

Voices of Adolescent Girls

Deepika Singh and Neha Parti

This article is based on interviews with adolescent girls in the age-group of 12-16 years from seven states across India who are in residential and day schools and informal learning spaces, such as community clubs. The objective was to understand how COVID-19 has impacted their lives, particularly the aspects of schooling, education and learning.

COVID 19 and its impact

The pandemic has unfolded differently for girls when compared to boys and life has definitely changed, but not in the same way for all. For a few of them, this time has given them an opportunity for more family time and to learn new things from *YouTube*. For others, it has made life harder than it already was. A girl in Assam lived with her brother and an alcoholic father who subjected her to physical abuse while she did all the household chores. Floods added to their inaccessibility and since she was also suffering from asthma, she was concerned about how she would get her medicines. In contrast, a girl in Karnataka living in a joint family had access to a phone 24 hours and was supported by the family to pursue her studies.

Anxiety about the future

There are some common strands running through all these experiences which need to be shared. Seventeen (85%) school-going girls echoed what one girl said, '*Agar school nahi shuru huey to humarey sapney adhoorey reh jayenge* (If schools do not reopen, our dreams will remain unfulfilled). We heard this again when we interacted with a few girls (15%) who had discontinued schooling after grades V and VII but were finding meaning in the activities conducted in a youth club.

Dreams of the future meant different things to different girls. For a few, it was being able to pursue their aspirations of becoming a computer engineer, a neurologist or a police officer and for the others, it was being able to go back to playing sports; to return to school so they could continue their studies; to be able to move around freely and be able to meet their relatives, like their grandmothers.

Grade X girls were anxious both about the upcoming

Board exams and about coping with the curriculum once schools restart. All of them had been promoted and had mentally switched to their next grades. However, eight (40%) of them did not have the new textbooks and were using old and borrowed ones.

Nearly all the girls were concerned about the deteriorating financial condition of their families, the uncertainty of food supply. A parent who did not have money to buy food and was dependent on neighbours for rations, borrowed money to buy a phone so that the children could access their lessons. Here are some comments:

Abhi to khaney ko hai, kuch dino baad shayad nahi ho (We have something to eat now, but it may not be so after a few days).

Abhi to padosi khana de rahey hain - daal, chaawal, tel... par kitney din (Neighbours are giving basic ration of lentils, rice and oil... but for how long?).

Understanding our learners

Understanding our learners implies getting an insight into their family backgrounds, learning styles and preferences, readiness to learn and past academic performances. A young girl in Odisha, speaking about the diversity of learners, said: *Sab bacchey ek jaise toh nahi seekhtey, kuch ko zyada samay lagta hai, unka padhai kaise hoga is samay?* (All children do not learn in similar ways, some take longer. How will they learn during these times?)

Relationship with technology

This pandemic has added new dimensions which are critical in designing relevant learning experiences. Access to technology and comfort with it have become important, as have digital learning behaviours. Prior exposure to technology, connecting with a peer network, the attitudes of the learner and her family are also significant considerations in designing learning experiences using technology.

For girls, access to technology is always a highly negotiable affair, whether with parents or siblings. Parental support varies. In the first case here, the girl is grateful to her father for getting a phone, '*Papa ne loan lekar phone laa kar diya, taaki main padhai*

kar saku. (My father took a loan to buy a phone so I could continue my studies). On the other hand, another girl speaks of limited access to the phone, *'Agar main zyada time phone pe hoti hu toh papa gussa karte hai.'* (If I spend too much time on the phone, my father gets angry).

The availability of a phone is the first challenge. For most girls in our study, there was just one shared device in the household. Prioritising access becomes a critical decision. Of the fourteen girls who said they had access to smartphones, four of them could use it for an hour or less, some only for two or three hours a day, and in an extreme case, a girl shared, *'Phone bhai ke paas rehta hai poora din.'* (The phone is with my brother the whole day.)

There were other concerns. In one case in Bihar when our facilitators began forming *WhatsApp* groups to engage girls in the learning process, a parent told them that their daughter could participate only in girls' groups. Parents influencing gender norms for the *WhatsApp* groups reflect unspoken concerns about controlling interactions with boys. Prevalent gender norms take a new form in a technology-driven process. Not only did the girls have to negotiate with their elder siblings and father to get time to use a phone, but household chores also had to be arranged around its availability. Then again, access to the phone does not ensure the confidence in using the device. One girl admitted that she did not press the buttons she did not know about.

These devices were primarily seen as sources of entertainment. They were used to listen to music, to read stories, and to watch art and craft videos, or to play games. During the lockdown, 50 percent of the girls had learnt something new using *YouTube*. It was interesting to see that self-learning was shown in these pursuits, but not in academic subjects, for which they depended on an adult.

Trust

A girl in Gujarat raised this issue, critical to the impending push towards online learning:

'Kispe vishwaas karna hai aur kispe vishwaas nahi karna hai, ye kaise pata chalega online?' (How will I figure out who to trust and who not to in an online space?) This highlights the absence of preparing people, especially young girls, for the digital space with a focus on their safety. Together with curriculum transaction, thought needs to go into creating safe and enabling environments to bring on board the girls and their parents.

Technology and learning

The girls miss the feedback of their learning as now it is harder for them to know if they are on the right track or not. This finding reinforces the *need for validation* that is inbuilt into our education system. The confidence for self-learning is not inculcated. As we move towards technology-enabled learning, the nature of assessments and learning has to include shifts in mindsets.

Educators have to understand what causes learner-anxiety and how technology contributes to it, especially in a situation where neither the learners nor the teachers were prepared for it. For example, a girl said that a document is sent by her teacher on *WhatsApp* and if she is unable to understand, the teacher sends a video explaining the concept. Thus, there is no immediate feedback to check the learning.

The crucial factors here are the abstract nature of concepts, lack of immediate application to see the concept in practice and the focus on more theory as a way to learn. Some girls spoke of the difficulties of learning science and math on their own or through *WhatsApp*-based interactions. This behaviour and expectations are in sharp contrast to those of learning something out of their own interest and demonstrating self-learning as was mentioned earlier.

Role of parents

Gadgets such as smartphones, feature phones and television sets are shared resources in the families of the girls in this study. Only one girl had her own phone. The phones were largely used by the father and the girls could get it for short periods only when he was at home. The TV, if one was there, was largely used for entertainment, not for educational programmes.

Although there is very little parental participation in the online classes, parents and other family members and even neighbours came across as the biggest allies in continuing learning as they encouraged and supported their children's learning. Despite this, all the girls felt the need to interact with teachers to clarify their doubts or to help understand mathematics problems, showing the iterative nature of learning.

For many parents, this was the first time that they had the opportunity to access a *WhatsApp* group and see what is being shared and discussed with their child. This is potentially controlling: parents

largely want the daughters to learn ‘regular’ school subjects. The patriarchal Indian male may not want his daughter to learn to question, be critical or learn about her rights, bodily integrity and other such themes. Resistance and backlash from parents are quite possible if organisations working with adolescents try to share such content and the State is aware of this.

Teachers’ role

The role of a teacher in the lives of these young learners is pivotal. They are the adults who care about their future and are encouraging and supportive. All the twenty adolescent girls that we interacted with were enrolled in government schools or were members of informal learning spaces, such as village-based youth clubs. Teachers and peer educators are important influencers, whom they turned to with their doubts or if they need to talk to someone. In almost all the interviews, the girls mentioned how they missed the encouragement of their teachers, how easy it was to reach out to them in the classroom to understand a particular topic. However, only about 25 percent of girls said that teachers reached out to them during the lockdown period, phone calls and *WhatsApp* being the primary modes of communication.

Equipping teachers

At a time like this, when everyone is experimenting with remote learning, teachers need adequate training to understand their learners holistically before jumping into lesson plans. The training needs to cover multiple dimensions – the wellbeing of students, preparing the ground for students to learn online, preparing parents, digital safety and teachers themselves getting comfortable with the new mode of delivering learning experiences. Training must include having personalised conversations with students to understand their anxieties and the support they need to engage in virtual learning experiences. It means equipping teachers with differentiated strategies to reach out to students, for example, using the Integrated Voice Response System (IVRS), *WhatsApp* and even teleconferencing. Teachers, too, could be anxious about redoing the syllabus and trying to reach out to the students. An adequate support system is needed for them as well, to be provided by the State.

Some important issues

Mental wellbeing has also become important now with the school-goers becoming anxious about the

exams in the ensuing academic year. Many of them had re-joined tuition classes and the non-availability of textbooks was an issue. In Maharashtra for instance, content has been disseminated largely through the radio or TV. Most girls in our study were using mobile phones for music and entertainment with the radio having lost its relevance, hence the government should check if radio sessions are being listened to at all by the learners.

Television presents other problems. For one thing, not every home has a TV set, for another, girls, who are responsible for many household chores, may not be free to watch TV at fixed times when the lessons are being streamed. In the words of a girl from Odisha, *‘Abhi toh 20 percent bachhey hi is se jud pa rahey hain, baki ka kya?’* (As of now, only 20 percent children are able to join/connect. What about the others?)

However, it is unrealistic to think that airing audio or video lessons and sharing of lessons on *WhatsApp* will ensure that learners have got an understanding of the concepts. They do not have an overall learning environment in which they are engaging with the virtual means, they may or may not have an adult in the immediate vicinity, or the time, to resolve their doubts or the private space to do so. For girls, it may be even more difficult as they are always on call for household chores, leaving their own needs unmet.

The State needs to come up with a comprehensive plan instead of responding only to immediate concerns. Some key aspects to be considered are:

- What would the duration and the learning priorities of the academic year be?
- With so much uncertainty about the pandemic, what are the plans for the next few years?
- Will exams be held as usual, or will that change or be cancelled?

As assessment does not necessarily mean exams, new ways can be thought of. It emerged from our interactions that many of our respondents did not know much about the pandemic. So, could the education programmes being streamed also cover topics outside of the syllabus? Such key decisions by the State and its communication to learners may put a lot of anxieties at ease. For the small percentage of young learners who are able to access the web and tech-tools, equipping them with navigating and safety skills are important.

Conclusion

Government schools in India are insufficiently served

in terms of human resources, infrastructure and learning resources. The teaching-learning process in government schools has been a neglected area. Currently, India does not have clear guidelines or policy for the State to respond to the educational needs during an emergency of this nature. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), while emphasising the need for digital learning (digital libraries), has not articulated a clear way forward to bridge the digital divide.

For the adolescent girls in our study, however, these issues are of great importance. They miss their schools, teachers and friends, the congenial chit-chat, playing, the pat on the shoulder; just the very possibility that they could reach out to the teacher if they wanted to - a very positive sign for those concerned about the education of girls. Almost all of them were learning something during the lockdown, even if they had no TV or smartphone at home. They were learning to cycle, make new hairstyles, improve handwriting, brush up on the previous grade's mathematics, grammar, drawing, to name a few. Their desire to learn is very evident and they want schools to reopen (with better toilet facilities), playgrounds and infrastructure. The experiences of previous epidemics, such as Ebola, show that girls may not return to school; more girls would be married off at a younger age. It is truly up to the state and civil society organisations to give wings to the aspirations of the adolescent girls and support

them so that they can re-join the learning spaces, such as schools and youth clubs.

The role of parents, families and community members needs to be understood. Parental outlooks are also changing as livelihood and food insecurity hit hard in rural areas. How to make them allies so that they stay invested in the education of adolescent girls will be a critical consideration. The function of teachers as the other caring adults in the lives of young girls is also very important and calls for attention. The usual discussions among NGOs and government are about the part played by schools and how that is getting reshaped and changed. The role of families now needs to be discussed: how the family can provide a safe learning space, how they can be supported in doing so and the change in their outlook needs to be part of the narrative that is getting built as we all gear up to respond to the educational crisis amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is evident that learning is continuing, and learners are making choices and decisions about what they want to learn and how they learn, even with limited resources, all of which need to be recognised by the State and NGOs as learning. Also, all of us who are in the field of learning and education should be able to design multiple solutions to meet the needs of diverse sets of learners with diverse learning resources, including access to technology, all the time keeping the human element intact.



Deepika Singh is Education Specialist for the elementary school programme, *Anandshala* at Quest Alliance. She has more than a decade of experience in leading large-scale education programmes focused on improving government schools in India. Deepika specializes in programme design, content development, capacity building and use of ed-tech for making education more contextual and addressing the issues of equity and inclusion in education. She can be contacted at deepika@questalliance.net



Neha Parti is the Associate Director of the Secondary School Programme at Quest Alliance. Neha's area of expertise has been in designing educational programmes focused on building 21st century skills and scientific mindsets amongst learners. She is currently leading a programme that empowers adolescent girls with contemporary skills and builds key behaviours for self-learning. She can be contacted at neha@questalliance.net