



Supporting Vulnerable Girls and Young Women in India:

Evidence from the Listening to Young Lives at Work COVID-19 Phone Survey

This policy brief focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of vulnerable girls and young women in India, particularly in relation to the combined pressures of interrupted education, increased domestic work, and widespread stresses on household finances. It analyses the current and potential long-term impact on mental health and well-being, increasing domestic violence and risks of early marriage and parenthood.

The brief presents findings from the Listening to Young Lives at Work COVID-19 phone survey, with key policy recommendations for supporting vulnerable girls and women, particularly as India faces an unprecedented surge in infection rates and a second wave of COVID-19 restrictions.

Young Lives is an innovative longitudinal study following the lives of 12,000 young people in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam since 2001. The study is divided into two age groups: 4,000 young people born in 1994 (the Older Cohort, now aged 26) and 8,000 born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort, now aged 19).

The Listening to Young Lives at Work COVID-19 phone survey consisted of three phone calls with each of our respondents in all four study countries between June to December 2020, to better understand the impact of the pandemic on their lives and help to inform COVID-19 recovery plans.

Overview

Over the last two decades, our evidence has highlighted significant improvements in the overall living standards in Young Lives families. Longitudinal data gathered in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana since 2002 has shown that young people are substantially better off than their parents and have higher aspirations for social mobility, despite the impact of persistent inequalities and gender disparities.

New research from the Young Lives COVID-19 phone survey reveals that the economic and social impact of COVID-19 lockdowns and related restrictions could not only halt progress but also reverse important gains, entrenching inequalities and gender disparities, and hitting those living in poor communities hardest (Favara et al. 2021).

The combined pressures of interrupted education, increased domestic work and widespread stresses on household finances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are a particular concern in India, and are having a detrimental impact on young people, particularly vulnerable girls and young women.

A persistent digital divide has widened educational inequalities, with around one in five 18–19-year-old students experiencing almost a whole year of lost learning. Among those most likely to have been disadvantaged by interruptions to their education, it is girls from the poorest, most vulnerable households who have been hardest hit.

The pandemic has increased the already heavy domestic work burden faced by girls and young women, suggesting that households tend to resort to more discriminatory gender roles at times of stress; 67 per cent of young women in our sample spent more time on household work during the first lockdown, compared to only 37 per cent of young men, with similar figures being reported for childcare responsibilities. Even where this does not result in dropping out of school, it is likely to significantly reduce the time that girls have available to keep up with schoolwork.

While we do not yet have specific data on the impact of COVID-19 on rates of early marriage and parenthood across the Young Lives sample, our findings suggest an increase in the underlying economic and social risk factors of early marriage, including interrupted education and increasing economic hardship, sounding a loud alarm bell for initiatives aimed towards reducing early marriage and parenthood.

Worryingly, the evolving pandemic is taking its toll on the mental health of young people, at a time when access to often limited mental health services is likely to have been significantly disrupted (Porter et al. 2021a). Our results show a marked decrease in subjective well-being for 18–19 year olds, and that girls whose education has been interrupted may be particularly at risk of worsening mental health.

We also observed increasing levels of physical domestic violence for both young women and young men, requiring urgent action (Porter et al. 2021b). Our results showed that 11 per cent of young people had experienced increased

physical domestic violence during the first lockdown. Similar results from Young Lives research in Peru show that those who had previously reported experiencing physical domestic violence before the pandemic may be particularly at risk during the lockdown.

COVID-19 recovery programmes need to pay special attention to supporting vulnerable girls and young women if India is to avoid reversing two decades of progress on improving the lives of young people and continue making progress towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Key policy recommendations

1. **Strengthen and invest in accessible and quality education to address gender inequality exacerbated during the pandemic.** This should include a focus on supporting disadvantaged girls to navigate continuing disruptions to education and avoid the longer-term impacts of a lost year of learning.
 - a. **The quality and accessibility of distance learning should be comprehensively assessed** in order to identify learning gaps and improve future approaches. This is particularly urgent given the likelihood of continuing disruptions to education due to the extent of the second wave of COVID-19 infections in India.
 - b. **Extended catch-up education programmes** are important for disadvantaged girls and boys, where the learning gap is likely to be huge, especially for those who were already struggling before the pandemic. Support should not be a one-off exercise and should include adequate funding and resources to enable additional tuition and extra learning materials, as well as targeted teacher training.
 - c. **Adding life skills to school curriculums**, including critical thinking, resilience and negotiation, is increasingly important in uncertain and changing times. Supporting vulnerable adolescent girls to confidently manage everyday situations and transitions into adulthood, including access to higher education and decent jobs, is crucial.
 - d. **Gender-sensitive back to school/university public campaigns** should target disadvantaged girls in poor and rural households, with initiatives working with schools and universities and local media to identify those who have dropped out, including girls who may have already got married or become pregnant.
 - e. **Cash transfer schemes to reward disadvantaged students** who successfully complete secondary and tertiary education, and/or expanding college scholarships for students from the poorest households, particularly disadvantaged girls, could also help to enable a return to classes and the completion of courses.

- f. Longer-term policies to help address the huge digital divide are needed**, particularly given the reliance on online learning during the pandemic. This should include providing digital devices and internet connectivity in rural areas and for the poorest households, particularly targeting disadvantaged girls, and ensuring that teachers are trained in using online technology.
- g. Large-scale education reforms to make secondary education free and compulsory** have the potential to support adolescent girls and boys to stay in education, especially in response to interrupted schooling during the pandemic. Amending the Right to Education Act 2009 to expand free and compulsory education from 6-14 years old to 3-18 years (in line with the New Education Policy 2020) would ensure progression through secondary education for adolescent boys and girls.
- h. Ensure adequate funding is allocated to education** in COVID-19 recovery plans, including higher education, particularly at a time when significant aid spending has understandably been redirected to health priorities. Recent analysis suggests that the 2020/21 education sector budget was cut by about 6 per cent compared to 2019/20,¹ despite additional funds being required in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the roll out of the New Education Policy 2020.
- 2. Initiatives to help address increasing levels of unpaid household work are critical** for enabling a more gender-equitable recovery from the pandemic. Improving and extending access to creche facilities, childcare support, or cash benefits for families affected by school or childcare closures could help to relieve the burden on girls and women and help them resume their education or employment.
- 3. Existing social protection programmes should be adapted to be more ‘shock-responsive’.** For example, expanding the number of days a family can work under the **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA)**² – currently limited to 100 days a year – with dedicated initiatives to increase participation by young women, could better support vulnerable families. Expanding NREGA into urban areas and specifically targeting women could help to address the significant loss of livelihoods experienced by daily wage workers and migrants during the pandemic.
- 4. Prioritise and expand urgently needed mental health and psychosocial support for young people**, including identifying and targeting disadvantaged and vulnerable girls and young women. Efforts to increase locally accessible support services (particularly in response to the second wave of the pandemic) should include investment in the training of mental health professionals, social workers and community based counsellors, alongside expanding and improving the quality of counselling helplines.
- 5. Prioritise measures to address increasing rates of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.** This should include targeted outreach to vulnerable young people, likely to include those who have previously experienced domestic violence, while addressing the specific needs of both young women and young men. Expanding community based services to respond to specific local contexts is critical; this may include increased provision of domestic violence shelters, helplines and frontline community workers able to identify those most vulnerable and least able to access support. Increased investment in preventative measures such as awareness-raising campaigns to raise the visibility of domestic violence and to challenge gender stereotypes and discrimination is also vital.
- 6. Effective initiatives to reduce early marriage should adopt a broad and flexible approach responding to detailed analysis of underlying risk factors exacerbated by the pandemic.** This may include a combination of practical assistance through social protection programmes to identify and support vulnerable households in financial stress; measures to address interrupted education and keep girls in school; and measures to reduce the burden of increased domestic work on girls and women, alongside targeted engagement to address discriminatory gender norms involving adolescent girls and boys, their parents and community leaders. *Panchayati Raj* institutions (a system of local self-governance in rural India) and Child Helplines could play a key role in preventing child marriages. Enabling strengthened community reporting mechanisms during the pandemic is also critical, particularly when schools and local health services may be temporarily closed.
- 7. Challenging discriminatory gender stereotypes, which may have been reinforced during the pandemic,** should be prioritised through targeted initiatives to engage whole communities; engaging with men and boys to challenge patriarchal norms and the discrimination faced by girls and young women is crucial. This could include local media campaigns, including clear messaging on TV, radio and social media as part of ongoing COVID-19 public engagement.

¹ For further details on the current budget see the government’s Economic Survey 2020-21, <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/economicsurvey/doc/echapter.pdf>

² The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme, initiated through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005, aims to reduce rural poverty by providing guaranteed wage employment (unskilled manual work) for every rural household. See https://www.nrega.nic.in/netnrega/mgnrega_new/Nrega_home.aspx

Key findings

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to access higher education, particularly girls from poorer households

Despite significant improvement in access to education in India over the last two decades, a substantial number of girls typically discontinue their education as they approach late adolescence, even before the impact of COVID-19 is taken into account. Our results support the well-documented finding that students from poorer households, particularly disadvantaged girls, are less likely to attend higher education.

Overall, 34 per cent of our Younger Cohort (aged 18–19) are not enrolled in education, with significantly more 18–19-year-old girls (39 per cent) than boys (31 per cent) having discontinued their education. Of these, over half were from the poorest households, compared to around 16 per cent from the least-poor households.

Interrupted education and a persistent digital divide have widened educational inequalities

Education was interrupted for the vast majority of students in India following the initial closure of schools and universities during the national lockdown from 23 March to 8 June 2020, and subsequent related restrictions.

A persistent digital divide has meant that continuing to learn during physical school closures has been almost impossible for students without internet access and a device to learn on, despite the impetus towards online classes through schemes such as the PM e-Vidhya programme.³ Even where students have been able to attend online classes (or other types of distance learning), there is no guarantee of the quality of this learning, compared to face-to-face lessons.

Almost one in five 18–19-year-old students had not engaged in any form of learning by the third call in our phone survey in November 2020, suggesting that a significant number of students experienced almost a whole year of lost learning. The majority of these students were from the poorest households, those from rural households, and those whose parents had no or little education.

The expansion of online learning since September 2020 and the gradual reopening of schools resulted in a return to education for many students, with 82 per cent of 18–19-year-old students engaged in some form of education by November 2020. However, the regularity and quality of this learning is likely to have been highly variable. Moreover, extended school closures and postponement of exams, particularly since the start of the pandemic's second wave, are likely to have a significant further impact on disrupted education.

The poorest girls and young women may find it particularly hard to return to education and are at greater risk of dropping out

We do not yet know if the 18 per cent of 18–19 year olds who had not resumed classes by November 2020 will subsequently return to education: this includes 11 per cent of students who had enrolled but were still waiting for classes to resume, and 7 per cent who appear to have dropped out altogether. The reasons given for dropping out of school included the completion of courses, though many respondents cited reasons exacerbated by the pandemic (including an inability to pay school fees and being forced to take up work).

Among those most likely to have been disadvantaged by interruptions to their education, girls have been hardest hit, typically those from poor and rural households, those without internet access and those whose parents have little or no education.

Of particular concern, our analysis shows that girls from disadvantaged caste groups are much more likely to have stopped attending classes than boys: by November 2020, there was a 23 percentage point drop between 2020 enrolment and actual attendance among girls from Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, compared to an 11-point drop for boys in this group.

There is a real risk that the current second wave of the pandemic may have adverse long-term impact on the retention of vulnerable adolescent girls in education.

Girls and young women have increasing domestic work burdens, which may reduce their ability to study

The impact of COVID-19 is exacerbating the already heavy domestic work burdens faced by girls and young women in India, suggesting that households tend to resort to more traditional gender roles at times of stress. Our results show that 67 per cent of young women spent more time on household work during the first lockdown, compared to only 37 per cent of young men, with similar results found for childcare responsibilities.

Previous Young Lives evidence shows that engaging in domestic work is one of the most important factors for the persistent gender gap in completing secondary school in India (Singh and Mukherjee 2018). Girls and young women are expected to do the bulk of domestic work in the home, including cleaning, cooking, childcare, fetching water and going to markets, often in addition to working in the fields and/or daily labour. This creates a cycle of gender discrimination that puts a strain on their ability to study and can have a detrimental effect on girls' and young women's progress and grades, affecting their likelihood of continuing with schooling.

³ The PM eVIDYA One Nation One Digital Platform programme was launched by the Indian government to enable online education courses to start from 30 May 2020. For more details, see <https://pmmodiyojana.in/pm-evidya>.

Interrupted education may increase rates of early marriage and parenthood

While we do not yet have specific data on the impact of COVID-19 on rates of early marriage and parenthood across the Young Lives sample, our findings suggest an increase in the underlying risk factors related to early marriage and parenthood, suggesting the pandemic may be having a significant impact on the life-course trajectories of girls and young women.

Girls who drop out of school, especially in rural areas and among poorer households, are much more likely to be married off early by their parents, than those who stay in education. Previous Young Lives analysis found that school enrolment at the age of 15 is one of the most important factors in predicting teen marriage, reducing its likelihood by 32 per cent (Singh and Espinoza 2016). Schools have also been shown to be a key platform for providing advice and counselling, support which has been significantly curtailed through recent school closures.

Of the 39 per cent of Younger Cohort girls (aged 18–19) who are not in education, almost half (46 per cent) are already married. By contrast, virtually none (2 per cent) of 18–19-year-old girls still in education are married. For Younger Cohort boys the story is very different; of the 31 per cent of 18–19-year-old boys who are no longer in education, only 1 per cent are married.

Girls who have left school and got married or become pregnant (including before the pandemic) should not be denied their right to resume their education. Unfortunately, only 6 per cent of 18–19-year-old married girls in our sample are still in education. Previous Young Lives research suggests that girls who have dropped out of education on account of getting married are likely to face greater challenges in entering the workforce and gaining financial independence (Singh and Vennam 2016).

With an increasing risk of vulnerable girls shouldering greater burdens of domestic work and not returning to education, there is real concern about the impact this may have on future rates of early marriage and parenthood.

Increasing economic hardship presents further risk of early marriage and parenthood

Increasing economic hardship and prevailing discriminatory social norms, which are likely to be exacerbated by the current second wave of the pandemic, further increase the risk of vulnerable girls experiencing early marriage and parenthood.

Our results show that 8 out of 10 Young Lives households have experienced reduced income and/or increased expenses since the start of the pandemic, putting vulnerable families under huge economic strain; those from the poorest households and in rural areas were

affected most, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

While there has been a strong recovery in employment levels since the end of the first lockdown, further research is required to better understand the long-term impact on access to decent work, especially for vulnerable young women. Our results show that although young men were initially hardest hit by reduced employment, job recovery has been slowest for young women (those aged 25–26 in our Older Cohort).

Early marriage is often considered a means of economic survival; prevailing circumstances may further increase the risk of early marriage within struggling households taking advantage of relatively low marriage expenses during COVID-19 restrictions that limit the number of guests attending a marriage ceremony.

There has been a significant reduction in young people's well-being; girls whose education has been interrupted are particularly at risk of worsening mental health

The pandemic is taking its toll on the mental health of young people, at a time when access to often limited mental health services is likely to have been significantly disrupted. The additional stresses faced by many young people appear to be directly contributing to worsening mental health, including school closures, increased responsibilities in the household and economic shocks.

Our results show a marked decrease in subjective well-being for the Younger Cohort (aged 18–19),⁴ compared to self-reported well-being when they were aged 15 in 2016. Using our longitudinal data, we can also see a significant decrease in subjective well-being when comparing the Younger Cohort at age 18–19 to the Older Cohort at the same age in 2013. Prior to 2020, the Younger Cohort had consistently recorded higher well-being than the Older Cohort at the same age (measured seven years previously), but this positive trend was reversed in 2020.

Following the national lockdown, 11 per cent of respondents reported symptoms of at least mild anxiety and 10 per cent of at least mild depression.⁵ While these levels had slightly reduced by November 2020, there is real concern that the current second wave of the pandemic will have a further impact on the mental health of young people.

Of particular concern, our analysis shows that 18–19-year-old girls whose education has been interrupted due to the pandemic are particularly at risk of experiencing at least mild anxiety. Conversely, girls who are enrolled in full-time education and participated in learning activities were significantly less likely to experience anxiety than those who were not enrolled in education. We found no such protective effect for boys (Porter et al. 2021a).

4 Young Lives investigated subjective well-being using the Cantril Self-anchoring Scale (also known as the 'Cantril Ladder').

5 Young Lives investigated the impact of the pandemic on mental health using the Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7) to measure anxiety, and the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8) to measure depression.

The significant drop in well-being may have long-term mental health consequences, and a body of evidence documents a vicious cycle between poverty and mental health. Our analysis shows that those who displayed symptoms consistent with at least mild depression and/or anxiety had experienced a greater fall in their subjective well-being. Given limited mental health services, particularly in poor communities, the danger is that symptoms of mild depression and anxiety could worsen if left untreated and affect later life outcomes (Favara et al. 2021).

There is little doubt that the previously underfunded service provision in this area will struggle to meet the growing needs of young people and their communities as the second wave of the pandemic unfolds in India, without significant new investment.

Increasing levels of domestic violence require urgent attention as the pandemic escalates

Overall, our results show that 11 per cent of young people aged 18-26 had experienced increased physical domestic violence during the first lockdown.⁶ This increase was identified among both young women and young men.

Similar results from Young Lives research in Peru show that those who had previously reported experiencing physical domestic violence before the pandemic (in an earlier survey round in 2016) were significantly more likely to have experienced increased physical violence during the pandemic, with 24 per cent reporting an increase during this period, compared to 8 per cent over the whole sample. While we don't have this comparative figure for the Young Lives sample in India, it is likely that those who have previously experienced physical violence are particularly at risk, which is an important consideration for identifying and supporting vulnerable young people.

Increasing levels of domestic violence are being reported at a time when individuals may find it difficult to seek help and access appropriate support due to

disruptions in the provision of services, coupled with restrictions on more informal support networks such as through schools and universities, civil society organisations and social engagements.

The second wave of the pandemic in India, with likely ongoing stay-at-home requirements and/or further lockdowns, may exacerbate the worrying increase in domestic violence, requiring urgent action from policymakers and related support services.

Conclusion

The economic and social impact of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in India is already having a profound effect on the lives of young people. COVID-19 recovery plans need to pay special attention to supporting vulnerable girls and young women if India is to avoid rolling back two decades of progress on gender equality and continue making progress towards meeting the SDGs.

The unfolding second wave of COVID-19 in India underlines an urgent need for addressing deeply entrenched gender norms to avoid further increasing inequalities and gender disparities. Prevailing discriminatory gender stereotypes and expectations underpinning these inequalities may be further exacerbated and can cause undue harm, especially when families are required to stay in their homes; the combined pressures of interrupted education, increased domestic work and widespread stresses on household finances are likely to have a continuing disproportionate impact on vulnerable girls and young women.

Further research and robust lesson learning are required to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of vulnerable girls and young women, particularly in relation to continuing their education and catching up on lost learning, developing skills, accessing and maintaining decent jobs, worsening mental health and well-being, increasing domestic violence and potential increases in rates of early marriage and parenthood.

⁶ Young Lives used an innovative new methodology to limit the distress of participants in reporting their experiences over the phone, known as 'double list randomisation'. For further details see Porter et al. 2021b.



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