back eventually for which they would need more money. Families with one earning member will not possibly earn enough to pay off and to earn more money they would send their kids outside for work. They would send them as soon the lockdown is lifted. From our area most of us are sent to Kolkata for jobs, but there has to be proper knowledge about the employers too. In this situation of rush, it is very important to understand the work and employer so that they do not become victims of trafficking. During this time, marriages are being fixed and there is a chance of not having antecedents of grooms. This can also be a reason of the girl being trafficked through marriages.

Apart from these, there are students who usually take time to pace up with others, they might have forgotten whatever they have learned within these two months break. These students might have to start from the scratch. So, when schools are open again and if exams are conducted soon then they might not pass them. My friend's marriage is fixed during the lockdown which will take place after the lockdown gets over. She has a younger sister who has been threatened of marriage by the father for very small mistakes in some work. If marriage is a topic of discussion, there are many stories. A week ago one girl got married during the lockdown where this was the only reason of that marriage taking place.

People who work as daily wager in rural areas, are not able to look after their children. Since they are forced to think about their everyday survival, they certainly cannot look after their children's education. For them, they ask their kids to be engaged with handicrafts or some zari works to earn money. They do not have time or wish to make their children study much. This is pushing them away from education. Kids are losing their interest in studying. And all of these are caused by financial problems. My cousin sister is worried about her next two exams and there is no notification to address her issues. She might adapt psychological disorders through all such tensions.

**Bhavani** elucidated on how the effects of indebtedness would affect the life of adolescent girls. The lack of income generation has made several families to get loans in order to cover their expenses for food, medicine and various other needs. The free ration received from the Government during the month of March did not suffice as we had to further borrow provision from our neighbours. The circumstance under which it was borrowed was that we had to repay it with the free ration received in April. After the lockdown as many families would be unable to generate any income, they would be willing to send their adolescent girls for Mill work for their income. This could affect the lives of adolescent girls disrupting their education. Many mills have been offering job opportunities for adolescent girls with hostel facilities. If adolescent girls go for mill work, they might wither end up as child labourers or there are high chances for child marriages. As I am willing to study, I had refused to go for Mill Work. The major hindrance of attending e-classes is the availability of Phones and the other issue is that many of them are unable to recharge their phones due to the lack of income sources. This factor has made many adolescent girls to lose their interest on education. Bhavani said, "Mathematics is a subject that needs to worked out but if it is taught through a video how will adolescent girls be able to learn?"

**Sarulatha (Praxis)** presented a quick study was conducted with 290 adolescent girls in three states- Uttar Pradesh (215), Tamil Nadu (41) and West Bengal (21) with support from Parada Pardadi Educational Society, Rupantaran Foundation and Vanavill. Respondents mostly from ranged from class 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> and some of them undergraduates and those pursuing professional courses. Study findings are mentioned below:

- 21% of the respondents didn't have access to three meals in a day. They were able to have access to 1-2 in a day which wasn't even a proper full meal.
- Families of 84 out of total respondents have taken loan. Most of the loans were taken from relatives, friends, neighbours and employers which might land them into situations of bondage labour in case of default.
- 51% of girls out of all respondents are attending to online classes on a regular basis. Recharge and network issues are major challenges preventing girls in attending classes. This also causing lack of interest in education among girls.
- Burden of household chores have increased for girls who are not able to spend time on studies. They are also involved in assisting parents in plantation, grazing animals to help them in generating more money during this time.
- Only 3% of the respondents had proper meals which might lead to anaemia and other health issues
- 7% of respondents indicated towards an increase in domestic violence
- Access to sanitary pads among girls has drastically reduced. Instead of sanitary pads girls are using cloths during menstruation.

**Recommendations proposed by the Adolescent girls interviewed from West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil NADU:**

- Enabling vocational training to address the educational needs of adolescent girls during the lockdown
- Educational loans to be offered by the Government to support families
- Offer a common means of enabling online classes for children so that there is no digital divide among the students.
- Peer learning groups among students might enable students to connect both educationally and mentally which can be initiated by the schools.
- SHG loans can be dismissed which is paying by their parents so we can continue our education easily
- Setting up of common grounds that can be accessible by all in the village with the necessary protocols in place can avoid the digital divide.
- Enabling 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. The use of E-Kranti will enable a digital infrastructure that can be accessed by all.
- The source of sanitary napkins on rural sides is through schools & with the lockdown the adolescent girls are unable to get it. Hence sanitary napkins and medication (iron tablets) being an essential it has to be delivered door to door by the Government through ICDS.

- The increase in domestic violence and lack of emotional support during the lockdown has caused mental pressure on adolescent girls. ICDS & Primary Health Centre can connect with the adolescent girls through telephone and offer guidance and support.

**Renuka** from Pardada and Pardadi Educational Society reiterated on the vulnerabilities faced by Adolescent Girls during situations of Corona pandemic and domestic violence was one of them. The girls are denied of the access to phones while their brothers are given privilege of using it. Many a times they have to miss the food as the preference is for their brothers. These are unfortunate realities of gender divide.

Adding to the key note statistical details were shared in reference to a news article published in Times of India.

- About 50% of the household (people at the margins) have started skipping the meals which means 50% of the girls will have a lesser chance to avail food in this kind of situation.
- Among 24%, the tendency of borrowing has increased more. This will impact the girls as they will be married off or pushed to work to repay the loans.
- 35% of the households will drop out their children after the school reopen. School is a place of joy, leaning, having fun and is place where their basic needs are taken care of. 35% of drop out means 35% of girls will be out of that place where they can achieve their dreams.

The need is to work closely with the girls and ensure that they are safe and have access to basic facilities like food and sanitary napkins or use of clean cloths maintaining hygiene and safety. In case a boy falls sick, the entire family is in panic while if it's a girl then it is taken casually. Basically the basic needs of the girls should be addressed.

These are the indicators which will be crucial to work in times to come. The divide between have and have nots in digital education will widen the gap. Everyone is saying children are getting education but after listening to these girls now we know who missing education is. In the backdrop of these realities, if the government doesn't change the syllabus then these girls will be very marginalised and left behind. Collectively, we have to appeal to the govt in forms of suggestions about what kinds of syllabus and testing system should be there to get them into university. Besides, also the kind of system the schools and universities have in place to assess the students.

Many of girls would have faced emotional trauma while going through the present time. The girls would need support and assurance from us they can fulfil their dreams. Let us count and follow each girl though various techniques either by hotline, sms service. The sole focus should not be on only academic learning but to ensure that they have access to food and safety. We have to instil the confidence among parents that this will pass too and they shouldn't treat their daughters as burden but consider them as assets. This message needs to be communicated to the parents, brothers and the fathers.

#### **Q&A SESSION:**

#### **CHILD PROTECTION**



**Question:** What are the organisations doing to prevent the trafficking of vulnerable girls?

**Response: (Smita Sen, Rupantaran)** We are working with Village Level Child protection Committees and Block Level Child Protection Committees towards strengthening them. Now, these institutions are working together to protecting the community against child marriage and trafficking issues. To sensitize people, door to door advertisements, discussions with parents who have received marriage proposals are done by them to sensitize the community members. These committees are basically *sansad* level committees. This is a government programme and there are CPCs at the village and block level in the entire country.

**Question:** Kanyashree Yoddha or Child Protection or Child line is not enough to help them?

**Response:(Jayashree)** In our area, there was no such organisation to prevent child marriages. Through the platform of Rupantaran, we used to reach people by the mediums of theatres or speeches. Marriage of a young girl happens in discretion. There are many incidents where we reached out and stopped the marriage. Child line is also used to prevent such marriages but who is getting married mostly tries to avoid police encounters during the occasion.

No, there is no Kanyashree Yoddha. But there are a few groups that work with young girls such as the Village-Level Child Protection Committee.

#### **AWARENESS BUILDING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

**Question:** How can Parents and teachers engagement in small groups particularly in case of infected children be done so that the children especially girls and families do not face any stigma and discrimination because of it?

**Response: (Renuka)** At Pardada and Pardadi along with running an education programme we are also working with women groups and self-help groups programmes and during such times they have been the best ambassadors or keeping an eye about what is happening in the community, particularly with girls. There is a need to have good connect with the girls also and not only with the parents.

It's a better idea to work with smaller groups and CBOs. In light of the present situation, the need is to because actively engage with communities in providing them inputs on how to save yourself and to be good to each other. Techniques such as hotline service and smsservice are being used in reaching out to communities into smaller groups and make them brand ambassadress of change.

#### **HEALTH AND WELL-BEING**

**Question:** Some children' are affected with psychological issues due to online classes, how to support them?

**Response: (Karthika)** - If lockdown ends, the psychological issues would reduce. Additionally, if children get access to nutritious food it will make them feel emotionally better.

**Question:** To deal with COVID-19, the entire focus of the health sector has been centred on this, what is being done in SRHR component for adolescents?

**Response: (Abhishek)** The concern of adolescents and SRHR have definitely taken a backseat. Presently, the schools are also not able to provide sanitary napkins that used to happen earlier.

There is a shortage of sanitary pads in market which has led to the black marketing of sanitary pads. The sanitary pads that used to cost around Rs.30 is being sold at Rs. 40-50.

Most of the wards in the hospitals have been converted into COVID wards which have badly affected the maternal health care. Not only adolescents' SRHR but all the health domains have been badly affected due to COVID-19.

#### **BRIDGING THE EDUCATION DIVIDE**

**Question:** Given the challenges faced in accessing online education, do you have any suggestion for this?

**Response: (Anu)** Education should be provided through medium of Television as most of the people have televisions but not the smart phones.

#### **OTHERS**

**Question:** is there any arrangement from Government or any NGOs in regard with cyclone in the area?

**Response: (Jayashree)** No. No measurement has been taken so far.

#### **LINKS:**

Visit <http://www.praxisindia.org/covid19.php> details on previous Webinars.