Differential Impact of School Closure on Adolescent Girls during Covid 19 Pandemic: A Study of Slum Dwellers in Delhi

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Abstract

Covid-19 impacted all fragments of society across the world but its impact seems to discriminate between poor and rich, old and young, male and female. These intersectional vulnerabilities paint a complex web of inter-connections that impact various segments based on determinants like age, gender, income status and others. The genesis of the paper lies in the wake of limited research on the social impact of Covid-19 and its consequences on young individuals, especially adolescent girls. This period is crucial for young girls as they undergo numerous transitions related to physical, mental and gendered expectations and decisions. The paper seeks to understand the factors these adolescent girls are exposed to due to the closure of schools from the lens of a consortium of NGOs working towards the empowerment of girls. The exploratory research was conducted using a mixed approach where response was collected from 100 adolescent girls to understand the problems faced by them during pandemic and in-depth interviews of 24 adolescent girls were carried to understand the exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity for vulnerability mapping and henceforth suggesting the measures required to mitigate the impact of school closure on adolescent girls during Covid 19 pandemic. The paper addresses the prime concern of Goal 5 of SDG which deals with achieving gender equality and empowering girls and women at a time when these girls are pulled back to domestic obligations due to school closure which is impacting their holistic development and if not addressed instantly might leave its effect for over a generation.

Keywords: School Closure; Differential Impact; Vulnerability mapping; Adolescent Girls; Covid 19; Pandemic; NGO; Government; Policy

Introduction

Adolescent girls in India accounts to a massive neglected population comprising 113 million being systematically denied the advantages of autonomy, economic opportunity and mobility in comparison to their counterparts. Research indicates that adolescent girls are vulnerable in parts of India as 50% of all adolescent girls are married before the age of 18, 95% drop out of school and 50% are exposed to domestic violence (Dasra Report, 2021). 1 in every 3 married girls in the age group 15-19 years experienced violence at hands of their husbands. 1 in every 5 girls of 15-19 years experienced forced sex before marriage and 2 in every 5 girls who were commercially sexually exploited were minors (IIPS, 2006-07; NFHS-3, 2005-06; India Country Report, 2008).

School closure in India impacted 320 million children enrolled from pre-primary to tertiary levels of education. Out of these, about 158 million are female students (UNESCO, 2020). Children studying in government schools were disproportionately affected with more than 80% students not having access to educational resources (Oxfam India Status Report, 2020). It adversely impacted the children coming from the marginalized section of society (poor, unemployed, migrant workers, malnutrition, living in slums and coming from families who lost their source of livelihood and income) and forced many children to discontinue their study even post restoration of normality[1] . Moreover, it led to unprecedented disruption to education system having ravaging impact on girls' education exposed to limited access to online education, forced to discontinue education when the primary members lost their jobs, unconsented early marriage, forced pregnancy and sexual exploitation leave many adolescent girls at the risk of discontinuing school post reopening of schools. These girls especially from the marginalized section of the society face the risk of being whisked away from studies to active participation in domestic chores of the household or provide helping hand in earning.

Government policies have systematically considered adolescent girls, mostly as a subset of women or children group, thus widening a gap for effective policies that address the needs of adolescent girls.

School System Functioning in India

In India, the school system has four levels: lower primary (age 6 to 10 years), upper primary (age 11 to 12 years), high school (13 to 15 years) and higher secondary (17 to 18 years). Students are required to learn a common curriculum according to the board and students have to learn two languages (namely Hindi and English). Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) is the most popular board and follows textbook written and published by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and many private schools use different text books and follow different teaching schedules. Second most popular board is the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE). Both these boards conduct their own examinations at the end of 10 years of schooling and again at the end of 12 years of schooling. Each state in India has its own department of education and runs its own school system, text books and evaluation system and its curriculum and evaluation comes under the preview of State Council of Education Research and Training (SCERT) (Kumar, 2011). There are different category of schools like public/ government schools, private schools, international schools, national open schools and special-needs school.

Indian education system has made significant progress ensuring educational opportunities to all segments of society under the aegis of Right to Education Act, 2009, which entails free and compulsory schooling for children from ages 6 to 14 years. 13.46 million children were out of school in 2006 which reduced to 6.1 million in 2014 (SRI-IMRB Surveys, 2009 and 2014). There has been an improvement but the question arises will this improvement continue? As the situation

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[1] https://thewire.in/rights/COVID-19-crisis-will-push-millions-of-vulnerable-children-into-child-labour

of pandemic is portraying different figure with economic distress, especially with individuals from marginalized section of society is projected to discontinue sending their children to school.

Adolescent Girls in India: A Potential for Future of India

India is ambitiously nearing to reach the aim of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all and Gender Equality by 2030 under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and 5. Progressing in terms of universalizing primary education as visible in the enrolment and completion rate of girls there is a significant drop-out rate of adolescent girls at secondary education level reaching 19.8% as compared to drop-out rate in primary education being 6.3%. (Sonawane, 2020). The Constitution of India conveys a powerful mandate for equality of women in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights and also Directive Principles of State Policy. India is also a signatory to a number of UN Conventions, like Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Platform for Action and Convention on Rights of the Child where the nation's commitment to protect and empower its women and girls is evident. India has been striving to dispel discrimination against women in all forms. Laws against sex selective abortion, child marriage and sexual harassment at workplace are being implemented. However, discrimination against women in India remains a deep-seated issue despite various policy and legislative reforms being undertaken at all levels. However, initiatives are being taken to prevent gender disparities at every stage, right from the time the fetus is placed in the womb of a mother to education, marriage to labour market posing significant barriers for the future of girls. Through committed implementation of government incentives/ schemes like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, awareness campaigns in the states, focus is on changing the mindset of people towards girl child. Implementation of SDG 5 will go a long way in making India gender equal. Though the discourse on gender justice and empowerment is rampant in our country, SDG 5 can help in bringing a gendered approach to the policies, schemes and laws of the country. India is expected to gain from its demographic dividend in the coming years and women are an integral part of this developmental process if India wants to tap its full potential. It is only through empowering the women in all forms that women will transcend beyond the constraints they presently face. It is essential to focus on these aspects if India wants to achieve SDG Goals by 2030.

Adolescent girls in the age group of 10-19 years constitute a significant 22.8% (232 million) of India's population (UNFPA, 2003). They face discrimination from their male counterparts on mobility, education attainment, say in decision making, nutritious meals, employment and marriage which impacts their physical and mental developments. Especially at this crucial stage of their life when they are transiting from childhood to maturity. During this phase they need physical, mental and emotional support from their siblings, friends, parents, family, neighbourhood and society. It is considered a critical stage for adolescent girls especially coming from the marginalised section of society as at this transition phase either they continue with secondary education, get married or enter into labour market. This decision is seldom the girl's choice but mostly dominated by economic factors, family decisions, societal and cultural factors.

Impact of Covid 19 Pandemic on Adolescent Girls

COVID-19 pandemic left millions of students at the risk of not returning back to school due to financial distress, help in household chores, childcare support, early and forced marriage, unintended pregnancy. It is estimate that about 24 million students (from pre-primary to tertiary education) will be at risk of not returning to education institutions in 2020, including care centres, schools, universities or other training institutions, of which 10.9 million are in primary and secondary levels. 11.2 million are girls and young women, with 5.2 million of them being primary and secondary school students (UNESCO, 2020). Table 1 provides an estimate of student dropouts by 2020 growth projections (growth projections are weighted by the student's cohort of each country and are weighted by Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Table 1. Estimates of Students Drop Outs by 2020 Growth Projections

Particulars	Growth Projections 2020	Number of drop-outs (in millions of students)
MPO-March	-0.8	1.9
WEO-April	-2.3	4.1
MPO-May	-3.4	6.8

(Source: World Bank, Research Paper Series, 2020)

The figures above indicate that with every fall in the growth projections will lead to household income shocks and an increase in the drop outs. It is now even more worrisome as Covid 19 pandemic and induced lockdown has increased the gender gap in education posing more challenges for adolescent girls in continuing online education during economic hardships faced by their family. The economic impact of Covid 19 will increase the risk of early dropout as girls are more vulnerable to child labour, child marriage, violence and sexual abuse (UNESCO, 2020). Increased rates of poverty, household responsibilities, child labour, teenage pregnancy may prevent as many as 20 million secondary school-aged girls around the world from ever returning to the classroom (Malala Fund, 2020). Alongwith the prevailing norms this interruption in learning had a greater impact on girls than boys and disproportionately affected adolescent girls belonging to marginalised section of society and from families that lost their livelihood during the pandemic (RTE forum, 2020)

Thus, it is impertinent to include adolescent girls in policy making as it will be insightful to invest in this segment to build a strong economic base (Judith, 2007), promoting gender equality, reducing health issues (maternal mortality, infant mortality and HIV), eliminating child marriage and help in reversing intergenerational poverty.

Both, the lack of access to schools and economic hardships due to COVID-19 puts girls at a higher risk of gender-based violence and forced child marriage. In the wake of these problems the study proposes to understand the impact of school closure on girls and to understand the role of stakeholders in addressing gendered differential in the wake of third wave.

Objective of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

(i) To understand the impact of school closure on adolescent girls amid Covid-19 pandemic.

(ii) To explore the role of stakeholders in addressing the issues raised by marginalized section of the society

(iii) To explore the measures required to mitigate the impact of Covid 19 on adolescent girls' education

Based on the research objectives the research questions are designed as follows:

a. What is the impact of school closure on adolescent girls amid Covid-19 pandemic?

b. Are the stakeholders/ policy makers ready to absorb the effects of the upcoming third wave?

c. What are the measures required to mitigate the impact of Covid 19 on adolescent girls' education?

The study was designed around the following critical areas of enquiry: (i) Social, demographic and economic profile of adolescent girls (ii) The impacts of the pandemic and school closure on the education and lives of adolescent girls between the age-group of 10-18 years, including how they spend their time in absence of schools and the status of access to and use of technology for learning (iii) The kind of support the household received from governments and civil society, especially in the context of income and livelihood losses and compensation for the loss of learning due to school-closure.

The sample of the study is collected from adolescent girls enrolled in a Centre of Excellence run by an NGO Protsahan India in Uttam Nagar, New Delhi. Population of the study constituted 416 adolescent girls belonging to the age 10-18 years from marginalized background. Primary data in the form of survey was conducted and response were collected by 100 adolescent girls through questionnaire to access their vulnerability on parameters of exposure and vulnerability mapping was developed from in-depth interviews and observations of 24 adolescent girls studying in the same center. In-depth interviews were conducted to understand their sensitivity and adaptive capacity used as parameters for vulnerability mapping. This field level empirical study was undertaken to from November 2021 till February 2022 when the schools in Delhi were in the transition of resuming physical classes. In-depth interview was conducted and questionnaire was also floated covering details about their education, age, death due to covid-19 pandemic, family members' profile and access to ration and Aadhar card.

Protsahan India Foundation is a non-profit organization established in 2010. They work against any form of child abuse and for the betterment of at-risk adolescent girls in the underserved communities of India. The slum neighborhoods where Protsahan is currently working, adolescence or hitting puberty is considered to be the age for getting the girls married irrespective of the fact that neither their mind, nor body are developed to handle such responsibilities and their consequences. They aren't even considered worthy of an education. Girls in this underserved community, as others, face all forms of child abuse on a daily basis. Some come from families where they go to sleep after witnessing domestic violence and alcohol abuse every night; some have 7-10 members living in the same room, as a result of which they have grown up in distorted environments which have left them with a warped sense of boundary, experiencing direct scenes of extreme intimacy or violence between parents; some have been sexually abused by one of their family members; and some are trying to get away with the constant pressure of becoming a child bride. There is no understanding of menstrual hygiene, reproductive health or nutrition. As a result, they are at high risk of early pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, stunted physical growth, and overall hampered health and development.

Vulnerability Mapping of Adolescent Girls: Risk, Sensitivity and Adaptive Capacity

Vulnerability of adolescent girls are assessed based on their poor and economic living conditions, government (both central and state) aid/linkages and medical aid. Vulnerability is commonly associated with poor economic and nutritional status, but many other overlapping social vectors such as quality of housing and public services, occupation, gender, disability, marital status, age, stigmatized and debilitating ailments and many other aspects are not recognized (National Urban Health Mission, 2017).

Vulnerability is a multidimensional process affected by social, political, and economic forces interacting from local to international scales (Bohle, Downing, & Watts, 1994; Ribot, 1995). Vulnerability is a function of exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity (Engle, 2011; Smit and Wandel, 2006). Many factors influence vulnerability, four broad spectrums: access to resources, governance, culture and knowledge have been considered in the past to understand the social aspect of vulnerability. Together they provide a comprehensive, interdisciplinary social science framework for analyzing and understanding uneven vulnerability across social difference. So, vulnerability mapping entails mapping of exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity indicators where greater the exposure or sensitivity of a system means greater the vulnerability (Esterhuyse et al.,2017). The study has been conducted on the basis of the framework proposed by Thomas et al in 2018, though it was used in climate study the vectors can be applied to other disciplinary studies as well.

Fig. 1. Vulnerability Assessment: Framework
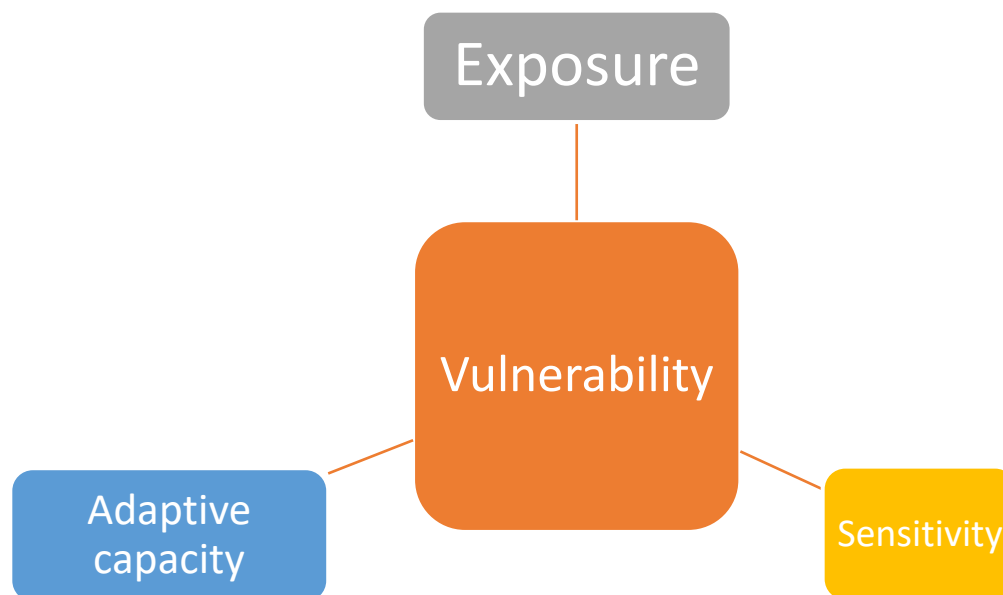
(Source: Engle, 2011; Thomas et al. 2018)

Vulnerability is a function of exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity so it can be stated as Vulnerability = function (exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity). Exposure (external characteristic) is the risk of being allowed or forced to experience something and in the context of the study it poses the risk adolescent girls are of discontinuing formal school education.

She is exposed to risks from various peripherals stated in fig. 2 starting with own parents, siblings, extended family, neighborhood, friends, society and culture. During adolescent, as the girl undergoes transition and experience changes in appearance, though process she either isolates herself and keep her interactions with people she is comfortable like parents, siblings and friends or she explores her surroundings and periphery of her interactions expands beyond personal relationships. Mostly the decisions related to her studies, marriage and future are taken by her immediate family taking into considerations societal norms.

Fig. 2 Periphery in Exposure of Adolescent Girls
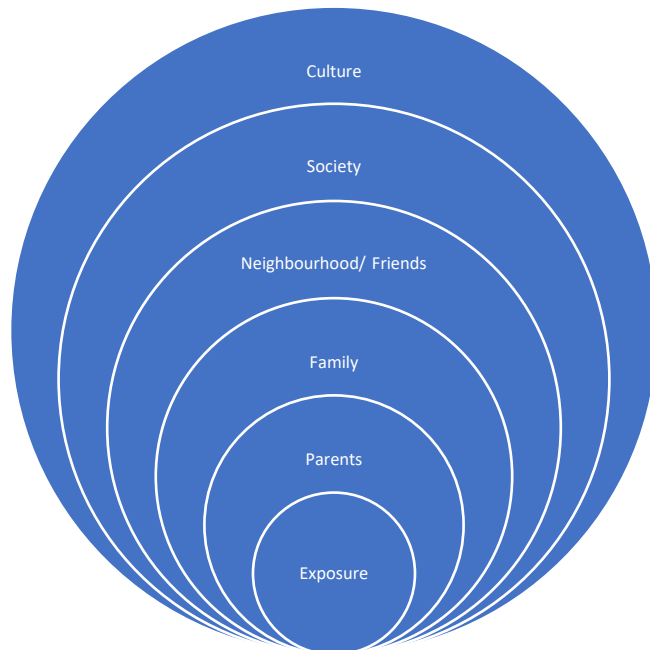
(Source: Self Compiled by the author)

Sensitivity (internal characteristic) is the degree to which these adolescent girls are affected by the exposure to risk of discontinuing their formal school education. For the purpose of this study sensitivity is studied on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is least sensitive, 2 is less sensitive, 3 is moderate sensitive, 4 is more sensitive and 5 is most sensitive. When a girl is ranked 1 based on the in-depth interview it means she is not affected by and face challenges at ease and if a girl is ranked 5 it means she is very sensitive to the new environment/ change and it is having an impact on both her mental and physical well-being. The scope of study was limited to understanding the intensity of impact on sensitivity on the scale and not in profound depth but it can be considered in future to cover this aspect in detail.

Adaptive capacity is the ability of these adolescent girls to develop resilience and adjust to the changing situation. Physical changes along with exposure to situations of discontinuing studies, early marriage, enter the labour market and others might have a deep impact on the girl undergoing it. These sudden changes might traumatize her and have a deep impact on her present and future. These impacts are based on factors like income level of family, support of family, education level of family, support of NGOs and government.

High vulnerability situation is when adaptive capacity is low, relative to exposure and sensitivity. Contrarily, if the adaptive capacity is high it helps in reducing the effects of exposure and sensitivity, and in turn reduces vulnerability. (Thomas et al., 2018)

Interview schedule was prepared and used during the mapping process and the adolescent girls belonging to marginalized sections were dealt in very subtle manner and it took time to collect data from these girls. Initially, the data was collected based on questionnaire and during data collection the response of these girls were recorded and to understand the exposure and sensitivity towards vulnerability interviews at length were conducted. The team focused to understand the reasons of these adolescent girls for discontinuing education during the Covid-19 pandemic and access their willingness and ascertain the problems faced by both the girl respondents and their family. Vulnerability was classified in three categories as stated in Table 2.

Table 2. Vulnerability Indexing

Vulnerability Index	Score	Condition
Vulnerability	1	If any One condition is met
High Vulnerability	2	If any Two conditions are met
Extremely High Vulnerability	3	If Three or more conditions are met

(Source: Self compiled with Protsahan India team)

Above stated vulnerability index was calculated based on the score (1-3) where the respondent is marked vulnerable if any one condition stated in Table 3 is met, the respondent will be marked as highly vulnerable if any two conditions stated in the below table are met and if a respondent scores 3 it means she is extremely vulnerable if three or more stated conditions are met.

Table 3 states the conditions to access vulnerability index of the respondents

Conditions to access vulnerability index	Status
Family Income (for a family of 5)	<Rs 10,000 per month
Basic Documentation (Aadhar card, PAN card, Labour card, E-shram card and Ration Card)	Not available
Basic Healthcare	Not able to access
Basic education for the children	Not able to access
Linkages to government schemes (Aaganwadi, Laadli Scheme and any other government scheme)	Not able to access

(Source: Self compiled with Protsahan India team)

These conditions were compiled based on the spectrums like access to resources, governance, culture and knowledge have been considered in the past to understand the social aspect of vulnerability. Thus, conditions to access vulnerability index were developed based on respondents demographic profile like family income, basic documentation (Aadhar card, PAN card, Labour card, E-shram card and ration card), basic healthcare, basic education for the

children, beneficiary of any government scheme (like aanganwadi, laadli scheme or any other government schemes).

Demographic Profile of Respondents

63% adolescent girls belonged to the age category of 10 to 15 years and 37% were in the age category 15 to 19 years. Majority constituting 54% respondents hailed from Bihar followed by 27% from Uttar Pradesh, 15% from Rajasthan and merely 5% from other states.

85% of the respondents belonged to a family of 5 and more members, 13% were family of 4 and remaining 2% belonged to a family of three and less. Whereas the earning members of the family were solely 1 in case of 58% respondents, 30% cases had 2 earning members in their family, 9% had 3 earning members and 3% respondents had 4 and more earning members in their family. Such large families with few earning members tend to detrimentally impact the nutritional and educational outcome of children (Kugler et al, 2017).

Fig. 3. Primary occupation of parents
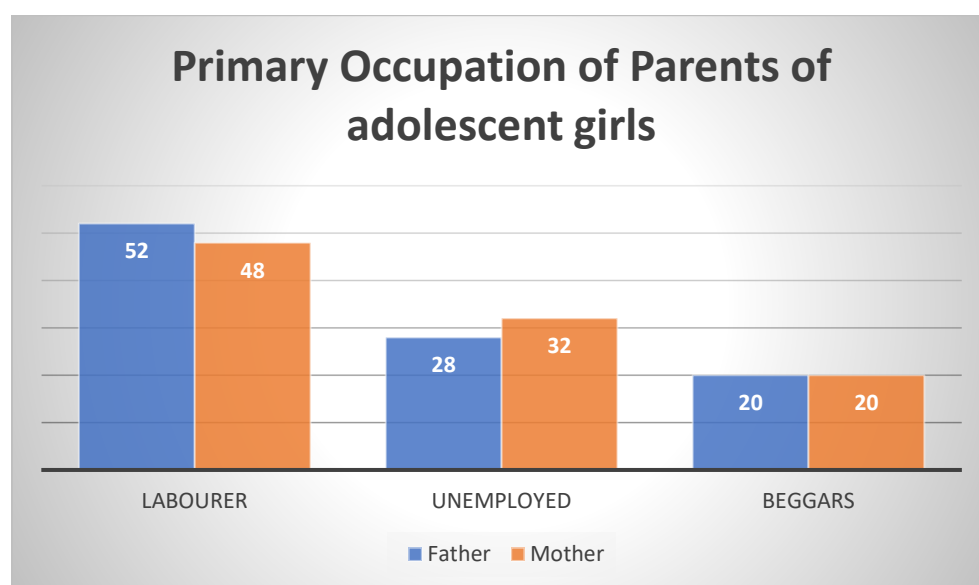
(Source: Self compiled based on primary data)

Only 52% respondents' fathers were in employment (mostly informal sector working in construction sites, sweeper, rickshaw drivers and rag pickers) remaining 28% were unemployed and 20% were beggars. 48% respondent's mothers were employed as domestic helpers and daily wage laborer, followed by 32% who were housewives and 20% were beggars. It reflects the vulnerable position of these adolescent girls, especially at this time of pandemic when economic activities were allowed only in essential services and other arenas were restricted or suspended. Further investigating into data stated the vulnerable condition of these adolescent girls in terms of monthly earnings as stated in Table 4 reflecting that 75% adolescent girls don't have access to

resources with majority coming from households where monthly earning is less than Rs 8000 per month prior to Covid 19 pandemic and during the pandemic approximately 75% respondents either parent lost their job.

Table 4. Family income of respondents

Particulars (per month)	Responses
Less than Rs 5,000	31
Rs 5,001 to Rs 8,000	44
Rs 8,001 to Rs 10,000	16
More than Rs 10,001	8

(Source: Self compiled based on primary data)

These situations could likely have bearing on continued schooling of these girls during resource deprivation exacerbating their vulnerability (Jha and Jhingran, 2006 and Usaini, M. et al, 2015). Migration is also an area of concern and especially during this period when statistics obtained from studies also suggested that almost only 4% of the total population of the migrants received rations that were allotted by the government, and 29% did not receive rations despite having ration cards (Farooqui and Pandey, 2020). Almost 90% of the migrants either faced loss of pay or a reduction in their salary (Shahare, 2020). International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated a decline of 22.6% in the wages of migrant workers post lockdown (Gothoskar, 2021). A survey conducted across 179 districts in India from May 30, 2020 to July 16, 2020 found that around 35% of the migrants went without any meal the whole day (Pandit, 2020). Migration poses major challenges for education systems in normal circumstances (GEMR, 2019) so it can be projected with reverse migration it would have been difficult for students (especially adolescent girls with burden of sharing household chores) to continue their studies in challenging times when either or both parents were struggling to retain their job. 13% respondents broke down when they informed they lost their father's life to Covid-19 and it was either their mother who were currently working to support the family or elder sibling (brother or sister), if any.

79% respondents reported having inadequate food to feed the dependent members of the families. School-going children, who were at home during lockdown did not had access to mid-day meals indicating higher incidences of hunger and malnutrition. Adolescent girls faced discrimination in nutritious meals being provided of inferior quality from their male counterparts in normal times and when struck with pandemic their nutrition was neglected. Majority girls felt the discrimination happening with them in terms of nutritious food and they showed the desire to join school, one reason being the mid-day meals provided to them. In the case of the school-going girls, this only gets heightened given the nutritional discrimination they face.[2] It tends to have an impact on these growing girls and many accepted the discrimination and were satisfied seeing their brothers being fed nutritious meals and they being deprived. This is not a good sign as if these girls are accepting this discrimination, it won't take much time for them to think it to be

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[2] (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4167551/)

normal and follow it in future with their children as well. It will definitely have a repercussion on the upcoming generation as well.

Despite central-government funded schemes and included Jan-Dhan Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, Building and Construction workers welfare fund and PM Kisan Samman Nidhi and others. These respondents were not enrolled in any of the schemes and they were only partially aware of the schemes run by government.

80% respondents lived as a tenant and only 20% owned the home they were presently living or lived with a close relative/ acquaintance. Merely 48% had access to toilet with proper waste disposal reflecting these girls did not even have a safe and hygienic toilet which is a necessity especially when these girls are in menstruation phase exposing them to diseases and exploitation. 88% respondents had access to mohalla clinic for primary healthcare and 12% still didn't had access to primary healthcare. Of which, 77% respondents had access to life saving immunizations and 23% did not had access to these immunizations.

Findings and Observation

It was observed that majority of adolescent girls who were associated with Protsahan India even for less than a year experienced change in terms of confidence, ambition, resilience and sense of independence. Protsahan India worked at ground level and filled the void that remained despite the presence of central and state government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi called on Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) to help the government by providing basic necessities to the underprivileged and continue supporting vulnerable populations.

In their almost a decade of work, the outcomes of their programs have been incomparable. All of the girls enrolled at their Centre of Excellence (CoE), who have appeared for their board exams, have cleared with excellent scores, some scoring as high as 80-90% in most subjects. 88% of the girls that they currently work with have not only been able to receive higher education, but have also shown an improvement in their annual school scores.

During lockdown the work done at the grass root level by Protsahan India team was commendable they provided rations to more than 26700 households in Delhi slums, provided resources at their centres to be accessed by the adolescent girls when their schools were closed and they did not had access to resources to continue their online classes, provided counselling to adolescent girls and their families. They also raised alarm through their reports of heightened cases of violence against children and adolescent girls and tried to reach out to girls and their families in times od distress and provide them with essential resources. During lockdown the team distributed simple relief kit consisting of need based customized assortment of 10 kg flour, 10 kg rice, 4 kg pulses, 2 kg potatoes, 2 kg onions, salt, sugar, essential spices, tea, biscuits and sanitary napkins.

Protsahan India Foundation has developed their model of work as the HEART principle (Healing, Education, Art based Life Skills, Recovery and Technology) that is based in the premise of working through the power of empathy, creativity, life skills, and active listening. Their focus is on healing the broken childhoods using the creative power of various art forms like painting, cinema,

design, film making, dance, music, photography and meditation and helping the girls with their education through an integrated after school program.

Having a model of work as the HEART principle based on trauma informed compassionate care, Protsahan India Foundation aims at addressing the adolescent girl framework for achieving their ultimate goal of fighting child abuse and healing and empowering girls. They want their girls to thrive, learn, have access to clean environments, and be protected from violence and exploitation.

Vulnerability Mapping

Exposure

53% respondents were engaged in earning activity like begging, child labour and sex work prior to enrolment in Protsahan and 47% were not enrolled in any earning activity. 20% respondents shared that they have risk of child marriage and remaining 80% respondents didn't feel the risk of child marriage.

Mere 46% respondents received 3 nutritive meals a day at home and 54% did not receive these 3 nutritive meals. 72% respondents experienced domestic violence at home and only 28% did not experience domestic violence at home. 59% respondents were at high risk of sexual abuse and remaining 41% were exposed to moderate, low and no risk of sexual abuse. 64% respondents were of the view that they did not get ample time to study and only 36% got ample time to study.

Sensitivity

It was interesting to notice that initially majority of girls didn't notice that they were sensitive to the discrimination they were facing but after the interactive sessions these girls opened and, in the discussions, almost all showed dissatisfaction towards the discrimination they had to face. They were keen to return back to formal schools but being aware of the resource constraints and the problems faced by their families they were ready to follow their parents decision. It was also observed that many girls developed a negative attitude and reluctance for participation in any group activity.

Adaptive Capacity

In the given timeline and resource crunch it was not feasible to reach out to all the girls supported by Protsahan India team but we tried to understand how the team is reaching out to these girls and improving the adaptive capacity so that these girls continue their education.

2442 adolescent girls and their families identified in the group of vulnerable to highly vulnerable category were supported by Protsahan during Covid-19 (2020 and 2021) in West Delhi. Of these 902 girls fall in the category of extremely high vulnerability and 238 comprising 26.4% adolescent girls were supported by Protsahan and were enrolled in their GEC and 73.3% girls were supported by the team despite they not enrolled in their GEC stated in fig. 4.

Fig. 4. Adolescent Girls Supported by Protsahan India Team during Covid 19 Lockdown
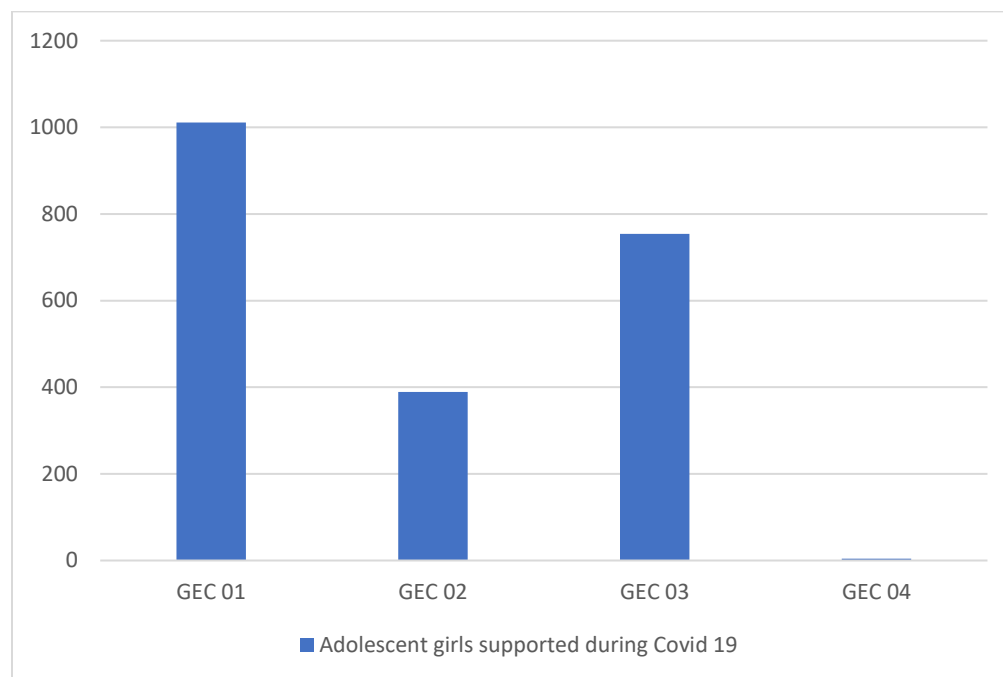
(Source: Self compiled with the data shared by Protsahan India)

The support extended to vulnerable adolescent girls by Protshan India during and after lockdown are as follows:

(i) Nutrition and healthcare support - Ration rich in protein content

(ii) Linking the unlinked with government schemes (either Central or State)

(iii) mainstreaming the marginalized girls with access to digital divides

(iv) Academic and life support skills to girls (counselling to girls exposed to violence)

(v) Scholarship for vulnerable girls

(vi) Enrolment in STEM courses

(vii) Cowin registration and vaccination drives in slums

(viii) Fellowship program for employability enhancement of younger girls

Protsahan India Foundation follows a "Trauma-Informed Compassionate Classroom" model that includes Creating A Safe Space For Socio-Emotional Development, Building A Sense of Trust

and Empathy, Establishing Predictability and Academic Rigor, Offering Choice Based Creative Arts Options, and Steering the Child Towards Socio-Economic Stability. It deals with at-risk adolescent girls who are (have been) dealing with various levels and types of trauma and therefore adopted its current trauma-informed care approach in order to 'heal' them. The organization believes in a "Theory of Change" that rests on three pillars:

Empathy - It involves delivering emotional and psychological support, complemented with support in formal school education, enables young adolescents' girls to be empowered to take charge of their own lives.

Creativity - Creativity of art, theater, dance, music, film-making, and photography not only provides healing for the childhoods broken by abuse, but also ensures improved long term learning outcomes in formal school education, and a better quality of life through higher self-confidence for young adolescent girls.

Life Skills - Life Skills training needs an ongoing systematic approach towards imparting soft skills and entrepreneurial skills that have a direct impact on the life of an at-risk young adolescent girl. It is essential to ensure that the girls understand the importance of their voice and their thoughts in everyday life situations. Life skills training includes personal safety education (good touch bad touch and training against child sexual abuse), critical and creative thinking, everyday problem solving and decision making, effective communication and social skills, interpersonal relationships, coping with emotions and stress, self-awareness and self-worth, greater participation in governance, entrepreneurship development, leadership building and social enhancement, ease of accessing digital services, awareness of rights and entitlements, financial inclusion, mentorship and career counselling.

Proposed Framework to Help Vulnerable Adolescent Girls

Based on the observations and data collected during the study a framework stated in fig. 5 was proposed to address the issue of gendered differential impact of school closure on adolescent girls. The framework constitutes major steps to access vulnerability of these girls in terms of exposure to risks by the internal surroundings (their parents, friends and family) and external surroundings (neighbors, society and culture), sensitivity (high or low) and adaptive capacity measures to be taken together by the stakeholders (their family, NGOs, institutions, society and government) to help these girls in overcoming the barriers in joining back the school. With the help of NGOs working with adolescent girls' government can include inputs collected by them, understand and incorporate measures to provide equal rights to these girls and not let them drop school in the dearth of resources and societal norms. If timely action is taken then we can together bring these girls back to school, improve the drop rate of girls in secondary education, empowering these girls and achieve SDG Goals by 2030.

Fig. 5. Proposed Framework
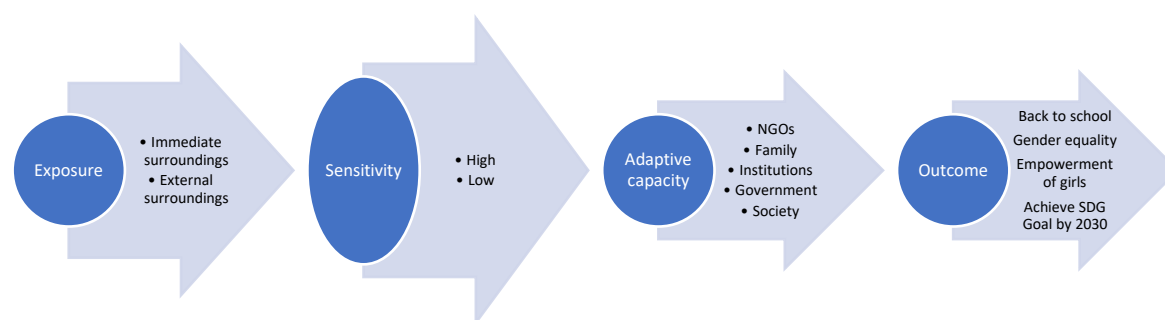
(Source: Self compiled based on the outcome of the study)

Conclusion

The existing societal norms, structural barriers of caste and stigma towards adolescent girls' education poses a threat of reversing the visible gains made in terms of gender parity in education and empowerment. The gendered impact of the pandemic on education of adolescent girls (in terms of high-risk exposure and limited means) can have a deep-rooted impact on the coming generations if this concern is not addressed comprehensively. This discourse can be addressed to a great extent if corrective measures are timely responded by understanding the root cause of the problems faced by adolescent girls and their families and responding to their specific needs and ensuring its inclusion in the policies framed by government. We have to reach the SDG goals in the stipulated time period and it will only be achieved by filling the void and adopting an effective framework to help marginalized families in distress, especially on economic front in order to prevent child marriage, children entering the labour market and discontinuing the school.

The study identified various challenges faced by the girls in their adolescent at the wake of the pandemic, when they are out of school. These challenges are infrastructural barriers, gender-based discrimination, exposure to abuses, child marriage and sexual exploitation within and outside their home. The study suggests towards the long-term impact on these adolescent girls. School closure is not only impacting the girls currently but also highlights that if corrective measures are not put into practice, it would surely have an impact on the entire generation. The study also covers the measures adopted by government to address this issue; however, it states that not much is done for this vulnerable group and also leaves few questions to be answered by the stakeholders: Are we prepared to help the adolescent girls join back the school? What remedies are we providing to these girls belonging to marginalized section? What measures are being taken by the stakeholders to help this entire generation overcome the problems related to school closure?

So, the question still remains the same that despite the aids provided by the government and individuals, such sensitive issue needs to be highlighted and timely corrective measures needs to be taken seriously to get these girls back to school or it will definitely have an impact on the entire generation. A holistic approach needs to be taken by the stakeholders to ensure educational equity and inclusive environments to fill the void for these vulnerable girls.

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