

Every year ASER reports on the schooling and learning status of 5-16 year olds, focusing mainly on elementary school grades (Std I-VIII) and on the age group of 6-14 year olds who come under the ambit of the Right to Education Act. For the most part, these data have shown relatively small gender gaps with respect to both schooling and foundational learning. Eleven successive ASER reports have shown, for example, that enrollment rates for the 7-10 age group have been well over 95% for both boys and girls for the last ten years; in 2016, the gender gap in enrollments for this age group was just 0.2%. For children age 11-14, the steady growth in girls' enrollment over the past decade has resulted in a declining gender gap for this age group as well, and by 2016 there was just a 1% difference in the proportions of 11-14 year old girls and boys who were enrolled in school.

This year ASER focuses on an older age group, youth age 14-18. ASER 2017 too reports a gender gap of just 1% in the proportion of 14 year boys and girls enrolled. This proportion is 95.3% among boys, 94.3% among girls. But this situation changes quite abruptly over the next few years. Once the eight years of elementary schooling are completed, girls begin to abandon schooling in far greater numbers than do boys; beyond age 14, for every year that our young people grow older, the enrollment gap grows steadily larger. By age 18, there are 4.3% more girls than boys who are not enrolled in the formal education system.

One reason for the higher dropout levels among girls is that at higher levels of education, the number of schools decreases sharply. According to U-DISE data for 2015-16, for every 100 elementary schools (Std I to VIII) in rural India, there are just 14 offering secondary grades (Std IX and X), and only 6 offering higher secondary grades (Std XI and XII).² This means that at each successive level of education, young people have to travel longer distances to reach school. Second, there is the issue of affordability. On average, at the elementary education stage, just 5 out of every 100 schools listed in the official statistics is a private unaided school and the remaining 95 are government or government-aided schools. But the picture is quite different at the post elementary level, where about 40% schools offering secondary or higher secondary grades are private, unaided institutions.³

Both these factors affect girls disproportionately. In ASER 2017 we asked currently unenrolled youth why they had dropped out of school. These were open ended questions and youth could mention as many reasons as they wanted. Among the girls who were not currently enrolled, the largest proportion - about one in three- mentioned their family's reluctance to let them study further - a variety of reasons that included, but was not limited to, worries about distance and security. Far fewer boys who were not currently enrolled mentioned these kinds of reasons. More than a quarter of all girls who had dropped out mentioned financial constraints at home, a reason that was given by large proportions of boys as well.

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² Based on NUEPA (2017), Elementary Education in India: Progress towards UEE. U-DISE Flash Statistics 2015-16 and Secondary Education in India: Progress towards Universalization. U-DISE Flash Statistics 2015-16.

³ However, states vary enormously with respect to their reliance on private sector provisioning. For example, private unaided schools constitute 7% of all secondary schools in West Bengal, 34% in Tamil Nadu, and 71% in Uttar Pradesh.

During the rollout of ASER 2017 in Gujarat, we met 18 year old Rita, one of the young women who dropped out after Std VIII. When we arrived at her house one morning, she was busy sweeping the courtyard of her home in a village in Mehsana district. The day was hot and her mother was sitting in the shade of a tree on a charpai in one corner of the courtyard. Rita was quite focused on the work at hand and barely looked up as we approached. But as we began to talk about why we were there, her mother instructed her to talk to us, and so she obediently set down her jhaadu and invited us in.

Rita told us that she had studied till Std VIII in the village school and that her younger brother was still in school, studying in Std X in a private school in a nearby village. He would be home in a couple of hours. When we asked her why she wasn't studying there also, her mother glared at us indignantly. "How can she go? She's a girl, the school is far, of course she can't go!" Her tone dared us to challenge her conclusion. In any case, Rita told us that she did not want to go back to school. She didn't want to study further and she did not aspire to work outside the home. What did she want to do in the future? "I'll get married and look after the house, what else?" was the way she put it, in a tone that suggested bewilderment at the question. Her mother informed us that the search for an appropriate boy was on.

In the ASER 2017 survey formats, a page and a half of questions aim to record details of each youth's current activity. Separate sets of questions ask about enrollment status, tuition classes, vocational courses, entrance exam preparation, working status. These are not mutually exclusive questions because in theory, youth of Rita's age could be doing all these different things simultaneously. The location of the tick marks on this sheet of paper could potentially tell us quite a lot about the hopes and dreams of the young person before us. But in practice, for many young people like Rita, the filled out sheet consists of a handful of tick marks against the 'No' option (for example, enrolled? No. Doing a vocational course? No. Preparing for an entrance test? No... and so on), and a vast number of blank boxes where the details of any 'Yes' answer would have been recorded. The sheet does tell us quite a lot, but it makes for depressing viewing.

Nearly 5% of the 'Beyond Basics' sample of about 30,000 youth age 14-18 are in this situation - neither working, nor studying, nor preparing to work or study. Almost three quarters of them are young women. This does not sound like a lot. But if we apply this proportion to the 100 million or so youth age 14-18 across the country, this amounts to close to 4 million young women. When asked about what they would choose to do in the future if they were unconstrained by opportunities or resources, 60% of them could not even imagine what a different future might look like.

The time came to assess Rita's ability on a range of simple tasks which tested her basic reading and arithmetic skills as well as her ability to apply these to everyday situations. Faced with the pictorial questions on the 'Beyond Basics' tool, many young people we surveyed engaged with the process with interest. But not Rita. She glanced at the pictures - you could tell that she was barely looking at them - and she listened as the

surveyor asked the questions. In almost every case, she immediately said that she didn't know the answer. One could almost see from her body language that in her own mind, she had decided that anything that sounded even vaguely academic was not for her. Her stiff back and blank gaze suggested that this total rejection of everything connected with literacy and numeracy had roots going back many years into the past.

Responses to each question on the 'Beyond Basics' assessment are coded as either Correct, Incorrect, or No response. This third option is used when the youth is administered the question but does not even attempt to answer it, as was the case with Rita for many of the assessment tasks. One distressing finding emerging from ASER 2017 is the fact that for every one of the 24 assessment tasks administered to youth, a higher proportion of girls than boys did not even attempt a response. This is true even when restricting the analysis to the responses of youth who, like Rita, had completed eight years of schooling. For many tasks, this difference in non-response rates between girls and boys was not large, but it was true in every case.

There are questions for which the youth's non-response quite clearly means that they had no idea what the answer was. For example, the three tasks with the highest non-response rates in the 'Beyond Basics' assessment asked the youth to point to their own state on a map of India; name a neighbouring state; and point out that neighbouring state on the map. Very large numbers of youth did not even attempt these tasks - between a quarter and half of all surveyed youth, depending on the question; but in each case the difference between males and females is striking. For example, 21% of all 14-18 year old males surveyed did not attempt to identify their own state on a map of India, as compared to 32% females. Many youth also failed to respond to the question requiring them to calculate the amount to be repaid on a bank loan after one year - again, a question where they clearly had no idea how to work out the answer. 21% of males and 29% of females did not even attempt to do so - even though they were asked this question only if they had correctly identified the bank (from a list of 4 banks) that offered the most favourable interest rate for a loan.

In other cases, interpreting youth's non-response is trickier and suggests that the problem may be lack of confidence, rather than lack of knowledge. Some tasks in the 'Beyond Basics' package are grouped together in a set of what we refer to as "daily tasks", involving activities that youth in our target age group are likely to be exposed to on a regular basis, such as counting money or adding up weights. Not surprisingly, youth were much more likely to respond to these tasks than to those described in the previous paragraph. But even here, gender differences in response rates are stark. For example, just 4.8% of all males did not even attempt to calculate the total weight shown in a picture with a set of 6 weights (the kind that are routinely used to weigh vegetables in the market), but almost three times as many females - 13.5% - didn't attempt an answer. Similarly, only 2.5% of males did not even attempt to calculate the total amount of money shown in a picture of four currency notes, but well over twice that proportion of females did not attempt a

response. These kinds of statistics bring the image of Rita to mind, with her unrelenting refusal to engage with tasks that eight years of school and eighteen years of life should have enabled her to do without a second thought.

Dropping out of school is not in itself necessarily a problem, if an alternative path seems to hold out more promise. The much bigger issue is when schooling fails to provide our young people not just with the skills, but also with the confidence and the imagination that can help them work towards a better future. This requires creating opportunities and processes that will encourage Rita and others like her to think about the possibility of going back to school, or of getting a job, without the immediate and absolute rejection that was so evident in Rita's voice when we talked to her. A new education policy is due to be released soon. If it helps to change the systemic lack of response to the needs of young women like Rita, it will be to the benefit of all our young people.