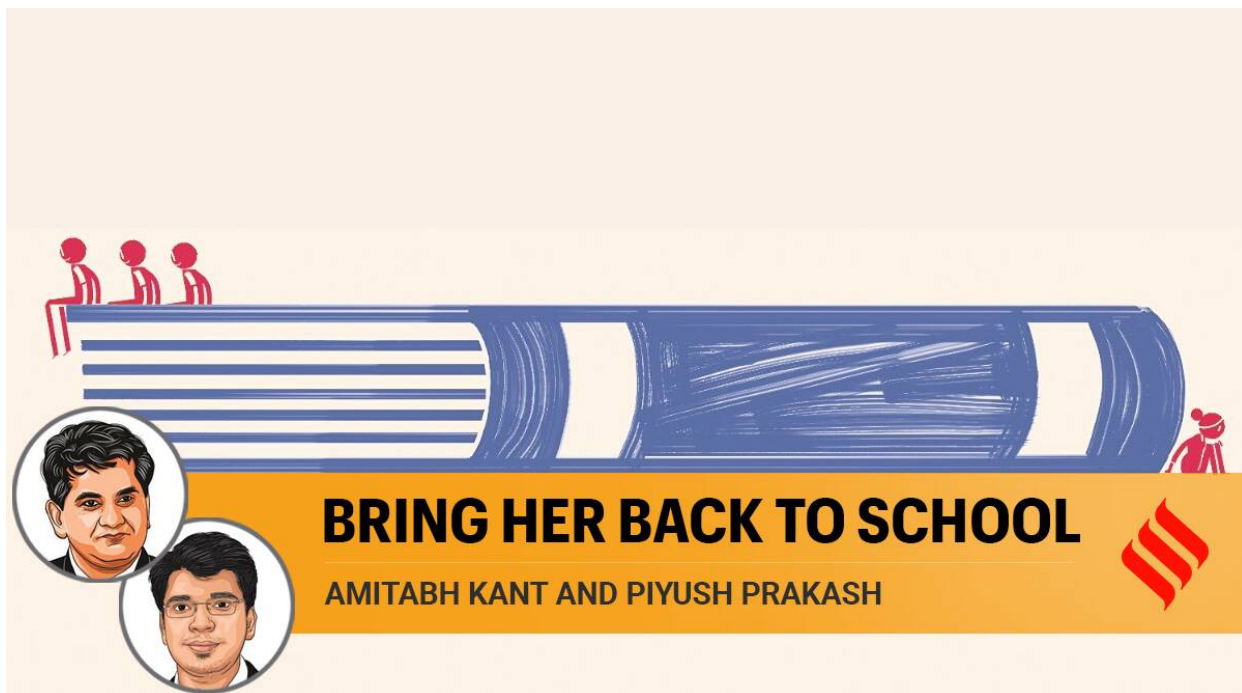


Making sure that girls don't drop out of school

Amitabh Kant and Piyush Prakash write: Addressing gender bias in education requires providing social, financial and emotional support to the girl child.

Written by [Amitabh Kant](#), [Piyush Prakash](#)

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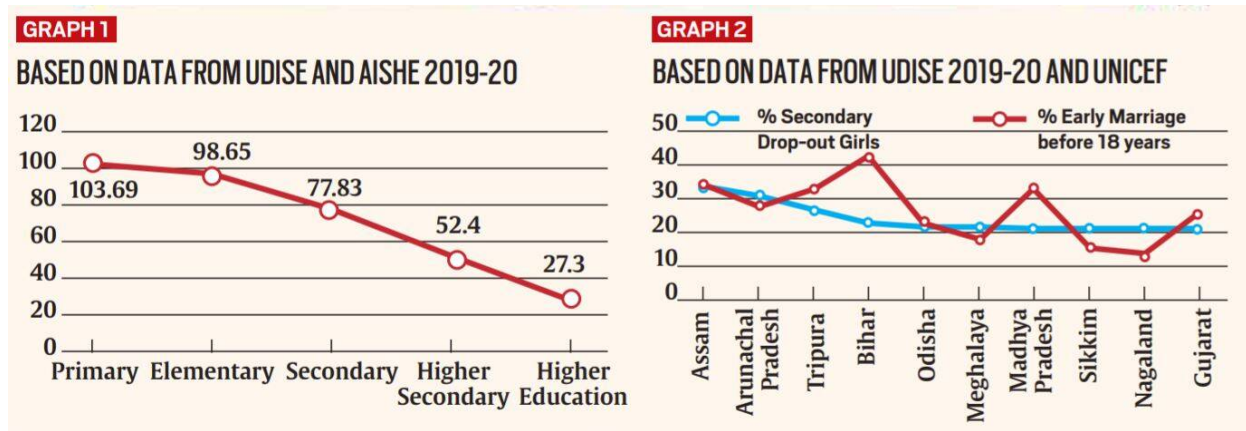


It is estimated that over 2.4 crore girls globally are on the verge of dropping out of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic. (Illustration: C R Sasikumar)

Indian women excelled in the most decorated Olympic Games for India so far. There is no reason for it to be otherwise in any other field, especially education, given the right support. As a nation, we can ill-afford to ignore half the potential workforce if we aspire to be an economic powerhouse. As a society, women can be the pivot to bring about critical and lasting social transformation. As individuals, they deserve a shot at being the very best they can.

The global average for the private rate of return (the increase in an individual's earnings) with just one extra year of schooling is about 9 per cent, while the social returns of an extra year of school are even higher — above 10 per cent at the secondary and higher education levels as per a decennial World Bank review. Interestingly, the private returns for women in higher education are much higher than for men — 11 to 17 per cent as per different estimates. This has clear policy

implications. For their own empowerment, as well as for society at large, we must bring more and more women within the ambit of higher education.



Graphics: Tarun Sehgal

It is estimated that over 2.4 crore girls globally are on the verge of dropping out of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Pandemic-induced school closures and economic hardships have significantly exacerbated many vectors that influence the problem of women in education. In the Indian context before the pandemic, there was a welcome trend in the gradual increase in the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for women in higher education — from 19.8 per cent in 2012-13 to 27.3 per cent in 2019-20. That said, a more nuanced picture of the problem of women and higher education can be seen in Graph 1. As girls progress from primary to secondary to tertiary school levels, their numbers decrease by the year. The graph shows this gradual descent and the resulting paucity of women, who are even eligible to go to college.

The reasons for girls dropping out in rural India are varied. The primary ones are obvious: Girls drop out of school because, one, they are engaged in domestic activities (31.9 per cent), two, they have financial constraints (18.4 per cent), three, they are not interested in education (15.3 per cent), and four, they get married (12.4 per cent). It is estimated that over one crore girls are on the verge of dropping out of schools due to the pandemic alone.

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The problem is not only rooted in poverty and poor quality of school education, but also gender biases and outdated social norms. It comes as no shock that the states having the highest rate of secondary school drop-outs among girls are also the ones where a significant percentage of girls get married before the age of 18 years, as we see in Graph 2.

Deep-rooted gender biases are also reflected in the choice of schools, access to private tuitions and the choice of discipline in higher education. As per the NSS 2017-18, 75th round, on 'Household Social Consumption: Education', at the higher secondary level, 28 per cent of boys attend private schools as opposed to 24 per cent of girls. The average annual household expenditure on girls at this level is Rs 2,860 less than that on boys. In India, the average annual cost for professional courses is much higher compared to that of simple graduation programmes (Rs 50,000 vs Rs 8,000). Of the girls who do manage to enrol in a tertiary degree, a smaller proportion go on to pursue professional courses such as engineering (28.5 per cent), while many more take courses such as pharmacy (58.7 per cent) or opt for "normal graduation" (52 per cent) as per AISHE 2019-20. Their representation is lowest in institutions of national importance, followed by deemed and private universities.

To overcome these systemic challenges, the government has taken a number of initiatives in the past such as the National Scheme of Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education (NSIGSE), supernumerary seats in all IITs and the PRAGATI Scholarship scheme for girls in technical education. However, in these unprecedented times, we need unprecedented measures to address the issue of girl child school drop-outs and bring more girls in professionally and monetarily rewarding fields of higher education.

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First, as an immediate step, in every locality, a mohalla school or a community learning programme should be started with appropriate Covid norms if the local disaster management authorities and the state governments permit. Evidence from the Ebola pandemic shows that continued engagement with educational activities reduces drop-outs in a statistically significant way. NITI Aayog, with the help of civil society organisations, had started a community programme led by volunteers called

“Saksham Bitiya” in 28 aspirational districts where more than 1.87 lakh girl students were trained in socio-emotional and ethical learning. Such initiatives should be replicated to ensure more girls do not drop out of schools during the pandemic.

Second, to predict likely drop-outs, a gender atlas comprising indicators that are mapped to key reasons for school drop-outs should be developed. Teachers should also be trained in all the scholarships and schemes available that provide economic support to girls and their families for continuing their education.

Third, there is a need to revise the National Scheme of Incentive to Girls for Secondary Education in areas or states with high prevalence of drop-outs and early child marriages. The scholarship amount may be increased and tied to the completion of graduation, with yearly scholarships paid to students upon successful completion of each year of their undergraduate degree.



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Fourth, special education zones need to be set up in areas which have been traditionally backward in education. Every panchayat showing a consistent trend in girl child drop-outs should have composite schools till higher secondary (classes I-XII). The National Education Policy 2020 provides for a gender inclusion fund. This fund should be utilised to support STEM education in these schools as well as in all Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas.

State governments need to leverage existing schemes to design interventions to promote women in higher education. The recently modified viability gap funding scheme includes provisions for social infrastructure projects, including education. For greenfield projects in higher education, 60 per cent of the funding can be accessed as viability gap funding from the central and state governments. For pilot projects in education, close to 80 per cent of the funding is available as viability gap funding and an additional 50 per cent as operational cost in initial years.

Fifth and most importantly, behavioural nudges are going to be key in tackling social prejudices and orthodox cultural norms that prevent girls from achieving their innate potential. Behavioural Insights Units (BIU) may be established across states to tackle social issues with the help of ultra-local NGOs/CSOs to reach the last mile. NITI Aayog has taken a leap forward in this direction by establishing a BIU to tackle nutrition and health challenges in aspirational districts.

The pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges for educators and students, especially for those on the margins, including girls. However, with recent experiments and learning experience, informed targeting of ample resources and an agile policy environment, this challenge could well prove to be an opportunity. Given the right enabling environment, educational outcomes can be improved.

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This column first appeared in the print edition on August 28, 2021 under the title 'Bring her back to school'. Kant is CEO NITI Aayog and Prakash is senior associate, Education Vertical, NITI Aayog.