

EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON PLAY AND RECREATION IN URBAN SLUMS OF INDIA: PERCEPTION OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS

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Abstract: As per Save the Children, WINGS Report (2018), only 20 percent of girls have access to playgrounds. Adolescent girls (10-18 years) from slums - face numerous challenges in realizing their right to access to safe, and inclusive spaces for play and recreation. COVID-19 has further exacerbated the already restricted access to play and recreation for girls. For many girls from informal settlements, playtime in school is the only opportunity for recreation, leisure, and meeting their friends. For this study, we adopted a mixed-methods approach; mainly a representative quantitative survey, focus group discussions, key-informant interviews. The survey uses the recall method to compare their situation between two timelines - (1) during lockdown (April to June 2020); (2) three months before the time of interview (November to January). In some questions, a third-time dimension was added to seek additional information on the situation before the pandemic. Data was collected from four states (Delhi, Maharashtra, Bihar, and Telangana). Two cities were selected from each state. Data has been collected from 1,092 girls and their mothers from the randomly selected slums. The survey was conducted during the first two weeks of February 2021. Nine out of ten mother respondents (88%) perceive play and recreation to be extremely important for girls. 50% girls reported that they missed the journey of going and coming back from school with their siblings and friends. Before the lockdown, streets were the preferred outdoor spaces for girls (40%). One in two girls (51%) reported that they were watching TV more as compared to pre-pandemic days. This was followed by household chores (two in five girls, 43%), use of mobile phones (two in five girls, 39%), and playing board games (one in three girls, 33%). There is an urgent need for multi-pronged efforts that should range from sensitization of city governments to investing in co-creating infrastructure and services - that enable girls to have safe access to play and recreation activities.

Keywords: lockdown, play and recreation, girls, adolescent, slums, city governments, COVID-19, India

Introduction

Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child calls upon States Parties to ‘recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.’

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Close to 120 million children below the age of 18 years - 57 million girls and 63 million boys live in cities in India (Census of India, 2011). This number was projected to be 448 million in 2016 (UNICEF, 2017). Of the total urban households, 17.4 per cent are slum households (Census 2011) and this number is expected to increase in the coming years. Slums are reported in 63 per cent of the 4,041 statutory towns. People staying in slums have been worst hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cities have been the epicenter of the coronavirus crisis especially during the first wave (UN news, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a wide gap in accessibility, design, management, maintenance, connectivity, and flexibility to public space (UN, 2020).

Public spaces are important centers for recreational activities for urban population living in closed and compact house structures/built environments. The recreational activities contribute in improving physical and mental health and wellbeing, contributing to children's development and reducing the stress levels. A report by Save the Children, International (2021) highlights the global challenge of not having adequate and safe public spaces for children to play and socialise. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more difficult for children by restricting their movements and forcing them to stay indoors to contain the spread of the virus (Sabry and James, 2021).

During the lockdown, children in urban areas faced a higher risk of isolation. Both girls and boys reported that they are not in touch with their friends, and that they had less time for play, recreation and relaxation. All this can have an adverse effect on their psychosocial wellbeing and development of children as it is often correlated with increased engagement in household chores – especially for girls (Sabry and James, 2021).

Access to public space is unevenly distributed in urban areas and lack of it is quite evident in poor and low-income neighborhoods. Less than half of the global population can access open public spaces within 400 meters walking distance of their home. Close to half (48 per cent of the adult participants) report that their children do not have access to an outside space where they could play or spend time with friends during the pandemic. Similarly, almost half (49 per cent) of the children living in urban areas reported that their play-time has reduced since COVID-19 crisis (Sabry and James, 2021). Another study (Save the Children India, 2020) has reported that only 12 per cent of children in urban areas could meet or play in person with their friends during COVID-19, while about 35 per cent children neither played nor met virtually or in person.

Less noticed is the denial of equal opportunities to girls when it comes to play and recreation outside the home. Only 20 per cent of girls have access to playgrounds points to the poor access that girls have to public spaces in urban India (Save the Children WINGS, 2018). Adolescent girls (10-18 years) in particular from lower income groups - especially those living in slums - face numerous challenges in realizing their right to engagement as well as access to safe and inclusive spaces for play and recreation. COVID-19 has further exacerbated the already restricted access to play and recreation as schools have been closed and restrictions were imposed on movement during the lockdowns. The pandemic has severely dented the opportunities for adolescent girls to meet their friends, engage in sports, play, participate in extracurricular and other leisure activities. For many girls from informal settlements, playtime in school is the only opportunity for recreation. There may not be playgrounds and parks in the vicinity where they live. Even if these are available, for many girls, their parents or

caregivers may not allow them to go outdoors to play or meet their friends. Physical restrictions due to COVID-19 have seriously jeopardized their access to spaces that are traversed on a daily basis to keep them active and playful.

Safety concerns in cities restrict the physical movement of girls and overturn their rights to go out in open to play, to express, and be happy. However, threats of violence and perception of lack of safety among girls as well as their parents reduce engagement and access to spaces for play and recreation in urban areas (Save the Children, WINGS, 2018). Rising number of crimes against children in metropolitan cities highlight the vulnerability of children and especially girls to different forms of violence (Dhar and Thakre, 2020); (NCRB, 2019). Girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence in public spaces in urban areas.

COVID-19 Pandemic Impacted the Rights of Children

Lives of millions of children were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic affected children in all dimensions of their lives including education, health, nutrition, mental well-being as well as access to opportunities for leisure and recreation.

UNESCO estimated that in 194 countries covered from nearly all of Europe, Africa, Latin America, and much of Asia 1.5 billion learners were affected due to school closures at the time when global lockdowns were in place (UNESCO, 2020). Apart from learning COVID -19 also impacted the access to school meals, sanitary and hygiene products, and interaction with friends and associates (UNICEF, 2020). Estimates by The Malala Fund expressed the fear that 20 million additional girls might drop out of secondary schools (Malala Fund, 2020). Adolescent girls also faced disrupted access to modern contraceptives with the Guttmacher Institute, finding in 2019 that adolescent girls more than four out of every ten girls in the age group of 15-19 not using modern contraceptives, resulting in severe risks such as unsafe abortions (5.7 million) and unwanted pregnancies (10 million) (Sadinsky, et. al., 2020).

The pandemic also made the threats of reversal in the progress made in delaying early marriages in South Asia appear very real (UNICEF, 2020). There is no denying that the pandemic has had disproportionate impact on the lives of women and girls and results of these deep gendered impacts are likely to persist in years to come.

Disadvantages Faced by Girl Child in India in Accessing Rights

In recent decades India has made gains in ensuring rights to its children. These gains are noticeable across the sectors. Number of children dying before their first birthday has declined from 55 in 2009 to 32 per 1,000 live births in 2018 (SRS, 2020). Enrollment in schools has increased considerably which has benefited girl child as huge gender disparities in school enrollment existed earlier. Enrolment rate among children in the age group of 6-17 years touched 88% by 2015-16 with equal proportion of boys and girls (NSS 76 Round, 2018).

Despite these improvements large gaps exist especially with regards to rights of girl child. Sex-selective abortions and female infanticide persist due to strong son-preference driven by social norms. The sex ratio of children under 6 years old touched the figure of 918 in 2011, declining from the

figure of 945 reported in 1991, highlighting the deepening of regressive attitudes towards females (Census 2011). Once girls survive they face discrimination in food and nutrition as well. The fact that women and girls form a majority of undernourished in a country where malnutrition is the most significant contributor for under-five mortality underscores the disadvantages faced by girls at every stage of life (Khullar & Sharma , 2020).

Adolescent pregnancies and poor access to reproductive health rights of adolescent girls remains a persistent cause of concern. Marriage below the legal age persists with more than one fifth of all girls getting married before turning 18 years old (NFHS-5). India's girls remained burdened by household domestic and care work with poor access to internet and devices resulting in heightened barriers in access to learning through distance mode.

Girls faced the Adverse Impacts of COVID-19

Children have been severely affected by COVID-19 pandemic while girl child has been impacted disproportionately. Disproportionate impact on girl child is a result of disadvantages faced by girls across the range of dimensions including education, food and nutrition, sexual and reproductive health and menstrual hygiene. Girls are hugely overrepresented among the victims of sexual violence and abuse. They also faced increased burden of domestic care work. Due to disadvantages in accessing internet and devices they faced greater barriers in accessing learning as compared to boys. They also faced barriers in socializing and play and bore the brunt of mental health issues (A Generation at Stake, 2020; Population Foundation of India, 2020; Plan International, 2020).

Mental Health Issues were heightened by the Pandemic

Pandemic also had mental health implication for children. A number of studies brought out this phenomenon. More than the anxiety and fear associated with the pandemic it is the epidemic of misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic on COVID-19, especially on social media that resulted in increased vulnerabilities of children. Many children suffered from potential symptoms such as depression and anxiety affecting their mental health (Bahl, Bassi, & Arora, 2021). Another challenge is stigma associated with the mental health issues which resulted in poor help-seeking behavior. This stigma, myths, disinformation and discrimination discouraged females to share what they were going through having implications in the form of poor help-seeking behavior of this population group (Population Foundation of India, 2020). School closures also had direct linkages on the mental health of the young (Lancet, 2020).

Girls faced disproportionate burden of Household work

Adverse gender norms in India result in disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women as compared to men. This is one of the limiting factors behind low status of women in India as it has implications in terms of poor investments in education, health and nutrition of adolescent girls. COVID-19 pandemic resulted in burgeoning of this burden on women. With implications of COVID-19 in the form of children being out-of-school, men rendered jobless having no option but staying at home, and increased care requirements of older persons women faced an increased load of household and care work (Basu, 2020) (Chakraborty, 2020). A study by the Population Foundation of India

conducted in three states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar in India brought out the increased burden of household work on girls and women (51% female adolescents and 23% male adolescents reported increase in load of domestic work). Another survey conducted in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha in India brought out the differences between how girls and boys spent their time. It showed that instead of being engaged in studies at home, girls were involved in household work (cleaning – 61%; cooking – 59%; washing clothes – 44%; washing utensils – 41%; taking care of siblings – 23%) while boys spent their time watching TV, farming, and doing other things (Gogoi, 2021).

COVID-19 severely restricted the learning opportunities

COVID-19 has severely impacted the learning of children. There is a huge risk of reversal in gains made globally in school enrollments as well as ensuring learning opportunities to children. As per UNESCO estimate in 185 countries, about 9 out of every 10 currently enrolled children was out of school due to nationwide school closures representing 1.54 billion children and youth, including 743 million girls (UNESCO, COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response, 2020). As brought out by a Plan International study in fourteen countries, girls were more likely to drop out from school than boys (Plan International, 2020). With regard to India, UNESCO estimated that school closures impacted 320 million girls (UNESCO, 2020). A report by Forbes brought out the challenges to girls' education and increased risks of 'early and forced marriages, early pregnancies, poverty, violence and growing digital divide' (Forbes, 2020). A report by Save the Children India brought out the risks to education in both urban and rural contexts. As per the report, about 20% of households reported that their children did not receive any kind of support either from school or from the education department. This report also brought out the digital divide impacting access to learning with 14% not owning a smart phone or internet to join learning sessions (Save the Children, RNA Round-1, 2020). Another study by Save the Children India brought out the gender gaps in accessing learning materials with girls having poor access than boys (A Generation at Stake, 2020).

Urban Slums in India and their Vulnerabilities

As the spread of COVID-19 pandemic was more intense in urban areas the population living in cities was majorly at receiving end (Jha, 2020). India was no exception as cities were impacted most severely with mega cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata facing the brunt. High density and huge number of vulnerable populations residing in slums heightened the vulnerabilities of cities to the impact of pandemic (Census, 2011; MoHFW, 2020a). Measures like lockdowns impacted the livelihoods of millions of vulnerable populations in slums with many forced to undertake arduous journey back to their home. Deficit-demand problem caused by lack of cash-in-hand among the sizeable urban poor population worsened the impact of crises (Bertrand et al., 2020). As found out by a study small proportion of urban poor households (one in ten) had the capacity to sustain three months or more without any external assistance.

As brought out by a report by Save the Children, children coming from poor urban households faced greater vulnerabilities than children from households in rural areas (Hidden Impacts of COVID-19 on Children in Urban Context, 2020). Peculiar conditions of living in slum environments such as poor access to water and sanitation, low access to social protection measures, and crowded and denser living, and behavioral challenges to aspects like washing hands made following precautionary

measures against COVID-19 challenging. Slum dwellers had no choice but to choose either following COVID-19 protocols or earn their daily living (Wasdani and Prasad, 2020).

The pandemic had enormous negative effects on children staying urban slums as brought out by a study conducted in the urban slums of New Delhi with girls and women being disproportionately vulnerable to household and financial stress. Lockdowns also worsened the problem of disproportionate burden of housework on girls (Raman et al, 2021).

Objectives

This study seeks to understand and document the immediate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent girls access to safe and inclusive spaces for play and recreation in urban areas. Two areas of the study are important to note:

What has been the experience of adolescent girls (10-18 years) from informal settlements engaging in play and recreational activities before and during pandemic (including lockdown and unlock phase)?

What are the challenges of engaging with play and recreation of adolescent girls when there is uncertainty about COVID-19? What type of activities they are missing the most while they were going to school?

Operationalization of Key Variables

Key variables have been operationalized in the context of the study as follows:

Category	Variables	Rationale/Explanation
Play and Recreation	Importance of play for girl child	It is aimed at understanding mother's perception of importance of play and recreational activities for her girl child. It is also aimed at understanding how life of girls has changed during the pandemic, how it has affected their play time, time in meeting friends, household chores, creative work etc.
	Change in playtime for girls before, during and after lockdown	
	Activities in which girls are engaged (special focus on household chores)	
Socio-demographic characteristics	Household size	These variables are used to understand the social, demographic and economic status of the respondent population
	Type of housing	
	Monthly income and asset ownership	
Informal Settlements	Urban slums	Data has been collected only from the urban slums in cities selected for the study

Study Methodology

Study adopted a mixed-methods approach using a combination of quantitative and qualitative tools; mainly a representative quantitative survey, focus group discussions (FGDs), key-informant interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders, and key duty bearers. The sample is not meant to represent a Pan-India picture but to draw an overall sense of the prevailing perception on the issues of the impact of COVID-19 on girl child access to play and recreation. The survey uses the recall method to compare their situation between two timelines - (1) during lockdown (April to June 2020); (2) three months before the time of interview (November to January). In some questions, a third-time dimension was added to seek additional information on the situation before the pandemic. Data was collected from four states (Delhi, Maharashtra, Bihar, and Telangana). Two cities were selected from each state. With each district. Within each city/district, at least three slums were identified randomly to collect data (Table 1).

Table 1: Slums covered in the survey

State	City/District	Slum Region
Bihar	East Champaran	Bada Bariyarpur, Chatauni Thana, Gyanpur Chowk
	Patna	Kamla Nehru Nagar, Shastri Nagar, Yaarpur Ambedkar Colony
Delhi	North District	Adarsh Nagar, Shakurpur, Rohini Sector-18
	South East District	Bangali Colony, V P Singh Camp, Subhash Camp
Maharashtra	Nashik	Ambedkar Nagar, Bharat Nagar, Rajeev Gandhi Nagar
	Pune	Hadapsar, Phule Nagar, Tadiwada, Yerwada
Telangana	Hyderabad	Chandrayan Gutta, Lalitha Bagh, Tukaram Gate
	Rangareddy	Anand Nagar, Saheb Nagar, Shastriapuram

The quantitative survey involved a structured questionnaire survey administered among 1,092 mothers of adolescent girls (aged between 10 to 18 years) and equal number of adolescent girls (aged between 10 to 18 years). A few questions were addressed to the girl herself to obtain their first-hand experience of the pandemic. Details of sample coverage are provided below (Table 2)

Table 2: Sample Coverage

State	City/District	Number of Mothers covered	Number of Adolescent Girls (10-18 years) covered
Bihar	Total	289	289
	East Champaran	134	134
	Patna	155	155
Delhi	Total	254	254

State	City/District	Number of Mothers covered	Number of Adolescent Girls (10-18 years) covered
	North District	133	133
	South East District	121	121
Maharashtra	Total	271	271
	Nashik	134	134
	Pune	137	137
Telangana	Total	278	278
	Hyderabad	141	141
	Rangareddy	137	137
Grand Total		1,092	1,092

The survey was conducted during the first two weeks of February 2021. It involved face-to-face interview with the respondents using a computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI) tool to collect information. KIIs were conducted with the gardener, security guards, physical training (PT) teachers, Ward Councilors, Municipal Officials, etc. FGDs were conducted with girls (aged 10-14 years and 15-18 years), boys (aged 15-18 years) with their mothers, and fathers, separately. All ethical guidelines (including child-safeguarding policy) and COVID-19 related protocols were followed during data collection.

Limitations of the Study

The study focuses on adolescent girls living in urban slums of India. However, findings of the study cannot be generalized at the state or the national level. Since the data collection was done during the first wave of COVID-19, the sampling was limited to two districts of the four states. Additionally, since the data collection happened before the second wave of COVID-19, the findings are limited to the impact of the lockdown during the first wave of the pandemic.

Findings

An Overwhelming Majority of Girls Perceive Play and Recreation to Be Extremely Important

Close to nine out of ten girls 10-18 years (87.5 per cent) responded that play and recreation are important to them. Only in Bihar, 31 per cent of adolescent girls from urban centers did not recognize the importance of play and recreation (Table 2). Restrictions on play and recreation activities as well as the burden of household chores are factors that come in the way of play. Additionally, social stigmas and gender stereotypes prevalent in society restrict girls from going or playing outside.

“We face restrictions to freely move outside our homes, to the extent that we cannot even stand outside the main gate of our house, keep aside playing outside the house. If we do so, we are faced with “taunts” from community members, and our parents do not want to face humiliating comments from our neighbors.” - **FGD with girls 15-18 years from Patna, Bihar**

Table 2: Perceived importance of play and recreation for girls as responded by mothers

Importance	Total
No	12.5%
Yes, to some extent	30.9%
Yes, completely	56.6%
Total number	1,092

“COVID-19 has not only affected the usage of spaces by girls, it has also affected the usage of these public spaces by other people also. Due to the lockdown, no one came to play grounds and public places. At present only a few people come here for relaxation.” - **Sanitary Inspector from Rangareddy, Telangana**

The most commonly cited reasons were; critical for physical growth and mental health followed by happiness (59 per cent), learning new things (37 per cent), and opportunity to play and interact with friends (35 per cent). The trend is similar across the urban centers of three states except Telangana where 68 per cent of girls responded that active behavior is an important benefit of engaging in play and recreation activities for them (Table 3).

Table 3: Benefits of play and recreation (in per cent)

Benefits / States	Total
Active behavior	34.8%
For physical growth and mental health	65.5%
To play and interact with friends	35.0%
To express or share feelings	29.6%
To learn new things	37.1%
To feel happy	59.5%

Benefits / States	Total
Improvement in concentration	20.6%
Improved self-confidence	26.4%
To learn life-skills	13.5%
Other benefits	0.3%
Total Number	955

Not Going to School Has Reduced the Opportunities for Play and Recreation

Schools are the spaces for girls to engage in extracurricular activities and creative pursuits with their classmates. Half the girls reported that they missed the journey going and coming back from school with their siblings and friends. Many girls also missed the games period (46 per cent), library class (40 per cent), lunch break (35 per cent) as well as the drawing and painting classes (30 per cent) (Figure 1) and (Annexure, Table 3).

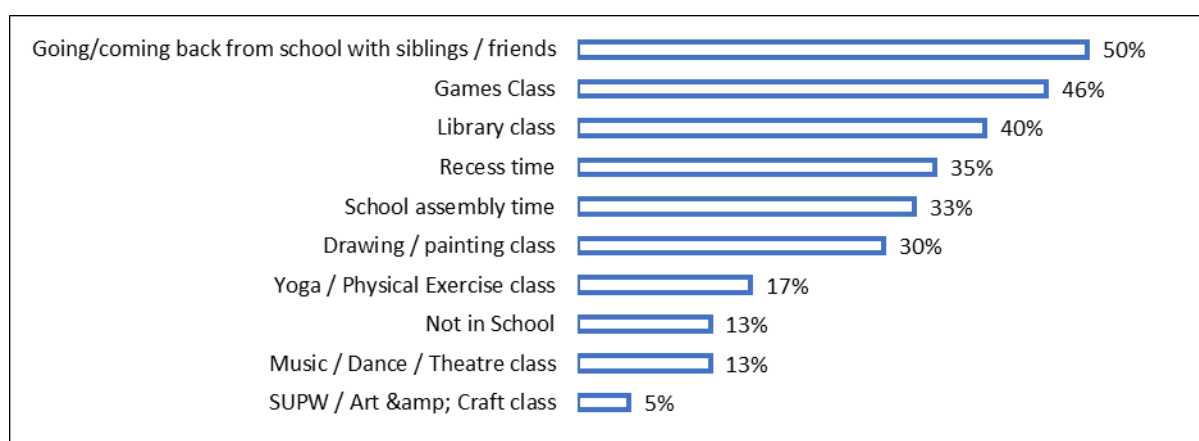


Figure 1: Extra-curricular activities and sessions that girls miss the most (Multiple response)

“We are involved in household chores and do not get free time to play. Although boys play outside but our parents do not permit us to play outside. We already shared that it was our school where we could play, enjoy and be with friends. “No school means no play, no sharing and no studies.” - **FGD with girls 10-14 years old girls from Nashik, Maharashtra**

For A Majority of Girls, Home Remains the Preferred Place for Play and Recreation.

Indoors (that is, within the home) is the preferred place for play and recreation across the four states. The pandemic has not changed the situation for a majority of girls. Only 20 per cent of girls across the

four states reported that they were not playing even before the lockdown. This percentage increased to 30 per cent during the lockdown (Figure 2) and (Annexure, Table 1). However, post the lockdown, the situation has reverted to what it was before the lockdown.

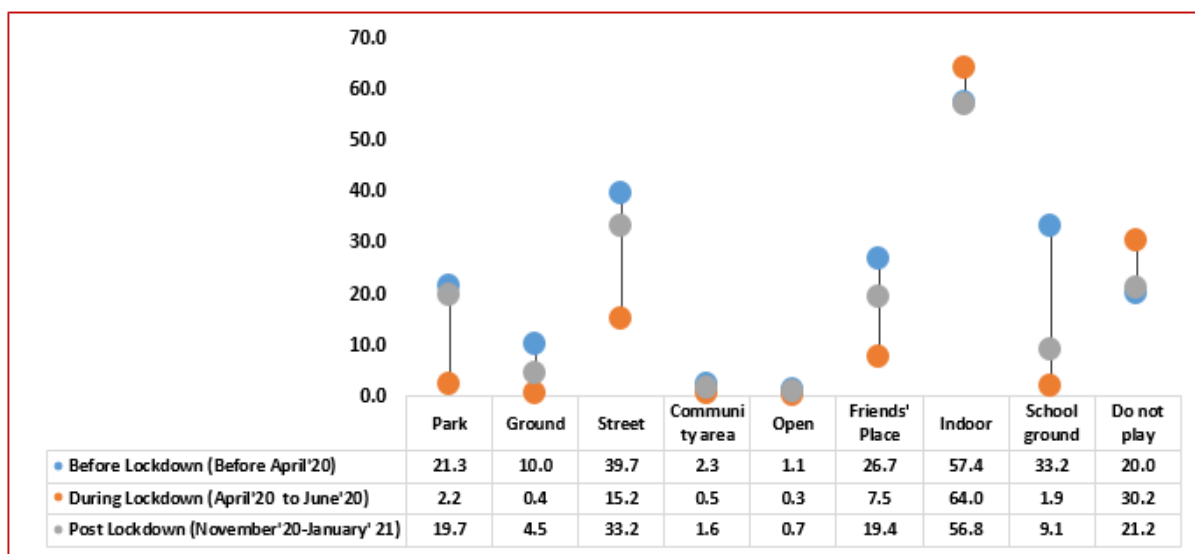


Figure 1: Places for play and recreation for girls in cities of four states (Multiple Response)

“... definitely girls were affected by COVID-19 as they were not able to roam or play outside their house due to pandemic. These things have not been fully operationalized till yet with due consideration of the public safety and spread of virus.” - **A Clerk from Municipal Office from East Champaran, Bihar**

“In my opinion, it was very difficult for each and every girl to move out and play with their friends during the lockdown. Schools were shut down and hence there were restrictions in imparting education to children. There were options for online studies but as we all are well aware; it has its own limitations.” - **Ward Councilor, Hyderabad, Telangana**

“The usage of parks and playgrounds has been affected by COVID-19. It was all shut down during the lockdown period. Before the lockdown phase, all the parks were functional...playgrounds are the responsibility of the schools and it's up to them how to keep them alive. There are nearly 20 playgrounds/parks in this area.” - **Ward Councilor, Pune, Maharashtra**

As reported by mothers, homes are the most commonly used space for play and recreation though girls use other spaces including streets, school grounds, friends' homes, parks and playgrounds (Figure 2). Physical training (PT) teachers and other stakeholders pointed out that the physical and recreational activity of girls and also their daily routine has been severely affected by the pandemic.

The usage of parks, playgrounds, streets, and school grounds dropped drastically during the lockdown phase.

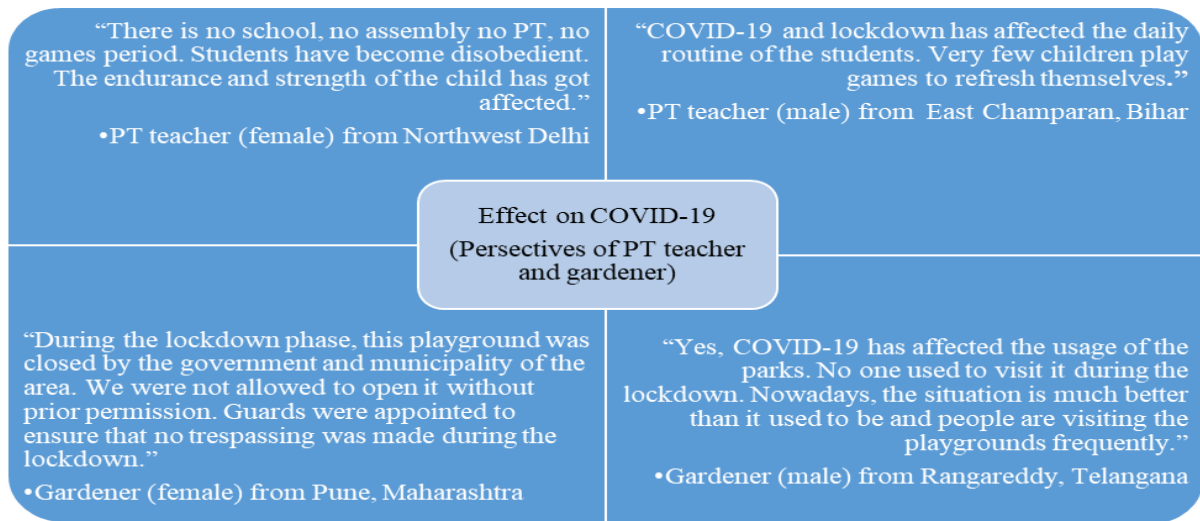


Figure 3: Verbatim from physical training teacher and gardener on effect of COVID-19

Mothers reported a significant decline in access to outdoor spaces during the lockdown phase as compared to the pre-COVID-19 phase.

Streets were the most preferred outdoor space for girls (40 per cent) before the lockdown followed by school ground (33 per cent), friend’s place (27 per cent), parks (21 per cent) and playgrounds (10 per cent). Streets remained the second most preferred places for outdoor activities for girls during the lockdown (15 per cent) and this increased to 33 per cent after the lockdown (Figure 2) and (Annexure, Table 1). This is because many girls may be living in areas within the slum where there is no space or direct access to parks or playgrounds.

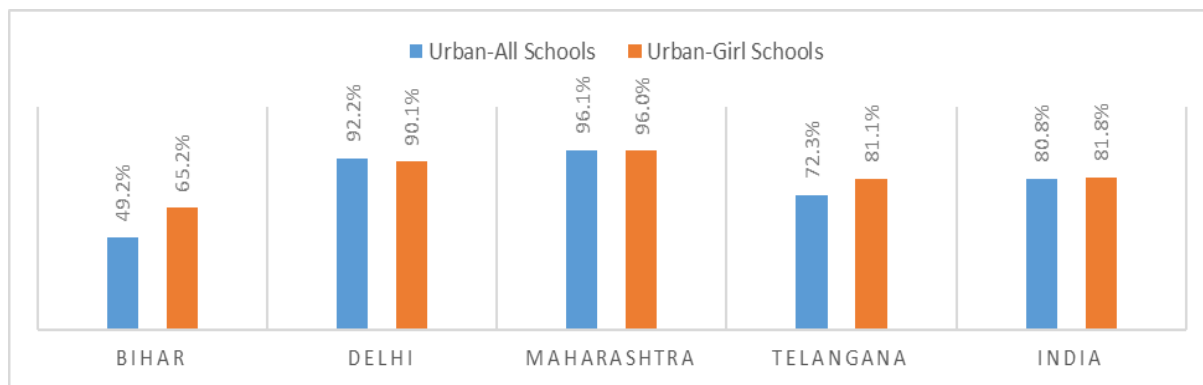


Figure 4: Schools that have playgrounds (in per cent)

Source: U-DISE Dashboard 2019-20

School grounds are the second most preferred outdoor spaces for girls to play after streets (Figure 2). Playgrounds serve as a space for playing and interacting with friends, a venue for having lunch during recess, and for organizing sports events and other functions. According to U-DISE (2019-20), 81 per cent of the schools in urban India have playgrounds. Among the four states, Maharashtra (96 per cent) has the highest percentage of urban schools having playgrounds followed by Delhi (92 per cent), Telangana (72 per cent), and Bihar (49 per cent). In all girls' school of urban areas, the availability of playground is almost similar (Figure 4).

The Lockdown Has Severely Limited the Space for Children to Play

The lockdowns on account of COVID-19 pandemic have seriously limited children's access to spaces for play and recreation. The qualitative discussions with the PT teachers pointed out that prior to lockdown, many girls did not engage in sports activities because of the abusive behavior of the boys. This was found to further deteriorate during the pandemic induced lockdown situation in India.

There are schools that issued guidelines for the continuation of physical exercise activities and designated a day in week for such activities during the closures of school. The children are asked to submit workout videos through WhatsApp. However, there were girls with no access to mobile phones or data availability. These girls found it difficult to participate in such activities.

Parks are green spaces in cities where children and adults go for walks, yoga, and other leisure activities. Before the pandemic, more girls used parks in Delhi (52 per cent) and Telangana (28 per cent) as compared to the other two states. This may be because families in these two states have better access to parks in their vicinity and their parents permit girls to access these outdoor spaces (Figure 2). Only 3 per cent girls in Bihar and 5 per cent of girls in Maharashtra had access to parks. Parks were rarely used by girls from Maharashtra and Bihar during the lockdown phase. Only 4 per cent girls from Telangana and 5 per cent from Delhi reported accessing park during this phase. On the other hand, 33 per cent of girls from Telangana and 44 per cent from Delhi reported accessing the parks after the lockdown (Annexure, Table 1)

“We haven’t taken any measures for the school since the lockdown. However, prior to the lockdown we were engaged in multiple activities like conducting tournaments, group-wise competitions and prize distribution ceremony was held in the school.” - **PT teacher and Principal (female) from Pune, Maharashtra**

“We have various sports equipment’s in the school and a huge playground. The school has facilities for both indoor and outdoor games. But students had no excess to these facilities since March 2020. There is a playground in the community named Satyagraha Park, I saw many of our school students especially boys playing outdoor games. Girls might be busy with household work and they don’t get permission to play outside.” - **PT Teacher (male) from East Champaran, Bihar**

“From DEO, we are provided with the guidelines that every Wednesday will be a recreational activity day in the school. I send offline exercise /workout videos to the students. They perform and record the activity and send back to us through WhatsApp. For 1st to 5th classes - exercises are done during mass PT. For 6th to 8th classes - moderate exercises such as jumping, alternate PT, side jumps are done, and for 9th and 10th classes, there are high intensity workout such as yoga sessions including chakrasana, shirshiasana. - **PT teacher (female) from Northwest Delhi**

“For the age-group 6-9 years: running, kho-kho and cricket; 10-14 years: running, kho-kho, cricket, carom, books and novels; 15-18 years: volleyball, kabaddi, kho-kho, dancing, tennis, language-skill, etc. Girls are usually not participative since they are afraid that boys might stalk them.” - **PT teacher and Principal (female) from Pune, Maharashtra**

Playgrounds are often used by adolescent girls for playing sports and related activities. However, the space for playgrounds in cities has been shrinking over the years because of the increase in construction of shopping malls, offices, residential apartments and condominiums and building of trunk infrastructure (such as streets, roads, pavements, drainage, and landfills. Parks and playgrounds are usually found in areas that have been ‘planned.’ It is rare to come across playgrounds in informal settlements especially on unauthorized lands. This is a reason why many lower income residential areas typically do not have such facilities in their vicinity. Access to playgrounds before lockdown varied from 6 per cent in Maharashtra to 19 per cent in Delhi (Annexure, Table 1).

“The girls of the ward usually don’t go to parks as there is only one park i.e., Satyagraha Park which is situated near the ward. But there, they charged fees which girls could not afford that so they don’t go in there as well. There is a guard who is deployed in the park for the safety concerns.” - **Ward Councilor, East Champaran, Bihar**

“In our locality, there are no parks. Some are far away from the locality, maybe around 6 kms. There are 2-3 community playgrounds that were temples before but now this space is being used by children to play. We have different playgrounds for walking and playing. However, most of the spaces have been occupied by boys and there is no separate space left for girls, only elderly women use the playgrounds for strolling or leisurely walk.” - **Ward Councilor from Hyderabad, Telangana**

“Most of the time, boys refuse to include us in team.” - **FGD with girls 10-14 years old from Hyderabad, Telangana**

“We are fearful to go out and play in the playgrounds. Boys occupy the whole ground and don’t allow us to play. We even have fights with them. But our parents scold us that we should not fight with boys.” - **FGD with girls 15-18 years from Hyderabad, Telangana**

Gendered access to playgrounds: Playgrounds are often occupied by boys which leaves little or no space for girls to play. Even if space is available, girls do not access these grounds because of their past experience of fear of harassment and safety concerns. Parks and playgrounds are often poorly maintained, and are used by boys and men who use the space to play cards and gamble, drink alcohol, or indulge in drug and substance abuse.

“It is open for both children and adults. Generally, children among the age group 3-7 years visit the park. Girls come around in the morning and spend at least 2-3 hours. They usually stroll and spend time talking.” - **Gardener (male) from Rangareddy, Telangana**

“This playground is being used by boys and girls aged between 10-20 years. We neither remember nor note it down about who uses this playground. This playground is open for all and also guarded and secured. We also don't differentiate between boys and girls. We treat them equally and let them play any sports or game of their interest.” - **Gardener (female) from Pune, Maharashtra**

The Pandemic Has Reduced the Time Spent by Girls Outdoors for Playing, Recreation and Meeting Friends

The lockdown induced restrictions have severely restrained outdoor activities for adolescent girls. In Maharashtra and Bihar where outdoor activities for girls were comparatively low (before lockdown), the situation has become worse due to the lockdown (Figure 5). The data suggested that adolescent girls found it really difficult to take out time for outdoor activities during lockdown across the four states. More than one in two girls (56 per cent) did not get time to indulge in outdoor play and recreation during the lockdown. Though, there was decline in this figure in post lockdown phase (37 per cent), it is yet to return to the pre-pandemic levels (Annexure, Table 2).

“There is a little traffic on the road and there is no play ground in our nearby locality. Therefore, we perform household chores with our mothers to pass our leisure time.” - **FGD with girls 10-14 years from Nashik, Maharashtra**

“We like playing badminton, volley ball and sports equipment should be provided to us. Along with this, our society must become a safe place for us to play because apart from societal restrictions for playing outside, the atmosphere is not conducive for girls to play far from their homes.”- **FGD with girls 10-14 years old from East Champaran District, Bihar**

Over two-thirds of the girls from Delhi and 40 per cent from Telangana reported that they spent 30 minutes to 2 hours outdoors before the lockdown. On the other hand, 43 per cent of girls from Bihar and 42 per cent from Maharashtra reported that they were not engaged in any outdoor activity (Annexure, Table 2).

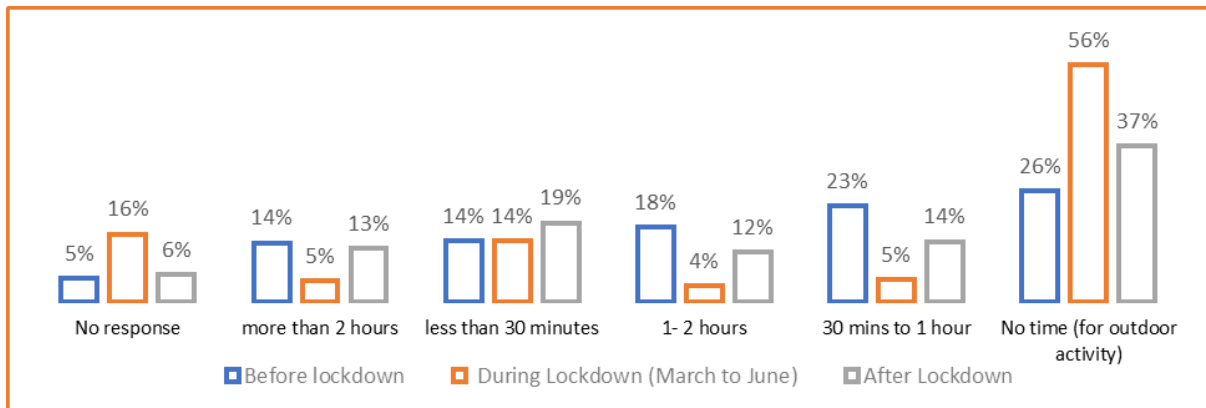
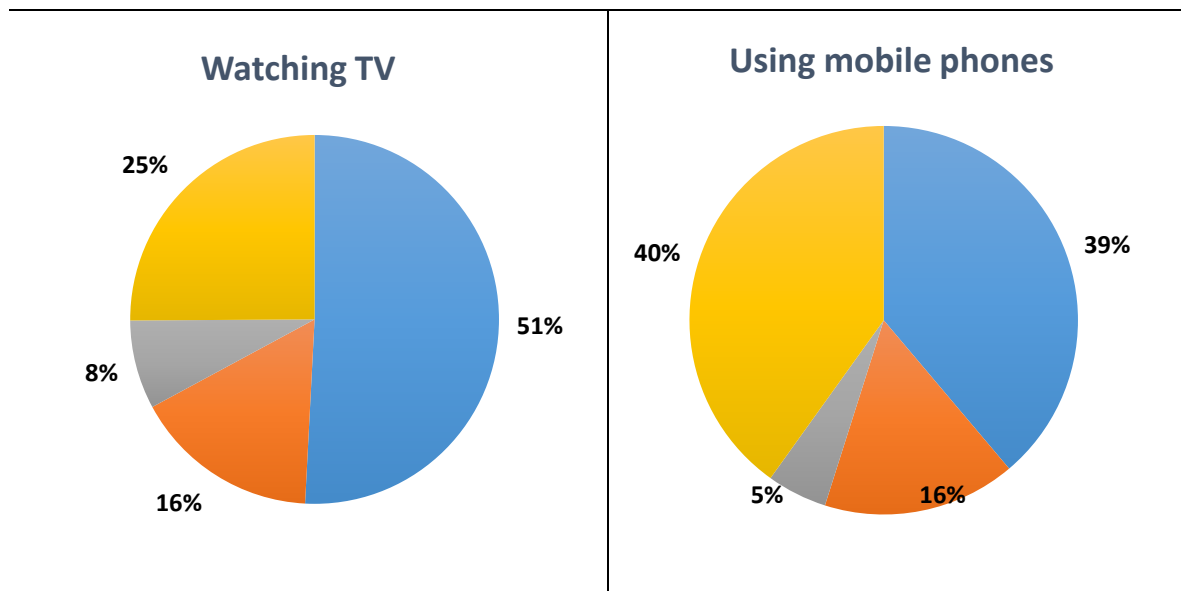


Figure 5: Time spent outdoor by girls in four states before, during, and after lockdown

Half the girls reported that they were watching TV more than before the pandemic. This was followed by household chores (43.2 per cent), use of mobile phones (38.7 per cent), and playing board games (33.4 per cent) (Figure 6). The proportion of adolescent girls watching TV for a greater number of hours than in the pre-COVID-19 period varied from 39 per cent in Bihar to 78 per cent in Telangana. At the same time, one in three (35 per cent) girls from Bihar reported that they were not watching TV at all. This could be because they did not have a TV at home or they were drawn into household chores (Annexure, Table 4).



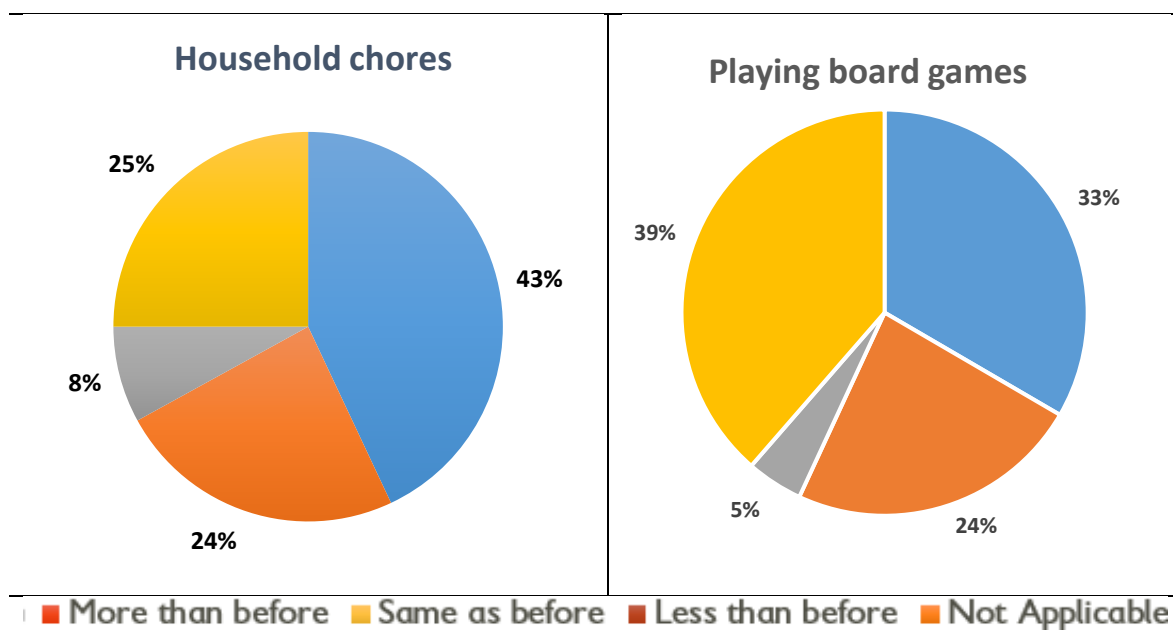


Figure 6: Time spend by girls in different activities in four states

More than half (51 per cent) of the girls from Bihar and 34 per cent from Telangana reported that they were playing board games more than during the pre-COVID-19 scenario (Figure 6). Adolescent girls from Telangana report a high usage of mobile phones (69.8 per cent) as against 20 per cent in Maharashtra and 25 per cent in Bihar. The increase in the time spent on watching TV and using mobile phones indicates that the girls across states are engaging in sedentary behavior during the pandemic.

Schools are the important places for girls to engage in extra-curricular activities other than regular academic work. Reading books for leisure and fun is a creative engagement for children. Close to 44 per cent of girls from Delhi and 34 per cent from Maharashtra reported that they are reading books (especially for fun and leisure) while being locked in at home during the pandemic.

Among the 43 per cent of girls across the four states who reported that their engagement in household chores has increased during pandemic times, majority of the chores include cleaning and mopping floor (97%), washing utensils (89%) and clothes (81 per cent), and cooking (75%) (Figure 7) and (Annexure, Table 5). More than 60 per cent of girls from Maharashtra and 48 per cent from Bihar reported that they are doing more household chores as compared to the pre-lockdown scenario, respectively. This has curtailed their time for play and recreation activities.

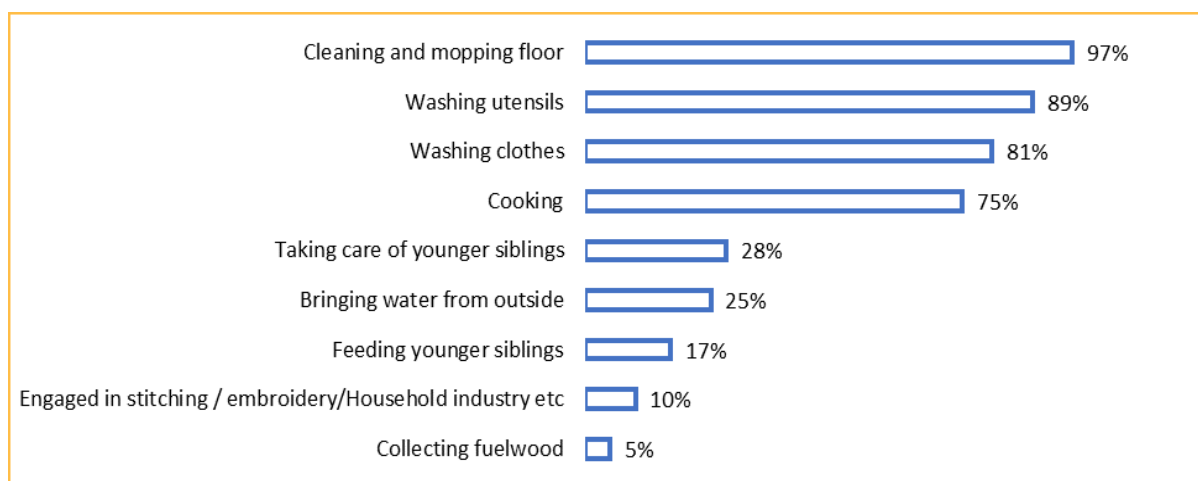


Figure 7: Increased engagement in different type of household chores

“Now the situation is under control. But earlier, teachers, students and their parents were very afraid of getting out from their home. For long time children did not come out of their home to play. Boys still had the chance to go out and play but girls were not allowed and they had to perform household chores.” - **PT teacher (male) from East Champaran, Bihar**

Ensuring a Level Playing Field

Participating in sports and outdoor recreational activities is essential for girls and women. Girls who participate in sports tend to enjoy higher confidence, self-esteem, and less depression.

The unequal access that boys and girls have to play and recreational facilities is often overlooked in discussions on child rights. Correcting the situation and establishing a level playing field requires overcoming several challenges. The first is a shortage and shrinking of space in urban settings for building playgrounds and recreational centers/spaces. However, more serious are the regressive social norms that deny girls the same freedoms as boys to go out of the house and play. This is a reason why girls are seldom encouraged to participate in sports activities as it often involves going out of the house to play. Lack of physical safety on the roads and in public spaces is another factor that deters girls from going out and forces parents to keep the girls at home. Fear of harassment and sexual abuse in public spaces is commonly reported across many parts of India. The solution lies in revisiting the rules that govern utilization of urban spaces, eliminating the gender biases that discriminate against girls in sports, ensuring safe spaces for girls, and launching behavioral change campaigns that can alter mindsets and create equal opportunities for girls to more actively engage in play and recreational activities. It is also important that the girls to be consulted for designing the spaces/play areas for them by the city governments and planning departments. In addition, they should be considered as important stakeholders during the local-level ward meetings in voicing their concerns and solutions for their well-being.

Results and Discussions

COVID-19 has further heightened the already restricted access to play and recreation. This situation was made worse by the closure of schools and restrictions on movement during the lockdown. Physical restrictions due to COVID-19 have severely dented the opportunities for adolescent girls to meet their friends, engage in sports, play and participate in extracurricular and other leisure activities. These circumstances have seriously jeopardized their access to spaces that are traversed on a daily basis to keep them active and playful. The study shows that:

An overwhelming majority (88 per cent), nine out of ten mother respondents, perceive play and recreation to be extremely important for girls between ages of 10-18 years.

Not going to school has reduced the opportunities for play and recreation as schools are the spaces for girls to engage in extracurricular activities and pursue creative pursuits with their classmates. One in two girls (50 per cent) reported that they missed the journey of going and coming back from school with their siblings and friends. Many girls also missed the games period (one in two girls, 46 per cent), library class (two in five girls, 40 per cent), lunch break (one in three girls, 35 per cent) as well as the drawing and painting class (one in three girls, 30 per cent).

The mothers shared that the pandemic has reduced the time spent by girls' outdoors for playing, recreation, and meeting friends as adolescent girls found it really difficult to take out time for outdoor activities during lockdown. More than one in two girls (56 per cent) did not get time to indulge in outdoor play and recreation during the lockdown as responded by mothers.

Before the lockdown, streets were the most preferred outdoor space for girls (two in five girls, 40 per cent) followed by school ground (one in three girls, 33 per cent), friend's place (one in three girls, 27 per cent), parks (one in five girls, 21 per cent) and playgrounds (one in ten girls, 10 per cent). Streets remained the second most preferred places for outdoor activities for girls during the lockdown (15 per cent) and this increased to 33 per cent after the lockdown.

Lockdowns, imposed on account of the COVID-19 pandemic, seriously limited children's access to spaces for play and recreation.

One in two girls (51 per cent) reported that they were watching TV more as compared to pre-pandemic days. This was followed by household chores (two in five girls, 43 per cent), use of mobile phones (two in five girls, 39 per cent), and playing board games (one in three girls, 33 per cent).

Several initiatives of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), Government of India such as Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), Smart Cities Mission, have their focus on the refurbishment of parks and playgrounds including tactical urbanism interventions, to improve play and recreation activities for different population and children in cities. However, there is a need for multi-pronged efforts by the city governments to address the challenge of reduced or no engagement of girls in play and recreation activities. It requires holistic interventions for their active participation in planning, designing, and monitoring spaces that are accessed by them from the concerned stakeholders. Gender-sensitive, child-friendly, and inclusive lens to be included in the policy formulation, and decision-making that ensures girls' safe mobility, and access to public spaces. Such interventions are all the more critical as the pandemic has further exacerbated the

challenges for girls for their play and recreation activities. Some of the solutions that are suggested in light of the findings are as follows:

Build Awareness among Stakeholders about the Importance of Play and Recreation for Girls: There is a need to sensitize teachers, parents, local community members, municipality officials, and elected representatives so that they can encourage girls to engage in sports, recreation, and other creative pursuits. This will help in making their neighborhood inclusive and safe for girls. Policymakers, planners, officials of city government, and other concerned authorities need to be oriented on the importance of creating safe places for girls for their overall growth and well-being.

Government to Invest in Creating New and Safe Places for Play and Recreation: The government needs to invest in making public places safe for girls to congregate, have leisure time, and play. Girls should be made aware of different facilities available in their neighborhoods, or in and around their localities. Many times parents are wary of sending their girls out due to safety issues. Thus, providing proper lighting in the play areas including the route traversed by girls for accessing such facilities should be prioritized.

Utilize Schools as Safe Places for Girls' Engagement in Play and Recreation Activities: There is a need to utilize and enhance the usage of schools as a space for engaging girls in play and recreation activities. Such as opening gymnasiums in schools and making available appropriate play equipment to them will be important. Female physical training (PT) teachers to be appointed to train girls on various sports activities.

Conduct Large-Scale Studies to Build Evidence: There is a need for research organizations, academic institutions, and other concerned institutions to generate large-scale evidence by conducting similar studies to address the evidence gap on the issue of girls' access to play and recreation activities in urban areas in India.

Conclusion

Play and recreation activities are important for physical and mental well-being. Girls, though aware of the key role of play and recreation, lacked access to spaces for play and recreation. The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequence in the form of school closures have aggravated the denial of engagement in play and recreation activities for girls. The pandemic has resulted in girls devoting a greater amount of time to activities like watching TV, using phones, etc. Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, their engagement in household chores has also gone up compared to earlier. In order to address this reality, multi-pronged efforts are required for improving the engagement of adolescent girls in play and recreation activities which enhance their physical health and mental well-being. City governments need to be sensitized especially to make investments in infrastructure and services. These investments should focus on ensuring that girls from both slum and non-slum households have safe access, of their choice, to play and recreation activities. The focus should be on providing access to these activities within the vicinity of their homes. Consulting girls in the process of designing the spaces and play areas is equally important. Recognizing girls as key stakeholders and providing them platforms such as local level ward meetings to raise their voice and share solutions is equally important for their well-being.

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Annexure

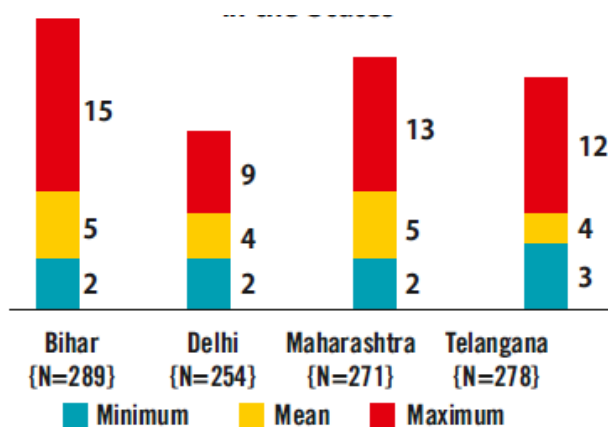


Figure 1: Average household size in the States

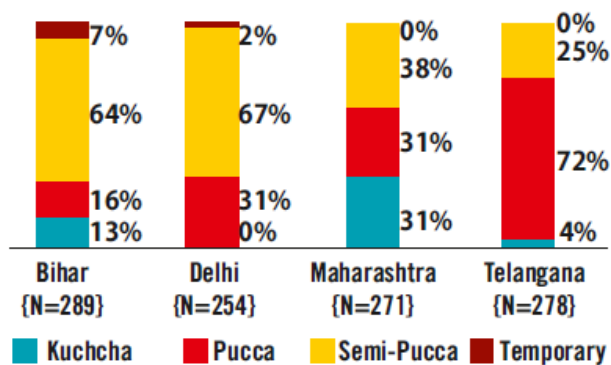


Figure 2: Type of house living in

Table 1: Average monthly income and per capita monthly income of the sample households (in Rupees)

State		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Total Numbers
Bihar	Average monthly income	600	40,000	8,985	289
	Per Capita Monthly Income	100	10,000	1,745	289
Delhi	Average monthly income	3000	30,000	8,705	254
	Per Capita Monthly Income	600	7,500	2,114	254
Maharashtra	Average monthly income	1000	50,000	9,970	271
	Per Capita Monthly Income	100	10,000	2,026	271
Telangana	Average monthly income	7,000	35,000	14,732	278
	Per Capita Monthly Income	1,800	7,333	4,000	278

Table 2: Assets owned by the households (in per cent)

	Bihar	Delhi	Maharashtra	Telangana	Total
Washing machine	2	16	3	3	1
Laptops/computer/tablets	0	2	1	1	2
Motorbike	13	14	39	46	2
Cooking Gas	87	94	88	99	6
Bicycle	54	12	27	18	28
Radio	1	2	4	0	28
Smart Phone	57	84	74	88	75
Television	60	69	74	100	76
Car	1	1	4	0	92
Total Number	289	254	271	278	1092