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Impact of pandemic on female education in India

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Abstract

The novel coronavirus has disrupted the functions of the whole world and India has borne the brunt of the same. The measures to minimize the risk of this corona virus i.e., lockdown and social distancing have affected the lives of every individual more than the fear of the virus itself. The pandemic has hit everyone but the affects vary from person to person and people from marginalized communities are affected disproportionately, especially the women. The already existing unequal structures of the society are exposed by this pandemic. The affect of lockdown on the educational system across the country, leading to the closures of all educational institutions has further worsened the condition of female education in India. This work deals with the major impact of COVID 19 pandemic on female education in the country.

Keywords: Pandemic, lockdown, social distancing

Introduction

The coronavirus was first encountered in November 2019 and has gone to affect millions of people around the globe causing a large number of deaths. It spread mainly through close contact from person to person. The name COVID 19 was announced on 11 February by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said: "We had to find a name that did not refer to a geographical location, an animal, an individual or group of people, and which is also pronounceable and related to the disease." Later on March 11, COVID 19 was declared a pandemic by WHO. According to Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, 'This is not just a public health crisis, it is a crisis that will touch every sector. So every sector and every individual must be involved in the fights.' Governments around the world have had to take several measures to stop the transmission of this virus which also led to the condition of lockdown in India. As the pandemic hits every sector in the country, the entire education sector in India is also affected by the pandemic, leading to the closures of schools, colleges, and universities. There is an unprecedented challenge in front of the education sector in India. The disruption of academic schedules has a significant impact on all the teachers and students across the country.

While everyone is suffering and struggling with uncertainty, the impact of any crisis is always more severe for the most disadvantaged and marginalized section. When the value of services increases in society, then it is the deprived section of the society which is most affected. COVID 19 pandemic has had a very bad impact on education. Since ancient times, women have been denied the right to education, which is a major reason for women's subordinate position in society. The pre-existing gender inequality in education in India is further impacted by the Pandemic. There are several ways in which pandemic has worsened the condition of female education in the patriarchal society of India.

Patriarchy and Pandemic

Patriarchy is a much more dangerous pandemic than COVID 19 pandemic and has severely affected the lives of women in India. It is a social structure based on male dominance over women. Women are always marginalized relative to men, and hence are getting more affected during this crisis.

This is extremely pathetic but Female education is still a big challenge in India. The ratio of female students to male students in schools and colleges was already unequal. The longstanding sexist mindset is further exposed by this pandemic. There are already fewer girls who get education in a male dominated society. The subordination of women in the country has locked women in the homes much before the lockdown.

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The closure of all educational institutions made the condition of female students increasingly vulnerable. The patriarchal norms and sexist practices prevalent in Indian society are affecting more to female students during this crisis.

Early marriages

Even in pre-pandemic times, as per a 2019 report published by the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) – India has the largest number of child brides in the world—one-third of the global total. The idea of marrying off daughters at an early age is driven by patriarchal values. The most effective way of preventing early marriages of girls was to retain girls in the schools and colleges. Now during the pandemic, when everything is closed and female students have to stay at their homes, the risk of their marriage increases. According to International Children's Charity, World Vision, - Coronavirus could put an extra 4 million girls at risk of early and enforced marriage. This is perhaps the most horrifying thing this pandemic is enforcing on female students that due to closure of all educational institutions in India, many of them will never go to schools/colleges again and will be forced into marriages. They were already seen as a burden in any patriarchal society and the already vulnerable condition of the female student is getting further affected because of the uncertainty brought by the lockdown.

Gendered division of labour at home

The division of work between men and women according to their gender roles is usually called the gendered division of labour. Education aims to establish an egalitarian society, citizenship-building, develop a critical faculty in the human mind, and meet the psycho-social and economic needs of society. India has passed the Right to Education (RTE) Act in 2009 which made education free and compulsory for children between 6 to 14 years of age. The act helped in increasing the enrolment of girls in the schools but the act could not help in keeping the girls in school and the main reason why girls have been unable to attend schools was household chores. Because of stereotypical gender behaviour, all household chores are meant to be done by women of the house. However, gendering is the social construction of a patriarchal society but this gendering of the work starts from the very beginning. This promotes gender inequality and also affects the study of a girl child. Now during the pandemic, when everything is closed and everyone has to keep themselves confined in their homes only, it has obviously increased the amount of household works like cooking, cleaning, washing, etc. This bulk of domestic work has added a vast amount of pressure on female students. This is a load that is disproportionately borne by the female students only and hence it is quite difficult for them to concentrate on their studies during this turbulent crisis. The indefinite rise in work pressure severely affects the physical as well as mental health of female students.

Attitude of parents towards sending girls for higher education

Educating daughters was already considered as less important than educating sons. Even after legal interventions, the patriarchal practices continue to exist and hinder the education of females. As discussed earlier,

daughters are treated as burden and responsibility to be shed off at soonest. Getting admission to the next class is like crossing a barrier for a female student. This barrier becomes more difficult when it comes to sending girls for higher education. Now when the pandemic is hitting hard in every sphere and there is utmost uncertainty, parents who are already suffering economic loss will not be willing to send girls for higher education after an indefinite period. This hits extremely hard for all the female students who had to take admission this year. This indefinite gap caused due to closure of all educational institutions will make the admission of female students to higher education even harder.

According to Antara Ganguly, a gender specialist in UNICEF India, - 'In India, girls are generally less likely than boys to transition to and graduate from secondary school. We are concerned that as COVID 19 impacts parents' ability to invest in all their children's education, some of these tough choices will come down even harder on girls.' As this pandemic has led to massive loss of employment and crisis of livelihood, the chances of reduction in enrolment of females increases.

Domestic Violence

According to the Crime in India Report 2018, published by the National Crime Research Bureau (NCRB), a crime is recorded against women in India every 1.7 minutes and a woman is subjected to domestic violence every 4.4 minutes. However, any statistics cannot represent the true picture because such cases are grossly underreported. According to the National Commission of Women (NCW) Chief, Rekha Sharma, 'Domestic violence cases have doubled than what it was before the lockdown.' She says the main reason for the rise of domestic violence is that men are at home and they are taking out their frustration on women and they refuse to participate in domestic work. It not only affects women but also their children. Due to social norms, only girls are expected to perform domestic tasks, they are the ones who are affected more than boys in many contexts. It affects the ability of female students to keep themselves engaged in studies. It can be said that staying in confined spaces and changed schedules has impacted everyone but it has severe effects on the physical as well as mental health of the female students.

Online Education and Female Students

As discussed above, the condition of female students was already pathetic due to many patriarchal practices and sexist mindset prevalent in society and the crisis further worsened their condition. Due to increased mental as well as physical pressure on female students, it is quite difficult for them to concentrate or devote some time to their studies. However, certain other similar factors play a crucial role in online education of female students.

Digital divide

Digital divide can be defined as the gap between those individuals and communities that have, and do not have, access to information technologies. This is the gap between privileged and unprivileged. Females have less technical means/sources and are also less technically trained. According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India, male users account for 67% of India's online population; women account for just 29%. It means there is a greater

digital gender divide in India. The gap is more evident in rural India. This digital gender divide makes online education not inclusive for female students. This digital divide also affects on the basis of caste, class and region. The ones living in rural areas are getting more affected. A class X student ended her life in Valanchery, Malappuram district of Kerala, on June 1 allegedly because she did not have access to online classes. There are several other similar cases. It shows that gender gap cannot be ignored in Digital India which makes online education exclusionary.

Conclusion

This global pandemic has major impacts on female education in India but it is extremely important to acknowledge the pre-existing gender inequality in India which is obviously visible in each and every sector including education. The impact of the pandemic is amplified by these pre-existing gender inequalities. The pre-pandemic patriarchal notions are responsible for widening the gender gap in India. The pathetic condition of female education in India due to a patriarchal social structure is being strengthened by the pandemic. This will be very important to take pre-existing conditions into account while formulating any policy in the response of this pandemic.

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