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Will education remain accessible to girls post COVID

*Yet again, girls outshine boys in board exam results...*

At the end of every academic year, when I sit down and read the cover story of various newspapers and magazines that talk about the significantly lower achievement of boys compared to girls, I go through mixed emotions. Emotions that range from elation to disappointment.

Elated, I am no doubt about the achievement of our girls, but, also equally disappointed and worried about the prevailing gender gap in education. Women's education has gone through substantial expansion in our country, with a gradual closing of the gender gap in primary education in recent times.

The same, however, does not hold true when it comes to education of girls in rural and semi urban parts of our country. The content and quality of education also varies widely between genders in rural India: when educated, girls are mostly instructed only in basic reading and writing, with much more emphasis being devoted to specific subjects such as needlework, sewing, and household duties.

I find that one of the drivers of the education gender gap in our country relates to family and kinship patterns and their implicit elements of patriarchy. In India, the family is a fundamental unit within which all decisions on education and childbearing, as well as consumption and saving are taken: this is where the decision pertaining to educating the girl child takes root. It is here that the girl either is given the wings to fly or is suppressed for life. Furthermore, the female age at marriage is a crucial factor that usually blocks their path to higher education.

With the prevailing crisis pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem of gender inequality in education is expected to worsen further as the schools and universities went into lockdown. While schools in urban India began conducting online classes, it hasn't been the case in government schools or schools located in rural areas. According to a report published in The Print, only 12.5% of the households of students in India have Internet access at home. There is an urban-rural divide: 27% have access in urban areas and only 5% in rural areas. Moreover, students studying in the rural schools cannot access the virtual classes, as their families cannot afford a TV or smartphone. Further, with their parents losing jobs or having no work during the lockdown, the first ones to endure the most of the crisis are the girls. UNESCO said girls will be the worst hit as it will lead to increased drop-out rates and further entrench gender gaps in education. It can further lead to increased risk of sexual exploitation, early pregnancy and early and forced marriage.

As a result of this crisis, we are staring at the risk of reversing 20 years of gains made in the area of girls' education.

Policy-makers should look at lessons learnt from past crises to address the specific challenges faced by girls. The Government as well as NGOs working in the area of education should safeguard to protect the progress made in favour of girls' education. This can be done by adopting appropriate distance learning practices while considering the digital divide, safeguarding vital services like the distribution of mid-day meals and sanitary pads under the central government's Kishori Shakti Yojna and involving the urban youth to ensure implementation. Each village should have a list of girls enrolled every year and compare that to the census data for that village - number of girls of a certain age enrolled in school must be at least equal to 90% of girl population in that village. If not, the Panchayat should intervene and enquire as to why the girls are not being enrolled.

Let us give our girls' the tools that will empower them to lead their lives with dignity and equality.