

ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND AMBITIONS IN COVID-19:

Dreams amid Disease and Dystopia.



ProtsahanTM
India Foundation



Protsahan India Foundation is an organisation working to empower girl children from difficult backgrounds of poverty, violence and abuse to access quality education, healthcare and gender justice through direct action on ground in communities and through systemic change via advocacy and research. It empowers children and stakeholders to create a future full of possibilities where children and adolescent girls, both survivors and those at risk of abuse, find an environment conducive to their safety, healing and growth.

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ADOLESCENT GIRLS **AND** AMBITIONS IN COVID-19: Dreams amid Disease and Dystopia.

A perceptive research report by Protsahan India Foundation on the ground-level documentation of the voices of over 400 marginalised adolescent girls during COVID-19.

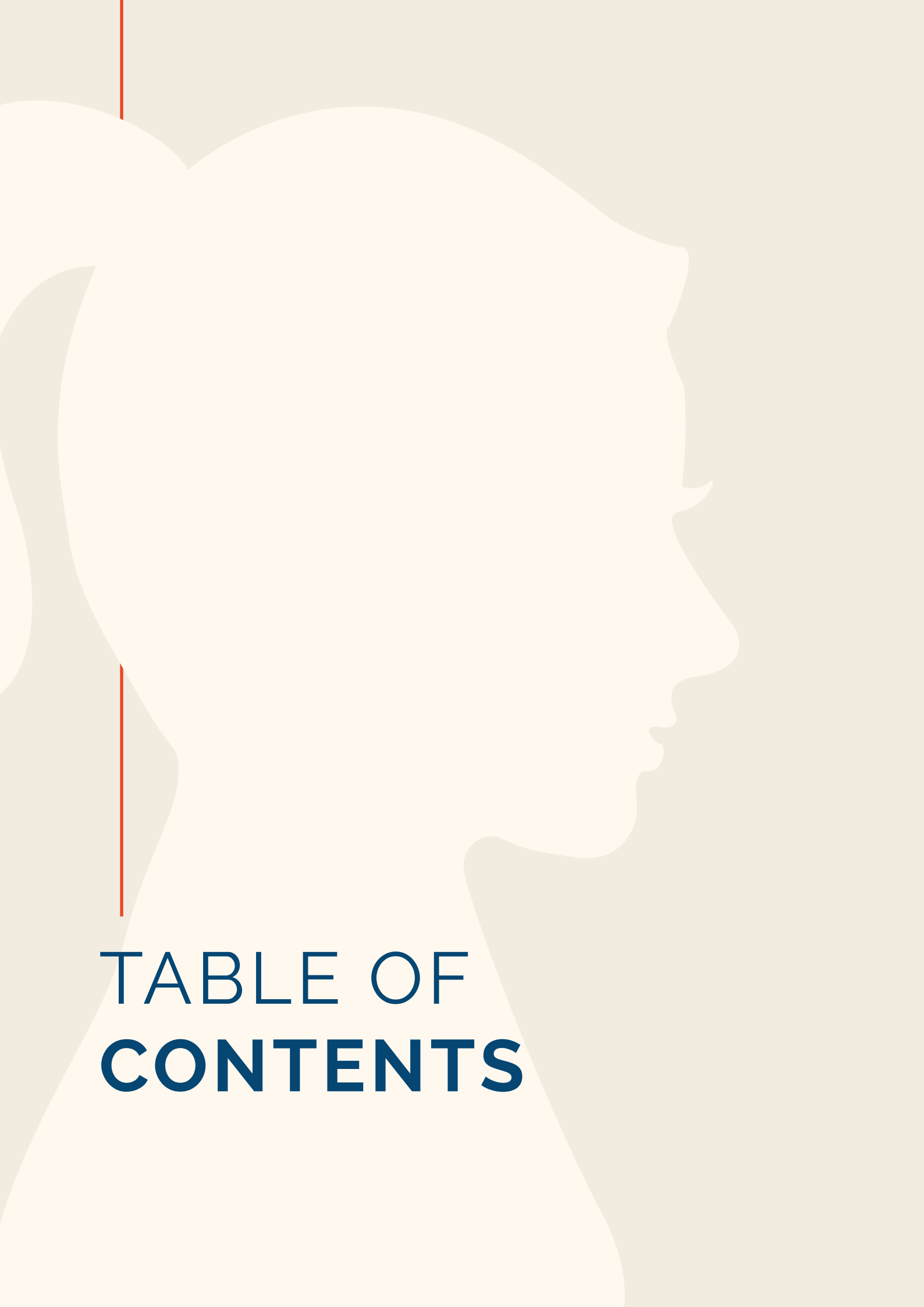


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FOREWORD

As the world continues to reel under the COVID-19 impact and as India grapples with the increasing divides and inequities in society, the aim of this report is to present a cohesive and collective voice that represents the unique trials and struggles of the country's underprivileged adolescent girls. Protsahan India Foundation has always believed in listening and reaching out to those at the last mile who are left out of the fold of policy engagement and outreach. As the pandemic is deepening the caste-class-gender gaps, and as the socially and economically weaker and vulnerable sections are being subject to societal phobia and prejudice, we have attempted to study the impact of Covid-19 on the already prevailing modes of discrimination that are impacting those lives that are already subject to intergenerational poverty.

Even as we, our partners and the civil society across the country has undertaken relief efforts, this research study has been an endeavour to gather and document insights into the on-ground reality of specifically for the adolescent girls during the pandemic. Our approach was to listen and not preach; to not overburden young minds, rather record and reflect on their

aspirations and dreams that are being thwarted due to the pandemic-induced lockdown.

We hope that these voices, findings from the survey questionnaire and recommendations can be used for informed and integrated, value-oriented toolkit for funders, the government, civil society organisations and other supporters of adolescent girl programs. We hope this facilitates better engagement with the communities that most require such support, solidarity and advocacy; we hope this knowledge sharing impetus can create more robust models of last-mile delivery of services and care for adolescent girls. This concerted effort, one of the first of many studies documenting the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, offers a space for empathy. We hope that it helps promote a more respectful approach to addressing their challenges and in empowering the dynamic, young, adolescent generation of India who are struggling due to the pandemic.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The study has been a labour of commitment and contributions of many. We would like to express our gratitude to each and every individual and organisation that have been instrumental in shaping up this report through the ideation and implementation stages. We take this opportunity to express our heartfelt gratitude to Protsahan's partners like, Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives, Salesforce CSR and Unicef India that funds and supports a critical part of Protsahan's on ground programs for most vulnerable adolescent girls holistically along with each and every participant who took out their valuable time to record and document adolescent voices.

We are extremely grateful to our global partner HundrED.org, a Finland based Education non-profit that has helped our work using the H.E.A.R.T. approach go global in the last two years. We are grateful to all those adolescent girls who participated in the survey and consensually shared their stories with us. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the world is unprecedented, and as we continue to track it, we hope that our recommendations will contribute to shape the responses of civil society agencies, sponsors, and the government towards adolescent girls.

We would like to acknowledge the following people who made this intervention and data collection possible even at the height of the pandemic in the country.

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INTRODUCTION

It's the surge of the pandemic amid the sweltering Delhi heat where a typical day in summer wears a deserted look courtesy the nationwide lockdown, which was first announced on March 25, 2020, as a containment measure to combat COVID-19. Picture long, narrow, serpentine lanes in a Delhi slum colony. *"Yes, it's a regular day for us; we have been out on the streets since morning. We understand that the virus is deadly but we are helpless; no one comes here to talk about Corona. We usually skip our lunch and have rotis only at night now,"* says Renu (name changed to protect identity), an adolescent girl, all of 14, roaming around the lanes and the adjoining streets with her 10-year-old younger sister in tow, both looking run-down and neglected in their worn-out frocks that cover no undergarments. Their mother couldn't be least bothered about their thus roaming around—open to street-side abuse and assault not uncommon to children in that area or kidnapping, or even trafficking. **If, on the one hand, the girls' family in this colony is financially hard-pressed to even buy undergarments for their growing girls, their young mothers, on the other hand, reveal that the lockdown has only upped the prospect of having unprotected sex and getting**

pregnant again. Where does that leave the vulnerable young girls on the streets? Well, with no protective and nourishing cover and the added burden of child-rearing chores pertaining to their siblings. It must additionally be noted that women, and even adolescent girls, often feel pressured to "eat last and least" in the role of primary and secondary caregivers. **In fact, one of the main reasons why girls dropped out of schools more than boys during covid was because they were burdened with a disproportionate share of household labour.**

Renu's story above is not a page out of any dystopian fiction. It is a real-time, compelling narrative that Payalji as she is referred to as, a social worker with Protsahan India Foundation, encountered on one of her on-ground visits to slum colonies, as part of a survey undertaken by Protsahan and partner organisations Deepalaya, Martha Farrell Foundation and Shades of Happiness Foundation. And this is not the only story to have come out of the envelope of darkness surrounding the neglected slum colonies like the one inhabited by Renu and her family.

During the course of the groundwork for the survey, another instance in another Delhi slum came to light—that of 13-year-old Roshni (name changed to protect identity) who was sexually abused by her father with both the child and mother sometimes beaten up during the lockdown phase. Roshni asks: **"I love my father, but why does he behave like this?"** Now with schools closed during lockdown, her mother takes her to the nearby factory where she works as a daily wage worker because she feels that the hazardous workspace of the factory is still better than the unsafe home where the perpetrator lives. Roshni is not alone; there are several like her. In fact, in another instance, **all three minor sisters were found to be sexually abused by their father as was told to the field worker during the fieldwork undertaken for this survey.** The organisation is currently providing recourse and rehabilitative care to the girls with minimum dependence on institutionalization and maximum involvement of the care by community members. One of the challenges that complicate the process of seeking justice especially in cases of incest is internalised patriarchy wherein a lot of times girls and women accept

domestic violence (and incest) as part and parcel of their existence within the traditional framework of the family. In fact, so normalised is this internalised violence that it prevents them from even acknowledging domestic abuse or incest, as violence.

As per a 2014 United Nations report on youth population, globally India holds the first position with 356 million people falling in the 10-25-year age profile. With insufficient comprehension of COVID-19, and no tools and training to deal with it, coupled with the confusion and insecurity of loss of economic and social security owing to the pandemic, families like those of Renu's and Roshni's are turning more hostile towards the girl child. **It is extremely important to note here that we are not saying that these are altogether new concerns for children and girls in India, but they have certainly been severely exacerbated during this lockdowns induced by the pandemic.** The shadow pandemic of violence during Covid-19 is disastrous for the girls of 21st-century India that is bursting with its millennial population, estimated at 400 million accounting for 46 per cent of the country's workforce. The prevailing gender-based biases in access to food and nutrition, health and hygiene,

education and opportunities, early forced marriage and unsafe childbirth practices and other choices are only augmented owing to this shadow pandemic of hidden violence and abuse. On one hand, there is the promise of a digital revolution and penetration of education even in the remotest areas by the State, and on the other, a resurgence of age-old gender-based discriminatory practices during the pandemic.

Are we failing the young girls and putting a question mark on their dreams and desires, now more than ever, under the prevailing humanitarian crisis of COVID-19? Are we compromising the blueprint of ambition of our disadvantaged adolescent girls and thrusting them further into a bubble of dystopia? At this critical juncture where the Indian society runs the risk of regressing 20 years and turning its back on the progress that gender empowerment has been able to achieve, ***it is important to listen to its adolescent girls. The act of listening to and documenting the lived stories of children/young girls itself is radical.*** Why radical? Children/adolescents and women especially those belonging to economically and socially weaker sections who have been subject to intergenerational poverty have always struggled to make their voices heard.

One of the major problems in feminist or minority studies is muffling of authentic voices or taking the pen away from those, in this case mic, who should be the active voices and not reduced to passive subjects or mute props in a grand scheme of things. Hence, this survey adopted the tone of listening. Our approach was to listen, rather than preach; to hear, not say or theorise and to empathise, rather than judge. **This survey resisted all temptations of intellectualising the real, ground-level problems faced by adolescent girls in marginalised urban slums of India, who not only lack the necessary tools and comprehension to deal with the threats and risks of the COVID-19 pandemic but are also victims of the resurgence of age-old prejudices. The idea was to listen and present those voices as simply as documented pieces of facts and evidence directly from ground to lead to more informed programming at policy levels.**





INFORMATION AND INSIGHTS FROM NORTH INDIA

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted in **May-June-July 2020** in the midst of the pandemic by a consortium of non-profit partner organisations **Deepalaya, Martha Farrell Foundation, Shades of Happiness Foundation and Protsahan India Foundation**. The representative states where the responses came from were **Delhi, Haryana, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Odisha and Chattisgarh**. Respondents were **416 adolescent girls of ages 11-18**, from marginalised backgrounds with their parents engaged in daily wage work like tailoring, selling vegetables, construction work, farming, bonded factory work, domestic help, manual scavenging, migrant labor, etc.

The aim of this qualitative exercise was to understand the perception of adolescent girls of ages 11-18 years, living in abject conditions of intergenerational poverty. **The objective**

was to hear it from the girls themselves as to what they feel about the denial of access to rights as enlisted by the United Nation Convention for Rights of the Child (UNCRC) during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of the spontaneous responses foregrounded gender-related themes even as the girls shared their personal experiences on what they considered to be violation of child rights.

Mala, one of the three 18-year-old community leaders responsible for drafting the questionnaire, shares that the objective was to elicit "*untutored and spontaneous reactions and responses from adolescent girls, who missed peer contact*" and felt stuck up in the cloistered environments of their homes that were filled with the toxicity of neglect, abuse and fear. The questions were divided into **three parts of education, health and justice** and drafted in a direct, conversational manner so as not to bog

down the respondents. The responses ranged from being deeply emotive and cathartic to heart-warming, eye-opening and shocking. **The spectrum of responses was also dotted with beautiful artwork and powerful poetry as well as emphatic, heart-to-heart answers that stood out for being real and unfiltered stemming from acute lived experiences and observations.** When one of the respondents shared that *"It's not possible to share everything with parents and this kind of a questionnaire*

helps girls like us unbundle and say what we feel and want from the system", it validated the spirit of the exercise. Elements of art as engagement were deliberately put in the questionnaire to understand the psyche of the respondent and her power of expression on the issue. The basic idea was that sometimes unlike an adult, when children are unable to write in or respond to questions, they find clarity and comfort in making art to express their opinion.



OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this report is to provide a well-balanced, insightful and incisive analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of adolescent girls, who were already on the edge, owing to their economically and socially vulnerable backgrounds. In doing so, the core vision of the report is to highlight their plight and direct the attention of political stakeholders and policy makers towards the heart-wrenching human-interest stories in the light of but not limited to data alone. Numbers, or studies of a quantitative nature, though valuable in analysing and predicting macro trends limit individuals to statistics of death tolls/abuse. **The aim is to do justice to the individualistic voices and bring a positive impact on their lives and not reduce them to a collective mass without any agency; rather to marry the numbers with insights for the stories to emerge as tools of effective communication that can be galvanised to channel the respondents' inputs for realising effective change.** Finally, the mission of this report to have the opinions and demands of adolescent girls (from the last mile) integrated into recommendations and suggestions for policy and program designs. And to advance the conversation on rights of adolescent girls amongst the girls themselves and beyond, through destigmatisation and busting popular and gendered misconceptions.

It is our objective to include children and adolescents in programme design, monitoring and decision-making as quarantine and lockdown protocols are disproportionately affecting adolescents and children's lives yet they are rarely included in holistic decision-making processes. This objective is tied to the overall philosophy of Protsahan India Foundation that believes in engagement with those at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid such as to create greater equity for them.



SALIENT FINDINGS



13%

adolescent girls interviewed cited incidents of sexual abuse during the pandemic



17%

children interviewed reported knowing of a "child being married in neighbourhood/family" but chose not to give details

19%

children interviewed mentioned that they or their elder sibling was now involved in "mazdoori (labour)" to supplement the family income for survival



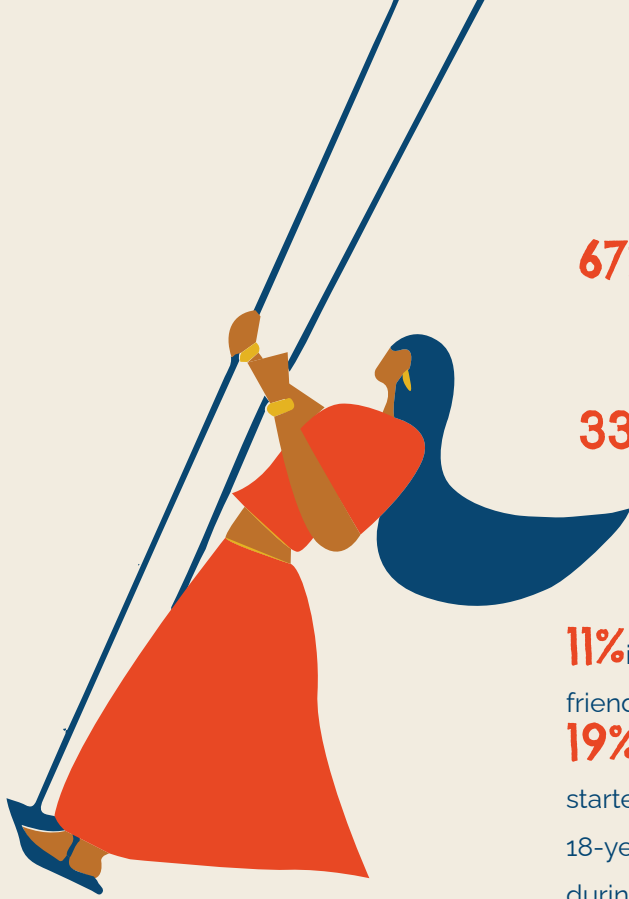
girls interviewed suggested they're considering moving from sanitary pads to using cloth as it's a cheaper option, even though that may not be necessarily more hygienic/comfortable

79%

adolescent girls interviewed mentioned how important education is for them in life and they will not give up despite the pandemic as much as possible, given each of their family constraints.

41%

adolescent girls were experiencing stress and tension on issues related to studies, exams cancellation and non-fulfilment of their aspirations to their fullest potential due to constraints in the family



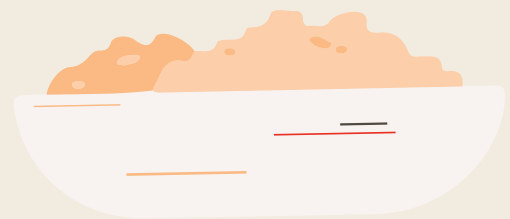
67% adolescent girls interviewed mentioned that they sometimes manage to play and engage in fun activities whereas the rest

33% said, they are completely bored and don't have access to recreation of any kind

11% interviewed cited instances of their adolescent sisters or friends getting married as child brides in native villages. However, **19%** respondents mentioned that parents in their homes had started raising the child marriage issue with reference to a 17- or 18-year old sister of theirs, in anticipation of bleak futures especially during the pandemic due to school closures

36% of adolescent girls interviewed preferred school's mid-day meals because they felt they didn't get enough food at home during the lockdown

23% girls found no difference between midday meals at schools as compared to home-cooked food and the remaining **41%** girls preferred home food more than school's mid-day meals



55% adolescent girls interviewed mentioned that during the lockdown they have faced gender-based discrimination from their own families

88% adolescent girls interviewed said their parents have started fighting more during lockdown and this worries them and they "felt suffocated at home".

71% adolescent girls interviewed mentioned that they miss school as they don't have peers to share their feelings with anymore and that is stressing them out

26% adolescent girls interviewed mentioned that they might have to drop out of school system forever as they're expected to work or get married and education is not a priority anymore

HEART OF DARKNESS: THE PREDICAMENT OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN INDIA

An event of the scale of a pandemic like COVID-19 disrupts existing knowledge systems, supply chains, information networks and social support groups. Apart from the obvious global recession, job and salary cuts and diminishing market values, if anything, **the COVID-19 pandemic has only exposed deep-rooted prejudices and apathy against working classes and minorities on the basis of race, colour, gender, language and religion worldwide.** Out of all indices, gender is one parameter that intersects with the variables of class, caste and religion. In a country like India where systemic discrimination of minorities and class- and caste-based apathy is nothing new, girls and women have been subject to intergenerational gender-based discrimination. And the ongoing disruptions in the sectors of education, healthcare, food and nutrition and social security along with large-scale migration of migrant populations from cities and Tier-1 towns to Tier-II towns and villages have only resulted in **further targeting, isolation and abuse of adolescent girls during the pandemic.**

Punni is a 12-year-old girl in Jharkhand, who has been unable to understand the meaning and import of a lockdown, and the frequent shutdowns and prolonged spells of stay-ins at home have only left her feeling low and depressed. Punni's father took

Punni asks -

“

When will I be able to step out of home? Why am I locked and beaten up? Why can't I go out and play, talk to my friends? I miss going out; I miss school. No one smiles here; I used to share so many stories with my friends, now I have nothing to look forward to in my life. Will this bondage ever end?

”

an arduous journey to their hometown from Delhi in the early months of the lockdown as nothing was left in Delhi in terms of life and livelihood. The mass exodus of several like Punni's father presents a dismal future for them owing to an overburdened informal economy that was already crumbling owing to scaling down or shutting down of several traditional allied work sectors. As per official data, India's economy contracted sharply in the three months to the end of June. The GDP shrank by 23.9%, which is its worst quarterly slump since 1996.

A short conversation with Punni revealed the everyday consequences of “being stuck with her father”:

A. Being locked down together with her father at her home with no outlet means submitting to control that a patriarchal, authoritative figurehead like Punni’s father wields. Punni is under constant surveillance and critique as she is now being monitored at each and every action. With the closure of schools, all her movements are watched and there is an air of suffocation that restricts her free spirit, power of articulation, ability to ask questions, contributing to her low psychological health.

B. It also means living in a toxic environment, one that is rife with ‘excessive physically and verbally abusive fights’ between Punni’s parents. This toxic environment at home affects both Punni and her mother.

C. This situation means no outside play for Punni. Through generations, it has been a challenge for adolescent girls to step out of homes into the open. The outside or non-domestic space is traditionally considered the masculine preserve where men would go out and earn money and take part in social activities. The “home” sometimes also becomes used by patriarchy as a construct to restrict the movement of girls and women. They are equated with being the honour of the home or “ghar ki izzat/maryada” and hence perceived to be in need of male protectors.

D. Punni mentions how even though a basic smartphone is present at home, it always stays with her father. He often chides her when she asks him for the access to phone to complete her schoolwork: ***“What kind of study takes place on a mobile? You want it to talk to boys, isn’t it? I will never give it to you. Don’t think that you can fool me.”***

The Right to Protection from violence, abuse or neglect as per ARTICLE 19 of the UNCRC is being violated as several girls like Punni are compelled to live in unsafe spaces with violent/abusive parents. They face neglect as to their daily, basic needs and their right to healthy and dignified living. The Right to Protection of a child entails protection against child abuse which includes, protection from perpetrators at homes, protection in enclosed spaces especially while being locked in, without any recourse to help or alternative outlets. The Right to Life and Survival and the Right to Protection also entails access to safe spaces, hygienic water and sanitation facilities, understanding of the COVID-19 disease itself, not being forced for child marriages, not being cut off from access to support networks for psychosocial care and emergency helpline numbers etc.

The predicament of Punni is located at the heart of the COVID-19 story, and how it has affected large sections of marginalised populations of adolescent girls. Another aspect of Punni's predicament is tied to the mandatory physical distancing protocols of COVID-19. First though physical distancing is imperative, is it even remotely possible in slums given the closed and cramped conditions that most belonging to marginalised sections live in? They are far removed from meeting the standard protocols of health and hygiene, clean drinking water and sanitation even pre-pandemic. **Second, the call for physical distancing, manifesting as social distancing, has only helped to pander and expand existing gender gaps.** Finally, the loss of daily wages coupled with the pressure of money lenders and payments of mortgaged land have amounted to extreme economic hardships in marginalised families, sometimes to the effect of only one meal being cooked at a household.

What are the implications of the above-mentioned conditions for a girl like Punni? What is the pandemic teaching us regarding the resurgence of gender-based deprivation?

Analysing the direct statements and responses received in questionnaires clearly indicated the following:

A. Generations of gender-based dietary practices, informed by socio-cultural practices start with allocation of food limited both in quantity and nutritional/ calorific value for the girl child. Such a practice is more likely to be legitimised during this time of economic distress. Lack of nutrition is one of the key areas of gender inequality that young girls are exposed to in their growing up years.

B. The closure of schools has left girls exposed to co-sharing spaces for a larger part of the day with abusive and unsupportive family members.

C. Restrictions on mobility including lack of access to open spaces to play, restrictions on interacting with peer groups and the added burden of being thrust with household work with no play and emotional release, add up to the isolation of adolescent girls.



India is an important signatory to Article 2 of the UNCRC, which states non-discrimination of children basis access to equality of services to every child whatever their race, colour, gender, language, religion, ethnicity, disability or any other status. While Article 2 spells out access to child protection services and safeguarding from any work that is dangerous that interferes with their education or that is harmful to their health, Article 32 sets out to gauge if they're being engaged in child labour/ hazardous working spaces.

The sudden lockdown has seen an unprecedented rise in the suppression of basic rights of girls. Among several downsides, being locked down with perpetrators of domestic violence and sexual abuse has given rise to accelerated isolation and continued abuse. In a country like India where, on an average, young girls are not encouraged to raise their voice against inequality or abuse, the current situation has only made the call to report injustice, further inaccessible.

Why are women being pushed into transactional sex?

Some young women are being pushed from begging into trafficking for transactional sex, as the pandemic has worsened the stakes for its girls and young women. "I have seen young girls and women being trafficked right in these streets where I came to distribute ration relief. I specifically remember Heeda bai* (name changed to protect identity) who hails from an adivasi tribe in Ajmer, Rajasthan and has moved to Delhi in search of a better livelihood. She is forced to beg for food so that she can feed herself and her seven children. Her husband is a cobbler and earns barely any livelihood for his family. Even before Covid-19 struck, Heeda was forced to beg on roads and outside temples to earn a living. But during Covid-19, her family has sunk into deep debt and poverty. She says, begging alms don't cut it anymore. She now often, every few days, engages in transactional sex to make ends meet for her family. Heeda bai told us that she got married at the age of 14 years and the groom's family said upfront that only if she would agree

to beg post marriage (as a tradition in this tribe), only then they would marry their boy with her. Heeda got 3-4 utensils with her as dowry. She says that she does not want to leave begging because it has become a habit. But prostitution as transactional sex was something she never imagined she'd have to indulge in to feed her children.

Lockdown has made the ones at the margins, fall right off those very margins."

says Preeti Kumari, social worker from Protsahan, recollecting her onground experience during ration distribution in some very marginalised spaces in urban slums in the country.

Its critical to note that transactional sex puts girls and young women at risk of physical and emotional abuse, exploitation, and a range of sexually transmitted infections and reproductive health problems.

During the pandemic and its resultant limitations, countries worldwide have registered a tipping point in the rising instances of gender-based violence (GBV) owing to increased duration and length of time spent at home by a family often leading to traumatic incidents of violence, abuse and conflict in already dysfunctional ones. Alongside, a huge number of children, including girls, are sheltered in children's homes, temporary COVID-19 homes, facilities meant for children of refugees, settlers or migrant populations, or co-sharing living spaces with foster guardians or relatives other than their parents. As similar precedents like the Ebola epidemic would tell us, this situation is leaving more and more children open to abuse and exploitation. The increased risk of GBV and sexual exploitation or abuse at a time while

schools are closed, can thrust girls into early marriage, unintended pregnancy and in extreme cases, even, sex trade. The moot question here is: What are the odds that girls belonging to marginalised families will be able to **return to schools when classes resume? More and more girls fear being forced into early marriage and pregnancy, the thwarting of their prospects of education, job and thereby economic empowerment, as the current trends point towards widening existing gender gaps in education and economic empowerment.**



One 18-year-old, youth peer leader at Protsahan India Foundation, **Soni Kumari** penned her words in Hindi during the qualitative survey to highlight the rising gender inequities during Covid-19 in her community:

जबो जनम हुई अधजान मे ही पूछी माई
बेटी हुई या घरबा मे नन्हा चिराग है आई
जब दाई ने यो बताई मुसीबत घर को आई
माई के होटो पर मुस्कुराहट ना आ पाई
बेटी आने पर कियू नही रसगुल्ले और मिठाई
ना दिए कोई माई को मेरे आने कि बधाई
माई ने भी घनो तखलिफ मेरे लिए हैं उठाई
माई कि तखलिफ देख किसी का जी न घबराई
पर माई ने मुझे क्या खूब दी संस्कार और पढाई
फिर धीरे धीरे वो वकत आई जिसका दर्द माई को सताई
जिसको राजा, महाराजा और विधाता भी बदल न पाई
दुनिया की रीत है पुरानी बेटी तो होती ही हैं पराई
हर माँ, बाप को दिल पर पत्थर रख कर करनी होती हैं बिदाई
में हो गई अब माई, बापू और सब के लिए पराई
फिर वही सास का नफ़रत और पती का तनहाई सताई
क्यूँ नही किसी ने मुझे अपनाई बस नाम का रिश्ता है बनाई
औरत के अस्तित्व, सम्मान को क्यूँ दुनिया है भुलाई
न जाने ये रीत किस इन्सान ने क्यूँ बनाई
हर रोज चढ रहि है बहू, बेटी की बली
बस बनने के लिए कहानी कोई नई ||

Out of my mother's womb, still not fully conscious,
my mother asked was it a daughter or boy
(the light of the house)—who has come—
when the midwife announced ill-luck
has come home in the form of a girl,
my mother couldn't bring herself to smile;
no rasgullas or sweetmeats for the girl child—
no one to congratulate my mother,
several difficulties my mother bore for me,
but no one cared for her,
and, finally, that ill-fated day came,
that day which no king, emperor or god could ever change,
a custom that spells the girl as the other—
an outsider, or foreigner,
whom mothers and fathers must bid farewell in marriage;
and thus, I became a distant stranger for my own parents,
bearing the hatred of my mother-in-law,
and pangs of separation from my husband,
no one made me their own,
relationships are mere rituals,
why has the society never stood up for a woman's identity?
or her self-respect and dignity?
Who knows who created these customs—
every day, somewhere and everywhere, a girl or daughter-in-law is sacrificed—
and they become a new story.



GIRL CHILDREN DENIED BASIC CHILD RIGHTS DURING COVID-19:

NO FUTURE OF THE THEIR OWN

In the light of the limitations imposed by the pandemic that are curtailing and clipping the wings—of ambition and dreams—of India's millennial and Gen Z girls, it is worth examining how child rights stand violated during COVID-19 and what are its repercussions on their lives.

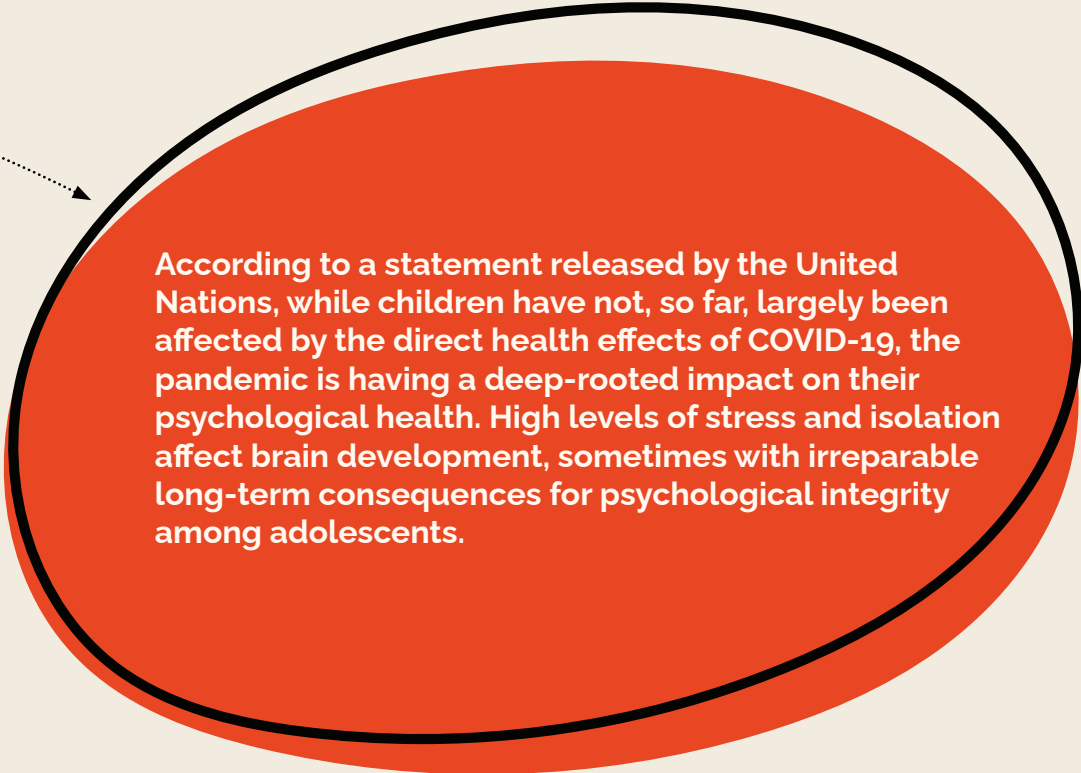
In countries with huge populations and deep pockets of intergenerational poverty, it is a big dream for children to be respected for their rights and privacy; their need for safe and private spaces, their need to access spaces of learning and play etc. It is even more challenging for girls given existing gender gaps.

*Report published by WeForum.org claims that 99 per cent of the world's children are living under some form of pandemic-related limitation on movement, while 1.5 billion children including **743 million girls are cut off from schools**. Children belonging to the poorest of the poor have been worst*

hit by this, who rely on school-based meal schemes as their daily, guaranteed source of diet. As the world reels under the impact of COVID-19 with schools closing down in as many as 185 countries, Plan International and UNESCO signal toward a disproportionate rise in school drop-out rates, which will further tip the scale of development against adolescent girls, leading to further widening gender gaps existing in education. Lack of equal opportunities in education lead to early marriages and unwanted pregnancies, lack of awareness of rights and personality development and increased risk of sexual exploitation. **Education of the girl child in developing countries like India, is a complex paradigm complicated by the consequences arising out of intersectionality of poverty, inadequate menstrual hygiene management and gender disparity in accessing respectful**

healthcare and culture-led misogynist practices. Mobile apps or coding classes are not going to change an iota of this complex web of problems that plague girls on the ground level.

According to a statement released by the United Nations, while children have not, so far, largely been affected by the direct health effects of COVID-19, the pandemic is having a deep-rooted impact on their psychological health. High levels of stress and isolation affect brain development, sometimes with irreparable long-term consequences for psychological integrity among adolescents.



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THE NEW CLASS OF LIMITATION

CLOSURE OF SCHOOLS OR CLOSURE OF FREEDOM?

The lack of adequate social security in the time of economic hardships caused by the pandemic is posited to have negative trickle-down effects on families that were already struggling with costs of educating their daughters added with the community pressure and stigma to get girls married off early. *While many girls will continue with their education once the school gates reopen, there will be several others who will never return to school. Will the State's existing responses to education of adolescent girls be able to bridge the widening gap? Is India listening to its girls so as not to fail them and regress 20 years backwards and nullify the progress made in girl's education so far? Is the closure of schools translating to curtailing of freedom; are adolescent girls being pushed into another cycle of bondage at homes?*

As part of our survey findings, 27 per cent had access to smartphones at home, 11 per cent had access to laptop or computers at home while 62 per cent didn't have any access to any form of online

learning and have not been able to access completely new education material of the new academic session post March 2020.

Diksha app, Google meet, WhatsApp were the top three apps through which the adolescent girls were accessing online education content during the pandemic.

One of the respondents said, *"My Internet packs expire too soon with video classes and my father is unable to recharge due to lack of money"*. Another pointed out that *"It's difficult to grasp everything in online classes, it is not the same as face to face classes with the teachers"*, and yet another girl said that *"there is no concept of clearing doubts after an online class like in a physical class in school"*. One of the respondents feels that *"online classes are a mere formality wherein teachers also lack patience"*, and even worse as another points out the *"mobile exposure for too long is bad for her eyes."* The issue here is understanding the nuances of online classes for first generation online learners, as opposed to merely introducing a new medium of education as the forceful "new normal".

This is not a long-term solution unless one is able to implement corrective measures sustainably.

The Gender Divide in Technology: While the rise in the consumption of smartphones and data is attributed to a burgeoning population of youth, mainly millennials, there is a deep gender divide that points towards a disproportionate lack of access to technology. A 2018 Harvard Kennedy School study had estimated that while 71 per cent men use mobile phones in India, a much lower 38 per cent of women do so. Some of the significant findings of the study titled Online Safety and Internet Addiction and conducted among adolescents in Delhi-NCR by Child Rights and You, are worth looking at: 76 per cent of the respondents used the Internet for less than two hours per day. 40 per cent of the respondents used the Internet as a studying-aid, while 38 per cent of them used it as a resource for extra-curricular activities. One in three adolescents reported going through negative experiences on the Internet. Around 10 per cent of the respondents disclosed being subjected to cyber-bullying. Only one in two adolescents reported the cyber-bullying incident. 48 per cent of the respondents displayed any level of addiction to the Internet, and severe Internet addiction was observed in one per cent of the respondents and it was mainly observed among boys.

This disparity exists in access to online classes, gadgets or electronic devices and Internet bandwidth. The lack of access fuelled by the existing urban/suburban and have/have-not divide has been pushing vulnerable adolescent girls to a cycle of depression and death. As Kerala started its first session of online classes in June, a class X student died by suicide. The girl, said to be a good student, did not have access to either a TV or smartphone. Being cut off from the fold of digital education can push girls into a prolonged and probably unbreakable cycle of poverty, illiteracy and dropping out of schools, lack of education and economic empowerment as families would be reluctant to let their girls return to schools and spaces of learning. **Uninformed girls with a lack of awareness and agency vis-a-vis their rights will lead to lower rates of participation in the workforce and in safe environmental practices, lack of appreciation of their own culture and those of others, lack of tolerance and maturity and the lack of ability to question and seek justice.**

In suburban areas there are other nuances even within this paradigm of technology divide. *Several adolescent girls do not own but borrow devices from their brothers/fathers and that in itself reduces their independence and diversification of mobile use. And even those with ownership are under surveillance and restrictions that bind*

them to use mobiles only within homes or access "permissible" sites. Existing biases against the girl child and even women when it comes owning/sharing mobile and surveillance on mobile usage fearing love affairs, elopement and loss of reputation/honour of the family is one facet of this gender divide in the use of technology. Technology or mobile revolution and digital literacy can only be effective when it reaches out to girls and women in communities where their representation in decision making is low. In the long run, their economic empowerment via information and access can eventually overthrow the traditional power hierarchies and they can cease to be passive members of households and passive members of society.

Threats of online child sexual abuse and being exposed to online predators and pornography are also on a rise during the lockdown. The "shadow pandemic" of online child sexual abuse, among other reports of rising domestic violence, needs both feminist and child-sensitive (both girls and boys) interpretative frameworks of care.

The Exponential Evil of Child Marriage:

One of the respondents to the survey said she overheard the elders of the family discussing how "lesser number of guests means a cheaper wedding" hinting at how this pandemic is the best time to get her elder sister married, who is also a minor.

While her studies have already been stopped with no will from the family's side to resume when things return to normalcy, her elder sister's marriage is already being fixed in a hasty manner. She asks: "Why doesn't the same rule apply to my brothers who still get to study and get to eat and live as they want?" There are no easy answers to her question as child marriage is an evil that has raised its head dangerously during the current time that has left girls more vulnerable than ever in the last two decades through India's development trajectory.

Durgeshati, a 15-year-old girl, says, "Our family has sunk into deep debt due to the pandemic. My mother, who is a domestic helper, is out of a job and my father, who sells vegetables locally, is able to do very less sales these days. Me and my two sisters are finding it very difficult to continue our studies. My CBSE exam fees in government schools is not possible to be paid, that is half of my father's monthly income. Father is trying to get the eldest sister married, so there is one less mouth to feed in the family."

The same sentiment is echoed by 16-year-old Meera*, in a small village in Odisha's Sambalpur region, who blurted out that her father and uncle were keen on getting her married in haste during lockdown as this is the "right" opportunity to get rid of her or the burden of her marriage in a "cheap or cost-effective manner". But what

about Meera's aspirations? What about her "love for clothes and computers", as she tells us? It is Meera's aspiration to continue with her studies and eventually move to the city and get a job. But there is no space for Meera's aspirations and goals in the traditional framework of her household as girls are raised as a burden—as a dowry price is set aside for their marriage early

to wear jeans and shirts and work in the city. I don't want to end up like my mother; I want to learn coding. But I don't think I will ever be able to." Traditional roles that project the goal of marriage and motherhood as the final goal of a girl's life, and that of her family's, are further being reinforced during the lockdown. Further, no long-term incentivisation of education for the girl-child, hinders families



on—and therefore perceived as a liability to be married off. This is especially true for marginalised sections of society where despite the penetration of education, prospects of economic empowerment, job outreach and social mobility, families have not been able to make strong inroads such as to overpower traditional roles assigned to girls as future wives/mothers. As Meera asks, "Am I only good enough for dressing up as a bride and wearing jewellery? I want

harbouring visions of the girl studying to get a job. On the contrary, even when marginalised families send their daughters to schools, they are unable to picture a future where the girls are able to carve out an identity of their own. Intergenerational poverty devoid of any such long-term vision, as parents and family members of the girl-child especially in such settings also sometimes lack the necessary knowledge, awareness and conviction of how a girl's economic empowerment can increase

her and the family's socio-economic capital and could potentially break that cycle of poverty forever. Lacking that awareness and dealing with severe economic blows, such families have quickly reverted to traditional moulds that encourage early marriages of girls.

The pandemic has witnessed a sharp rise in child marriages. With "less number of guests; cheaper marriage" running as the incentive across economically and socially weaker families as revealed by some of the adolescent respondents to the survey. 17 per cent girl children reported knowing of a "child being married in neighbourhood/family" but chose not to give details; 19 per cent children mentioned that they or their elder siblings was now involved in "mazdoori (labour)" to supplement the family income for survival. Early marriage curbs educational and professional aspirations and reinforces the traditional roles assigned by society to girls as mothers/child-bearers and marriage as

the final life goal. Early marriage is that disruption in the frontier of economic empowerment that can snowball into the absence of careers in jobs, businesses, sports and enterprises for girls/young women. Coupled with that, child bearing at lower ages leads to pregnancy-related complications thereby increasing the risk of infant mortality rate and maternal mortality rate. There are also other consequences of stepping into marriages for adolescent girls as they are less likely to exercise self-agency by that age. Lacking exposure and experience in the real-time world and also suffering from low self-esteem and lack of confidence, chances are adolescent girls will hardly be able to act as equal-rights partners in their marriages. Their lack of awareness of women's rights and lack of access leads them to prolonged or continual states of abuse and gender inequality in marriages.

NO COUNTRY FOR GIRLS:

WHO WILL RAISE VOICE FOR THEIR DIGNITY?

In a country where menstruation is already a subject of taboo and drops of blood or blood stains on a girl's/woman's cloth raises eyebrows and frowns, families lack the necessary awareness to prioritise menstrual hygiene and care. The lockdown owing to the ongoing pandemic has only adversely affected the access to sanitary napkins. This survey revealed that 46 per cent girls suggested they're considering moving from sanitary pads to using cloth as it's a cheaper option, even though that may not be necessarily more practical/comfortable.

As per the National Family Health Survey 2015-16, out of 336 million menstruating women in India, about 121 million (roughly 36 per cent) use sanitary pads. The most disturbing part of the survey is that most adolescent girls residing in marginalised households use home-grown and other makeshift material like dry leaves and material from waste worn out old cloth, which is a far cry from standard sanitary practices.

The lockdown has led to the denial of access to nutrition, sanitary napkins and food security for many girls. Compensation for the loss of iron and folate tablets are also denied to young girls, which they otherwise received in their schools pre-lockdown. Access to these basic tenets is tied to the Right to Life, Survival and Development as enlisted in Article 6 of the UNCRC. Further, any vital information regarding COVID-19 and accessing healthcare and food during the pandemic is not reaching children of migrant and displaced families due to issues of language incomprehension, constant travel by foot on roads for hundreds of kilometers without access to sources of news, etc. only further leading to denial of rights and fuelling anxiety in children.

FROM MATHEMATICS TO DANCE :

DREAMS OF INDIA'S GIRLS IN 2021

"I want to be a dancer and I learn dance through YouTube; I just wish everything becomes 'normal'", pleads an 11-year-old, dreamy-eyed, dance aspirant.

From the ambition to be a dancer to lamentation over missing mathematics classes, adolescent voices refuse to be relegated as footnotes in feminist studies. They are charged with a sense of urgency. They register the aspirations of today's young India, free from any cultural baggage that would otherwise see dance as not a respectable profession. These voices also go beyond gendered stereotypes that would see Mathematics as a subject in which girls are not particularly interested in or good at. India in 2021 is an India of social media and reality TV where dance is not a taboo or a faraway dream but an achievable one where a girl from a rural area or slum can also break into its rhythm and movements. And higher education in Math or other STEM subjects is no more out of reach of a girl's ambition or dream box. To understand how Mathematics is a stride in the horizon for a young girl in India, one can turn to popular culture. In a superhit Hindi film (*Hum Aapke Hai Kaun*) song filmed on actor Madhuri Dixit, the lyrics ran: "*Chocolate, lime juice, ice cream, toffeeyan.. Pehle jaise ab mere shauk*

hain kahan...Gudiya, khilone, meri saheliyan....Ab mujhe lagti hain saari paheliyan....Yeh kaun sa mod hai umar ka..." translating as "I've now run out of interests like having chocolates, dolls, ice creams and toys," signaling her transition to adulthood from adolescence. The interesting point to be noted here is the adolescence club of girls is associated with things considered conventionally to be feminine-appropriate; the aspiration for Math is surely path-breaking for this girl and several others like her, in this context. As the respondent says, "*I love Math and always wished to do Engineering; but now I'm scared that I will forever lag behind in pursuing my dreams and may get married early anyway due to lockdown.*" Who will take responsibility to ensure she is able to return to Math and not forced to forego it?

Girls felt that their dreams of "*opening a coaching centre after Class 12th*", "*learning football*", "*going for extra Math tuitions*" have been stalled during the pandemic. Instead, they have been asked to make "*more tasty food at home and learn homely skills*" whereas before lockdown some of them were preparing to audition for reality TV show *Kaun Banega Crorepati*. They describe their dreams and now feel that their wings have been

clipped before they could take flight. Who will be held accountable for the dreams of India's most marginalised adolescent girls who are still being denied access and opportunities to break the shackles of poverty and patriarchy?

"Yes, during the lockdown I have been able to devote more time to entertainment; I have been drawing on sexual harassment themes and sharing them on social media through my mobile phone, sometimes I also write poems and make dance videos and upload them on social media, I was unable to do all these things before lockdown," says one. Such voices though are few. Instead, voices asking "When will everything become like before?", "When can we talk to our friends?", "When can we join a badminton academy and step out to play everyday?", "When can we again visit a mosque to pray for the poor?" are far greater in number and force.

Sharing their opinions on their goals, dreams and aspirations, during the course of the survey, some of the respondents mentioned that they have aspirations of becoming famous sports persons, learning computer science, mastering English speaking courses etc. One girl mentioned, she would have *"wanted to train to be a wrestler but is afraid now wouldn't be possible because of the school closures."* Regarding the frontiers of their aspirations and expectations, the respondents are clear as one 12-year-old explains: *"I will go for picnics with my parents once places open up; I will spend time with my friends and study when schools restart; I will go on shopping when*

I visit my village," There is clarity in this.

Calling for action to justice, a respondent showing awareness and depth in her views says, *"There is discrimination between Hindus and Muslims, between boys and girls and between rich and poor, this has only increased in the lockdown. I don't like this at all".*

Psychological impact: *"When will schools reopen?"* and *"When will this virus end?"* are the pertinent questions almost everyone raised during the course of the survey. The girls are dealing with lockdown-induced stress, further addled by the economic conditions of their debt-ridden families—whose mothers who work as domestic helps have not being asked to join back fully still and whose fathers who work in small factories have faced complete shutdown, never to be opened again. Owing to stressful environments at homes, parent-child communication is also at an all-time low, and entertainment means games like word match/ ludo on phones.

88 per cent respondents said their parents have started fighting more during lockdown and this worries them and they "felt suffocated at home". As the fights between "mummy and papa" have increased owing to "economic hardships", they say it has become difficult to concentrate and invest time and mental faculties in studying. In fact, some of the respondents mentioned that it's good that TikTok, the social media app, has been banned as all that youngsters were doing during lockdown was making TikTok

videos at the cost of studying. *"We get drained out after finishing all the rigorous household chores so much so that we don't get enough time to play with our younger siblings"*, "I have lost any sense or semblance of schedule in my life, it all starts with mother's admonition and drags through the household chores", *"I have started eating in a lopsided manner, sometimes more and mostly erratically, making my body feel puffy and lethargic"*, *"I am mostly exhausted and my eyes hurt due to mobile exposure"*, *"I feel bored and dejected"*, *"I have no clarity regarding our board exams and competitive exams post 12th"*, *"I feel unhealthy"*—some of these telling responses indicate the rising levels of stress. **The stress accumulation can be accounted to worries regarding their studies, the lack of clarity regarding their future, the hopelessness for being unable to pursue their dreams, the fear of losing out, the mundaneness of being home-bound.** Adolescents sit on the cusp of childhood and adulthood with unbounded vision and unbridled energy with which they want to rise and shine above the contexts of their caste and class. Their stories could be of spirited fight and success only if not thwarted by measures of sudden uninformed lockdown, inaccessibility of learning systems, lack of political will and the inability to tap in their growing aspirations



RECOMMENDATIONS AND REDRESSAL :

THE ASPIRATIONAL BLUEPRINT OF MILLENNIAL GIRLS

Often, recommendations for drafting policies do not involve or include suggestions and inputs from those whom the policies target. This report brings forth recommendations straight from those who are in the most vulnerable positions and those working on ground for their upliftment. As we summarise our key insights gained from voices and data documented and collected vis-à-vis on-ground researching and reporting of the pandemic, we hope our recommendations are able to influence positive-impact and gender-sensitive advocacy for underprivileged adolescent girls of India. These recommendations are not formulated by any think tank who may be far removed from ground realities, rather these are opinions, views and feedbacks shared by those who are directly and deeply impacted by the shadow pandemic of lack of access to continuing nutritional supplements and education, respectful care and personal dignity.

Here are some of the suggestions that the respondents have urged the government to look into. While some of the responses like *"feed migrant workers"* and *"give us proper quarantine centres because no social distancing is possible in slums"* offer us an understanding of their primary concerns, a very telling feedback is how *"sometimes mid-day meals in schools are better than home-cooked food; mid-day meals and Anganwadi services should be started just like before in spite of school closures"*. Most have also asked for help to enable and foster studies of children of migrants. What stands out amid the collective of voices seeking rights and respect is girls who had to leave studies due to lockdown urging to be brought back into the fold of education.

Some of the respondents have also left food for thought for teachers and school authorities. While most have urged teachers to pay home visits once every week or once in every fortnight to follow up on online classes and also to monitor their studies, some have also requested teachers to enquire about the students' health and psychological wellbeing and spend more

time in talking to them. *"Above all, teachers should be more patient in these trying times"* is another poignant response. There could, of course be, logistical challenges to implement these suggestions during the pandemic.

However, it is important to note that young girls are looking at teachers who are able to express more empathy and accord them dignity. In fact, home-based monitoring by localised community school teachers and government or government-aided institutions is an established practice to keep a check on the home environment as girls in urban slums are often subject to domestic violence and other forms of injustice and discrimination at homes that hamper their ability to pursue studies.

In India, caste-class-gender related inequalities have always existed as deep-rooted social practices. Wherein progressive policies have attempted with varying degrees of success to alleviate such gaps, gender-related deprivation and inequities have always problematised the question of empowering the adolescent girl. The primary reason for this being endemic gender-based apathy intersecting with poverty and backwardness coupled with dogma sanctioned by religion and culture. However, these intersectional conditions have only exacerbated during the pandemic. **The aspirational blueprint of millennial and Gen Z girls runs the risk of further regressing to pre-existing limitations of their caste, class and religion or conditions of their intergenerational poverty.**

This is particularly painful in the India of 2021 as the country is sitting at the cusp of a digital revolution. The penetration of mobile device and data in remote areas albeit not free of limitations and gender-based biases has fueled new dreams and aspirations. This aspirational blueprint can now come in rainbow colours, Salsa moves, mathematical probabilities, space research, wrestling acts and badminton shots as we could infer from the responses. So, no limit should be a limit when otherwise technology promises more democratic frameworks of social mobility. But the question is in the absence of immediate redressal, will the pandemic take us 20 years backwards in a regressive cycle? A vicious cycle of continued neglect will only upturn the progress achieved so far and endanger future prospects. We need a virtuous cycle upholding values of liberty and equality to prevent this.

It is in this light of the impending continuity of the vicious cycle that our recommendations should be studied. We hope the concerned stakeholders are able to assimilate these voices in both urgent and long-term gender-rights based justice and advocacy during and post the pandemic. As children ***"demand for a government that cares for its children and can hold their hands; that will not discriminate"***, we sincerely hope we are careful and sensitive enough to not let the gaps make any further inroads into their ambitions.





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