

# Begin early before it is too late

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In recent years and especially in the last few months, India has been grappling with gender-based violence of enormous magnitude. Rapes, gang rapes, domestic violence, female foeticide, infanticide and malnutrition are issues that are unfortunately all too familiar for India. Individuals and organizations have been trying to stem these issues by working with the 11 to 14 age group, some with 14 to 18 years and above. But if the current ASER data is anything to go by, it is a startling indicator suggesting that the roots of inequalities and stereotypes about boys and girls are deeply ingrained in our society and begin to be evident quite early. Decisions about whether to invest in a boy or a girl are taken in the first 5 years of a child's life, and children's own stereotypes about what they can do or not do begin even earlier. Thanks to ASER 2018 and 2019, for the first time we have current data, nationally, for young children (4 to 8 years) with respect to pre-school and school trajectories and learning levels. This data creates the possibility of understanding the status of girls' education in their formative years in our country. The present attempt is to analyse the data collected to ascertain the equality or disparity between boys and girls in terms of education trajectories and response trends in the early years.

## Sex-wise enrollment in schools in the early years

In ASER 2018, data was collected across 596 of 619 districts of India. At age 4, 60.3% girls were in government pre-schools/schools as compared to 55.7% boys. The percentage point difference here was 4.6. By age 8, this difference had risen to 8.4, with 68% girls in government facilities as compared to 59.6% boys (see adjoining ASER 2018 table).

When data was collected across India in ASER 2019, this trend was again visible nationally, with 56.8% girls in the age group of 4-5 enrolled in government pre-schools/schools as compared to 50.4% boys (see Chart 1- % Children age 4-8 enrolled in different types of pre-schools and schools by sex 2019, page 51 in this report). At age 6-8, a similar trend was visible, but the gap widened with 61% girls in government institutions as compared to 52% boys. The reverse was seen in private schools where 39% girls are enrolled at age 6-8 as compared to almost 48% boys.

What do these trajectories imply?

Government schools are free of cost while private schools cost money. Private pre-schools and schools are perceived as providing better quality education. Many are also popularly known as 'English medium' schools. Though studies<sup>3</sup> have pointed out that the quality of private schools is highly inconsistent and often leaves much to be desired in terms of developmentally appropriate practices, the reality is that they are much coveted. In all probability, when there is a paucity of resources and parents have to choose which child to invest in, they choose to provide 'better quality' education to the son first as compared to the daughter.

This trend becomes all the more daunting in the face of the fact that India has a skewed child sex ratio. As per Census 2011, the child sex ratio (0-6 years) in India has been declining dangerously over the years with respect to girls (919 females per 1000 males).<sup>4</sup> This means that as many girls as should be born are not born. Even if they are born, many die before the age of 6 years due to infanticide, malnutrition and other reasons. In other words, there are fewer girls in India as compared to boys and of the girls in rural India, a higher percentage of girls are enrolled in Government pre-schools/schools as compared to boys.

**Table 1: % Children age 4-8 enrolled in Govt pre-schools/schools by sex 2018<sup>2</sup>**

Age	Enrolled in govt schools/pre-schools		Gender difference in enrollment in percentage point
	Boys	Girls	
Age 4	55.7	60.3	4.6
Age 5	51.8	56.8	5.0
Age 6	55.8	62.5	6.7
Age 7	58.1	65.6	7.5
Age 8	59.6	68.0	8.4

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<sup>2</sup>ASER Centre (2019). Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2018 - 'Young Children'.

<sup>3</sup>One such study is the India Early Childhood Education Impact Study by ASER Centre with CECEd, Ambedkar University Delhi

<sup>4</sup>An adverse child sex ratio is also reflected in the distorted gender makeup of the entire population. Child Sex Ratio is defined as the number of females per 1000 males in the age group 0-6 years. In census 2001, the child sex ratio of India was 927 which declined to 919 in census 2011. For state-wise details see <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=103437>

## No Response

During the ASER assessment when children are given a task, they answer correctly, incorrectly or give no response, and this is recorded as such. No response means that the child did not answer the question. The surveyor would know this if the child either said, 'don't know' or simply remained silent.

In ASER 2019, for age 4 to 8, there were a maximum of 24 tasks that 4- and 5-year-old children were expected to attempt. 6- to 8-year-old children had to carry out 21 tasks. An analysis of the responses by children shows that for almost every task, the proportion of girls giving no response was higher than that of boys (See Annexure on No response by age and sex, page 168 in this report). Interestingly, even in ASER 2017 'Beyond Basics' which was carried out for much older children in the 14 to 18 age group, for every one of the 24 assessment tasks administered to youth in ASER 2017, a significantly higher proportion of girls than boys did not even attempt a response.<sup>5</sup> While the difference between boys' and girls' responses seen in ASER 2019 is small for young children between ages 4 to 8, it becomes much wider by age 14 to 18. This trend of higher 'no response' by girls across age groups cannot be a mere coincidence.

Throughout the ASER field survey 2019, volunteers said that on many occasions they could not really tell the difference between girls and boys. At a very young age, it is often difficult to distinguish between the sexes based on external physical characteristics like length of hair or clothes. Yet, this data on 'no response' indicates that while on the outside there is no apparent difference, something invisible in terms of socialization is certainly already changing the perception of boys versus that of girls. Are girls not answering because they are shy as compared to boys of the same age? Is it possible that confidence of girls or willingness to negotiate with the task at hand is already lower at age 4 as compared to boys? Is it this gap that begins early and becomes even more pronounced over the years and manifests itself clearly in the 14 to 18 year age group?

These two data points from ASER - one on enrollment patterns and the other on children's response to the assessment tasks - seem to highlight separate, but obviously related ways in which boys and girls experience education differently. One indicates preferential treatment towards boys and the other points to a lack of self-confidence among girls. Both are debilitating factors that only increase in magnitude as girls grow older.

These indicators point to a larger issue around perceptions and beliefs of parents in rural India. While the silver lining is that parents across India have begun sending both their boys and girls to school, parents perceive private schools as providing better education as compared to government schools. The higher enrollment of girls in government schools suggests that parents are probably guided by the widely held societal belief and cultural norm that boys should have the first right to perceived better resources. Anecdotal evidence from the ground also suggests that parental decision-making with respect to allocation of resources among girls and boys is skewed in favour of boys. Differences between the sexes are unfortunately interpreted as inequality between them and decisions in homes taken accordingly. These perceptions and beliefs combine to determine the choices that are made for each sex from a very early age. The burden of future expectations that arise from these choices are accordingly carried by both boys and girls from their formative years.

As a society, these trends should strike a warning bell for researchers, policy makers, government institutions and not-for-profit organizations alike. Over the last 14 years, ASER has succeeded in collecting nation-wide rural data across the life span of children and youth (4 to 18 years) in India. Analysed from the lens of gender equity, so many years of data has the potential for much deeper research and investigation. At first glimpse, however, it already throws up many questions for each of us: How do we bring about a change in existing belief systems so that girls are treated equitably in our country? How are government schools preparing for the fact that more girls than ever before are in their system today? Will making girls' toilets within schools suffice or is there something more that needs to be done? To build the bridge towards gender equity, we must begin by recognizing the widespread gender discrimination that is embedded within and around us. Clearly, any effort to bring about a lasting change in mindsets and behaviours requires keen observation of pre-schools, schools and home environments and close engagement with young children, their parents and their schools as early as possible.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>For more on this argument, refer to Suman Bhattacharjee's article on 'No Response' in the ASER 2017-Beyond Basics report.

<sup>6</sup>For more on this argument, see Subramanian, Samyukta (2019). "India's policy on early childhood education: Lessons for a gender-transformative early childhood in India", Policy Paper, Echidna Global Scholars Program, Center for Universal Education, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC.