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## INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/11106

DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/11106>



### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### PANDEMIC AND THE NEED FOR RESHAPING EDUCATION FROM WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE

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#### Manuscript Info

##### Manuscript History

Received: 05 April 2020

Final Accepted: 07 May 2020

Published: June 2020

##### Key words:-

Covid 19, Pandemic, Education, Online,  
Women

#### Abstract

The pandemic that is engulfing the globe has devastated some of the major industries that the countries thrive on. Of these, Education stands to face one of the greatest impacts it has ever undergone. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has estimated that more than 1.725 billion students across the globe are having their studies disrupted by the wildfire of Coronavirus. With the massive closure of college and schools and indefinite postponing of major national level exams, the spotlight has been turned towards the future of education. Is there a precedence of education being walloped? If so, what approaches can be adopted to tackle a total shutdown of educational institutes? Is Covid19 worsening the societal strata which is already bad? What have the countries around the world learnt from this crisis and how better equipped are they to face a similar blow in the future? This article is a quick scan of all these questions, from a gender sensitive approach, that has probably been experienced by every single human on the planet.

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#### Introduction:-

One of the first question that surfaces even before getting into the crux of this problem, is whether the massive school shutdowns are even worth the risk that students stand to suffer? Experiences of the past epidemics have established that shutting educational institutes, earlier, in any seasonal flu outbreak can help significantly slow down the spread of the disease and substantially reduce the number of people who get infected. Hence the school shutdowns throughout the globe aren't something policymakers came up with as a whim. That being said, in the majority of the countries, educational institutes were established so long ago that almost none of the people alive today know what it is like to live without them. There have been no attempts whatsoever to study the effect of the impact of school closures in a crisis such as the present one. This is quite difficult to fathom as no individuals or societies would have imagined exercising the absurd experiment of actually trying the idea of shutting schools down to study the effects of a pandemic. That is exactly why the pandemic stands to threaten the world in which institutions neither have the experience nor the capability to deal with the problem by being shut down completely. Although we've certainly encountered school closures in a few scenarios like in the event of a natural disaster, but never on this scale. A lot of countries have faced prolonged school closings such as during the 1918 Spanish Flu. The shut-down lasted for as long as four months, but all of those closures were restricted to a particular region and not as widespread as those we see today. That is why we're in uncharted territory.

Within a few weeks of the realization of the scale of the catastrophe, scientists across the world have been busy analyzing the most urgent needs that need to be met and future changes to be brought about. According to the article

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published in the 'worlds of education,' Andreas Schleicher and Fernando M. Reimers, at the OECD carried out extensive research to guide and develop the process of thoughtful education responses. The report is titled 'A framework to guide an education response to the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020'. The study is based on a steadfast assessment of education demands and emerging responses taken up in 99 countries that were surveyed as a part of the project. The authors identify the most urgent needs that have to be addressed in these times, as well as the areas likely to undergo implementation challenges.

Schools and universities across the world moved online and ended face-to-face instruction. Virtual learning classes have proven to be a lifeline for education, as institutions seek to completely shift education towards the digital world. Students and teachers are able to exchange digital materials beyond the scope of textbooks, in various formats and in ways that may very well utilize time and space. An enormous number of accounts have been registered at videotelephony software such as 'Zoom' and 'Google meet' to join online training courses and adopt e-learning classrooms between students and teachers. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has been framed to develop an efficient education response to the COVID-19 pandemic for distance learning. Adapting to crisis situations requires steadfast learning and innovative risk-taking approaches. This sudden shift of focus involves modifying course designs, training faculties, enabling hardware and software for both teachers and students, and dropping some facilities like lab experiments that would be difficult to implement virtually. Moving education online also requires incredible support, monetary relief, and changes from the administrative end. Students worldwide are getting accustomed to the now popular cyberspace.

One of the major problems in moving the students to virtual classes is the deep inequity in the education system. While some children go to school to get education, there are many other children who rely on school for food and a safe environment. The digital divide among students with high-class e-learning technologies and others without electronic devices and reliable internet connections is also stark. Especially in developing countries like India, with a majority of students lacking e-learning facilities at home, schools are left with a complicated choice: to teach remotely and leave out all the disadvantaged groups of students or halt teaching indefinitely for everyone thereby missing out on months of curriculum. Examination and assessment methodologies have already started getting affected due to closure. Transparency in exams and valuations will be at risk. Doctors, nurses, medical staff, government officers, etc. will be called to work and will have little time to nurture and monitor their kids.

#### **The Gender Aspect of Covid19:**

The repercussions of this crisis go well beyond the limitations of household resources with respect to education. It is also one of the aspects of Covid19 impacts that is most likely to be ignored. The ill-effects of the Covid19 pandemic, particularly in education, have started to show similar patterns of gender differentials as observed in the previous experiences of disease outbreaks. Deep roots of gender inequality have existed for centuries. Although with each passing year, as the world marches towards modernization, humanity is still old school in its ways of treating men and women. The tentacles of gender inequality reach out to every possible area of education concerning men and women. According to The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), there are 1.54 billion students enrolled in schools worldwide. Out of the total population of children enrolled at school, approximately 89 per cent are affected as a result of school closures. As per the UNESCO data, more than 743 million of the total school-going children are girls. Over 111 million girls out of the total, live in developing countries of the world, where seeking education is still a challenge.

Although it is assumed that students worldwide are safe at home, the reality is quite different. Millions of young girls, particularly those living in low-income countries, face potential risks from various dimensions. Impacts of Covid19 on education can be particularly worse for girls in developing countries. The orthodox functioning of society, coupled with the disruption of resources, can aggravate gender differences. Furthermore, in countries with large gender differentials, conventional norms are likely to manifest. Girls will be expected to drop education and take up domestic duties and family caregiving.

In India, one of the most challenging issues of the education system is the massive wastage of resources as a result of 'dropout'. The existing 'gender gap' in dropout rates in India is disheartening. Moreover, school closures may elevate the burden on young girls who are already likely to drop out of schools. Girls living in rural and low-income areas are at a heightened risk of permanently staying out of education in a crisis situation and therefore may never go back to school. As per the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, 39.4% of girls belonging to the age group of 15-18 years drop out of school and college. Also, 64.8% of the girls who drop out, do so because they

are compelled to take up household duties, are married off or are engaged in begging. This trend is likely to multiply during the pandemic situation.

### **Factors that are Likely to Endanger Girls' Education:**

#### **Increased domestic burdens:**

In the majority of the patriarchy stricken societies, women are in charge of undertaking all the household works. Additionally, in countless families, particularly those in developing countries, women and girls are accountable for the majority of paid and unpaid domestic employment. This trend will likely boom with the closure of educational institutes and workplaces. Children, especially young girls, will likely be put to work to mitigate financial requirements.

#### **Orthodox norms:**

As per the World Bank data, nearly 76 per cent of the world's total population of teachers are female, and 24 per cent are male. The male percentage share is even lower at the elementary school level, i.e. 11 per cent than at the secondary school level, i.e. 36 per cent. Women's lack of access to ICTs is more likely to keep them from distance teaching resources. Especially female teachers in rural and low-income areas will be affected the most. This, in turn, impacts the female learners. Feudal values and orthodox norms, particularly in rural families, restrict female students from obtaining education from male teachers. The orthodox functioning of several families is likely to compound the complications of home-schooling amid pandemic.

#### **Increased Healthcare demands:**

Women and girls form the majority of the healthcare workforce, whether paid or unpaid. Young girls are more likely to step into the caretaking task during confinement. According to the World Health Organization, globally, women form 70% of the total healthcare system and social sector. The enormous disproportion in the health sector indicates that women are not just the frontline workers for the pandemic response, but also are in the frontline for catching the disease. For instance, 72% and 66% of infected health workers in Spain and Italy respectively are females. Female health workers are, therefore, vulnerable to infection, which in turn puts their family and children at risk.

#### **The surge in domestic violence:**

Health risks of girls out of school is not just limited to the virus itself; they are also dangerously prone to undergo physical and mental assault. In the absence of school— a place of safety as well as education, home confinement implies a heightened risk of domestic and sexual abuse. Data available across the affected countries indicates a significant surge in domestic violence.

As per the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) data, an increase in domestic abuse was recorded in all past epidemics. In fact, data collected from various affected countries, including Spain, China, France, and Germany, in the initial phases itself, indicated an increase in the number of gender-based violence. Most of the cases reported a common connection with the stress of the lockdown, financial crisis, and job insecurity. In India, an increase in the number of household violence was reported by the National Commission for Women (NCW) since the national lockdown began. As families are confined together in an abusive environment, children become vulnerable to witnessing abuse as well as undergoing the abuse themselves. Toxic environments such as these put young girls at extreme health risks, augmenting educational impacts. As a result, girls are likely to suffer extreme physical and mental health issues. While there are increasing incidents of child abuse, there is a high chance of an increase in domestic abuse-related homicide.

#### **The Digital Gender Divide:**

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), there is a significantly low level of access of women to Information and Communication Technology (ICTs). Women not only lack access to ICTs but also underperform their male counterparts when it comes to handling the latest technologies. This can be primarily attributed to patriarchal norms and orthodox families. Amid stringent lockdown measures being implemented worldwide, home-schooling and distant learning methods will be essential to keep children up to date with school programs and curriculum. Pre-existing gender biases will, therefore, hamper girls' education. According to the World Bank, in developing countries, women are 8 per cent less likely to own a mobile phone than men and 20 per cent less likely to use the internet on mobiles. Consequently, female elders in the family will be of little help to support young girls in home-schooling. Furthermore, low education level among women and less access to ICTs put them at risk resorting to negative coping mechanisms.

**Suggestive Measures to Prevent the Immediate After-Effects:**

Evidence from the 2008-2009 financial crisis indicates that there had been a significant rise in gender-gap in education across developing countries. The knowledge that girls are at high risk of not returning to school after a prolonged absence can be used by education administrators. Acknowledging gender-based problems can remedy the disastrous reversal of any recent progress made in girls' and women's education.

The following tasks will be essential to mitigate and remedy immediate gender-based impacts:

1. Making use of community-level women's association to organize awareness generation programs
2. Research-based assessment of shortcomings in the previous containment efforts during epidemics and pandemics and using the knowledge to evaluate current attempts.
3. Developing innovative programs in order to encourage women to use ICTs, thereby narrowing the digital divide.
4. Ease financial barriers and provide assistance in order to prevent girls' dropout rate that is likely to increase as a result of COVID-19 economic impacts.
5. Ensure equal participation of women and men in crisis-related decision-making procedures to obtain women's expertise
6. Developing confidence in young girls and encouraging parents to resume learning during and after the crisis.
7. Encouraging men, women, and children to share household works and childcare.
8. Condemning domestic violence and building confidence in females at home to seek help.
9. Ensuring safe environments for female victims of abuse.
10. Study timings must be made flexible to incorporate learning timetables around the domestic demands that are disproportionately held on girls and women.

Suzanne Grant Lewis, Director at International Institute for Educational Planning, while speaking at a recent UNESCO webinar, said that 'evidence shows that both education and gender are neglected in responses to disease outbreaks. We need to pay more attention to the gender dimensions of the coronavirus school closures.' The gender-based impact of covid19 has become a universal threat now. No country in the world can afford to ignore it, as doing so will only delay any hope of recovery. As Ms Grant Lewis said, 'this is a universal issue. All countries must consider how this crisis might widen inequalities, and all countries need to take action to address them.' Of course, the full impact of this crisis will be unknown for quite a while, yet it is urgent to secure the future of girls worldwide and make sure that they do not miss out on their education.

**An Optimistic Outlook Towards Lockdown:**

Despite an ocean of challenges and setbacks to be dealt with, it is unarguable that for many learners and educators, the isolation caused by the pandemic will be a time of learning, carrying out innovative experiments, and thereby utilizing the opportunity for their own growth and self-direction. The distant learning experience could also introduce more personal and productive collaborations between teachers and students, guiding them through the power of the latest technology. One of the most striking positive impacts is the active involvement of parents and that they are more concerned than ever before. Suddenly the focus has been shifted to a lot of problems that have always existed and yet did not catch the limelight. There is front-page coverage about disadvantaged sections of society, food deficits, inadequate access to technology, internet, etc. This newfound awareness of ever-persistent inequalities shines a ray of light that may create a sense of urgency in the general public.

Although many may opine that this catastrophe is the result of the global economy that we all benefit from, it is through the enormous scaling capacity of technology, that millions around the world are enabled to run a parallel virtual universe. The high-speed connectivity virtualizing almost everything that can be virtualized is balancing the fate of almost every threat that even the most equipped countries are set to face. Undoubtedly, the spread of the pandemic at this scale is giving technology some massive highlights on how education could turn out, allowing it to potentially move from just content dissemination to virtualizing students' relationships with teachers and shifting learning from a live learning experience to electronic cyberspace. This may turn out to be one of the biggest hits in innovating education, but the way it is has been rolled out—overnight, with no warning, no training and with insufficient bandwidth—will leave millions with a bitter taste about the whole process. E-learning may well remain associated with lockdowns forever, recalling frustrations with trying to connect or to log on.

At the end of the day, the educational aftermath of the pandemic will be shaped by how humans respond to it—students, parents, teachers, school, and system-level leaders alike. While some may mitigate the impact, others

might as well augment the adverse effects of the pandemic. The worst response would be to act ignorant of the effects on education and to pretend as though education stays immune to the crisis and that if anything, the impact will be short-lived.

Addressing the impacts of the pandemic in vulnerable groups will substantially improve the efficiency of containment attempts. As this note points out, the impacts of COVID-19 on certain groups indicate that the pandemic is indeed gender-sensitive. Therefore, gender-specific approaches must be tailored to withstand it. Acknowledging the gaps in the current containment methodologies with a critical view towards gender dynamics could help fast-track the recovery process and save the future of millions. When the world comes back to normal, schools may be revolutionized by the experience they had to undergo. Or, they may very well revert to how they used to be, in which case, the new world will harbour students in constant danger of a similar or worse threat in the future. The crisis showed demand for more-acceptance, robustness and revolution. Education as ever before may remain slow to change, but the new world will demand it.