

The Overworked Indian Adolescent Girl: Navigating Academic Stress, Gender Bias, Societal Expectations

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Abstract: *This paper explores the consequential phenomenon of overwork among adolescent girls in India. It examines how stereotypes, society expectations, household and family responsibilities, academic pressure, and the overhang of gender violence intersect to create a reality where growth and exploration are replaced by anxiety and exhaustion. It covers a spectrum of aspects leading to overworked adolescent girls in India. They, while studying amidst a hyper-competitive education system, have to confront the complex dynamics of gender biases, health and economic outcomes. The paper will explore the intersection of these dynamics and delve into the economic and psychological consequences of overwork in girls and its role in the future productivity and prosperity, not just nationally but across the globe. Drawing from statistical data, case studies, survey and socio-cultural literature, the paper argues that this silent crisis has economic, emotional, and developmental consequences for India's future. It makes a strong case for a change in the system-educational reform, greater mental health support, and a re-evaluation of the stereotypical gender burden disproportionately placed on young girls.*

Keywords: Adolescent Girls, Overwork, Gender Stereotypes, Academic Pressure, Mental Health

1. Introduction

The roller-coaster adolescent years

The adolescent years, 10 to 19 years to be precise, are formative years and shape a person as they transition from childhood to adulthood. This is a period of intense change: physical, emotional, and social. It is also a time of exploration, dreaming big, ambition, and growth. But alas! These years, as experienced, have morphed into a stressful time for young girls, with unprecedented pressures to perform and compete, particularly so in emerging economies and aspirational countries like mine, India.

Why this paper: If I won't speak up, who will?

I spent a part of my formative years in the United States and travelling worldwide. It has allowed me a varied perspective to understand gender dynamics at play in India. I am shocked by the struggles faced by adolescent girls.

Firstly, at a personal level, I am deeply impacted by the lack of safety that girls experience in their everyday life. I do not feel safe to walk alone in my home city, Delhi. There's a danger lurking, I can sense it, a potential sexual and violent predator. Heinous crimes against women are not a rarity. Staying at home has curbed my adventurous spirit. This may so easily accentuate some kind of mental health issues, and curtail opportunities for growth, learning and development. This sense of being held captive is shared by many girls of my age.

Secondly, there is a discernible disconnect between the education provided in schools and the aspirations of students. In India, there is a thriving parallel industry of private tutoring and coaching centres that operates alongside the

formal school system. One of my friends in class had been preparing for engineering college entrance exams since Grade 6. She rarely went out, watched movies or met with friends. So, we were stuck with twin burdens: teachers in schools are overstretched and under-equipped and the additional burden of supplementary classes. This is unsustainable and mental health repercussions, with minimal social interactions, are a distinct possibility. And it has reached a stage where schools have lost their principal role - to educate.

In India, 1 in every 5 individuals suffers from some form of mental illness symptoms; 50% of mental health conditions begin by age 14 and 75% of mental health conditions develop by age 24. According to a UNICEF report, by the 2050s more than a third of the world's children will live in one of these four countries: China, India, Nigeria and Pakistan. India, with 350 million children, will top the list. If the present social, education and gender dynamics exist, I am concerned about the future of the adolescent girl.

Third, health is fundamental to human capital, key for productivity growth and economic development. A child's health has deep impact on the economic outcomes: income, education, the cognitive ability, behavioural problems, and health later in life¹.

Finally, a question. Can India flourish and reach its goal of being a developed country by 2047 if adolescent girls— future women—are not healthy?

This paper aims to critically examine how excessive academic demands, ingrained gender biases, and societal expectations collectively contribute to the psychological and economic challenges faced by adolescent girls in India.

¹Almond 2006; Banerjee and others 2010; Carneiro, Meghir, and Parey 2013; Duc 2011; Mani 2012

This research is significant as it addresses the critical need for targeted educational reforms, improved mental health support, and gender equality initiatives, essential for India's sustainable social and economic development.

2. Methodology of Paper

Quantitative and Qualitative Approach:

- **Literature Review:** Analysis of existing research including academic studies like Leela Dube's work on gender socialization, Amartya Sen's "Missing Women", government surveys (NFHS-5, NCRB), and international reports (UNICEF, WHO, ILO)."
- **Statistical Data Analysis:** Interpretation of quantitative data from official sources—e.g., suicide rates, education dropouts, gender-based violence, and time-use surveys regarding unpaid labour. **Statistical data** from credible sources (e.g., UNICEF, UNESCO, ILO).
- **Case Studies:** Survey of Students, Narratives from real-life scenarios, including personal experiences and anecdotal evidence of adolescent girls navigating school, domestic work, and social restrictions.
- **Emphasis on intersectional analysis:** gender, age, class, and geography.
- **Comparative perspective** between developed and emerging economies. Reflections from the author's time spent in the United States to juxtapose global gender norms and their impact on adolescent experiences.

1. The silent exhaustion of India's 250 million adolescents

Every fifth person in India is an adolescent, and half of them are girls. India's 253 million adolescents, is the largest in the world² for a country. The WHO describes adolescents as giving India a competitive advantage to reap "*demographic dividend*".

Adolescents, in their crucial phase of learning and discovery, are overburdened to meet societal notion of success. As stated earlier, this manifests as excessive academic pressure, long hours of study, in addition to household responsibilities, and even part-time work. India's patriarchal society makes it worse for adolescent girls. The pressure of academic success with non-negotiable responsibilities of domestic chores, caregiving roles, and societal restrictions makes it nearly unsustainable.

In India, unfortunately, a girl's ambition hinges on gender stereotypes. In "On the Construction of Gender: Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India" (1988), Leena Dube writes about the socialization processes of Hindu girls, emphasizing how rituals, language, and family practices contribute to the construction of gender identities within a patriarchal framework.

In the survey, it was found, the majority of girls agreed that boys remain the favourites for excelling in professional paths. Expectations on girls to perform well academically is less. Mediocre schools are a natural choice as a trade-off for the brothers' pricier education. In some families, a girl's education is sacrificed to ensure her brother gets quality education. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a gender gap of nearly 15 percent in literacy.³

But complexities abound. India also has communities that decentralize male authority and practicing matriliney or matriarchal traditions. Here women have considerable agency over their family, economic, and cultural choices. In Kerala, the Nair community historically followed a matrilineal system as did the Khasi tribe in Kerala, the Bunts in Karnataka. But even matrilineal societies co-exist with male political authority. These exceptions challenge the patriarchy set ups and offer hope on women having agency. But these counter-narratives are not yet mainstream.

Society norms and family traditions compel girls to undertake everyday chores, caregiving responsibilities or even achieving the "have to" benchmark of marriage and kids. Tasks performed by girls, in households and agriculture, are not imputed as these are not accounted for as economic contributions in the national income accounts. A recent report by State Bank of India states that unpaid domestic work alone accounts for 7.5 percent of India GDP⁴.

Another influencer is social media, which has a deep impact on adolescents across the spectrum. As per the survey conducted, over 50 percent adolescents use one or more social media platforms for 2 hours or more on a daily basis. The popular social networking sites include: YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat⁵. This adds to the challenges of adolescent girls, impacts their body image, self-esteem, and, thereafter, in many cases, their mental health.

One girl remarked, "Social media with its barrage of curated images made me feel horrible about myself." She is not alone. Social networking sites have a demonstration effect and posts reinforce unrealistic beauty standards, peer comparison, and online bullying, and the pressure to conform becomes overwhelming. Girls who do not meet these standards experience anxiety, depression, and a distorted sense of self. Also, most adolescents admitted that they are yet to be equipped with the necessary guidance to navigate these digital spaces in a healthy and positive way.

Household responsibilities take a toll

Traditionally girls, and not just in rural areas, are expected to help with cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings or grandparents. Girls are the default sex assigned tasks in a household. An automatic trade-off is reduced time for education, sports or relaxation. Women and girls in India spend 352 minutes or nearly 6 hours per day on unpaid

²Adolescent Health and Development in India
<https://www.who.int/india/health-topics/adolescent-health-and-development>

³https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/women-men22/EducationStatistics22.pdf 2017-2018

⁴ SBI research 2023 Ecwrap

⁵ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-depth/teens-and-social-media-use>

household chores. Men spend a meagre 52 minutes or under 1 hour. In rural India, the woman shoulders the burden of 7 hours per day on household chores, almost 6 hours more than the male counterparts (National Family Health Survey-5). Indian women, including adolescent girls, perform 80% of all unpaid care (International Labour Organization in 2020).

This lop-sided share of household chores confines personal and professional development. Nearly 40% of girls in rural areas face reduced opportunities (India Human Development Survey-2, 2011-12). Relatedly, economic and social progress is also stymied, adversely impacting the value of goods and services or GDP. McKinsey Global Institute report on gender equality offers an optimistic scenario where India could increase its GDP by 27% if women equality in the workforce was ensured. Yet what ensues is a more pessimistic scenario where with unpaid work, gender wage disparities and a vicious cycle restricting education and skill sets, GDP is stifled.

Amartya Sen, the Nobel laureate, spoke of “missing women”⁶ in India, the impact of female foeticide, discrimination, neglect, and violence against women, and malnourished women (who died) and how this impacts India's economic growth. The overworked adolescent girl is also a ‘missing’ woman – overburdened and on the verge of burnout. Chronic stress and burnout emerge from always being in the role of a multitasker. Emotional and physical exhaustion from overwork and lack of support ensues. When girls are expected to perform unpaid labour while also excelling academically, their well-being suffers. This intersection of gender bias and youth vulnerability extends to mental health concerns, which, in turn affects work productivity and quality of life.

2. Trauma of gender violence: A weight adolescents must not carry

Gender-based violence, both physical and emotional, is a significant contributor to the mental health of adolescent girls in India. Reports of sexual harassment, assault, and domestic violence are widespread, with many girls subjected to abuse within their homes or communities. While countless girls endure sexual harassment, assault, and domestic abuse firsthand, the trauma is not confined to the direct victims. For others, the overhang that their bodies are at risk and safety can be violated, becomes a burden. Even as bystanders, girls remain fearful: haunted not by what has happened to them, but by the knowledge that it could.

India continues to suffer a worrying level of sexual violence. In 2021, as per National Crime Records Bureau, 31,677 cases of rape were reported across the country. Despite media advocacy, legal reforms and societal awareness campaigns, over 85 cases of rape were reported every day. The most recent case in Kolkata, where a doctor was brutalised and killed in a hospital where she worked, shows that the malaise is not restricted to rural areas or marginalized communities.

The NCRB's 2021 data also revealed that 10% of all rape survivors were minors, highlighting the intersection between gender violence and age. The pervasive culture of victim-blaming complicates the situation. Many adolescent girls who have been victims face social pressure to remain silent. Lack of legal protection and absence of support from family and friends makes girls vulnerable and subject to long-term mental health issues.

3. Beyond home and culture- Academic pressure

The education system in India emphasizes rote learning and exam performance over holistic development and innovation. For students preparing for engineering or medical entrance exams, studying starts at age 10 or earlier. Within the lucky few who make it, only 12% in IIT campuses are girls. Similar trends of low representation are mirrored in parliament at 15% (world average is 27%), Statistically, 70% of women are educated, with universal literacy still 35 years away, as per UNESCO⁷. NEP remains more optimistic at attaining 100% youth and adult literacy by 2035

Also, girls often need to match the stereotype of success and are considered successful only if they choose subjects like mathematics and science, or opt for the career choices of an engineer, chartered accountant or doctor. Failing which they are not considered intelligent or ambitious. Feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness follow. Even if they toe the line in subject choices or careers, the pressure to perform in school and workplaces comes with mental health challenges.

Academic Stress and Suicide Rates Among Adolescent Girls

UNICEF in its study has mentioned that girls are more likely to attempt suicide. While deaths from self-harm are not as prevalent in girls as boys globally, exceptions can be found in some South Asian countries, such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, where more girls than boys die by self-harm. This reflects high levels of gender inequality and gender-based violence in the subregion.

In India the society's obsession with grades and entrance exams, such as the IIT JEE and NEET, leaves little room for failure, which in turn increases the likelihood of depression and suicidal tendencies. There were 10,000 adolescent suicides in India in 2020, with a high proportion being girl students, indicating the ugly side of overwork in adolescent girls and its correlation to rise in suicide (National Crime Records Bureau). Academic stress, societal and family expectations, plays a crucial role in these tragic outcomes.

I recently met the parents of a Grade 12 girl who gassed herself to death. She believed she had lost agency and control over her life. She spent hours on social media. Unrealistic standards of success and beauty perhaps made it worse. Surprisingly, her parents thought she was actually living a beautiful life even as she struggled and lost her will to live.

Case Study: Competitive exams -IIT

⁶ Sen, A. (1990). *More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing*, The New York Review of Books.

⁷ <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/key-data-girls-and-womens-right-education-2023>

A striking example of the mental health consequences can be seen in adolescent girls studying at coaching centres. These coaching centres operate independent from schools and focus on preparing students for competitive exams. Even as these coaching centres can enhance academic performance, they contribute to increasing isolation and stress levels.

Suicide rates among adolescents in India have been rising. In 2021, 1,598 adolescent girls, aged 15-29, died by suicide due to academic stress, making it the leading cause of death among this group (National Crime Records Bureau). Looked at another way, 30% of adolescent suicides in India were academic related, with girls taking the larger hit. (The HINDU, 2020)

The National Mental Health Survey of India (2016) revealed that 21.4% of adolescent girls (aged 13-17) reported symptoms of depression and anxiety, with academic stress being one of the primary contributors. According to a 2019 report by McKinsey, gender-based violence could cost the global economy up to \$1.5 trillion annually in lost productivity, and India is a major contributor to this statistic. Society stigma related to women's rights and their economic roles creates a lethal dose of stress and vulnerability.

4. Deeper and more lasting psychological impacts

With 253 million adolescents in India, the impact on human health is profound. The intersection of gender and psychology is evident in studies that show that adolescent girls in India are more likely to experience eating disorders, insomnia, depression, anxiety, and stress.⁸

Exposure to adversity, pressure to perform and conform, peer envy and exploration of identity can trigger stress. Media influence and gender norms can exacerbate the disparity between an adolescent's lived reality and their perceptions or aspirations for the future. Other important determinants include the quality of their home life and relationships. Violence (especially sexual violence and bullying), harsh parenting, and severe socioeconomic problems are recognized risks to mental health⁹.

Burnout, a term largely absent from conversations about adolescence in India, is a daily reality for many girls. The silence surrounding their psychological distress is both a symptom and a cause of the problem. As one girl recounted, "I don't know how to say I'm tired. No one will understand. They'll say I'm making excuses." Much of the pain is internalised.

My survey showed that many girls find an escape in psychosomatic symptoms of frequent headaches, stomach aches, and dizziness as "excuses." The stigma around mental illness and the glorification of sacrifice exacerbates this issue.

Health services in schools are inadequate, and counselling is rare or non-existent, especially in public institutions. Girls face the pressure of conformity. Cultural expectations for girls include being obedient and conscious of their 'duty' to marry and have children at an early age. A natural fallout: girls maintain their outward composure and appear unaffected by stress.

The psychological fallout of overwork is deep. 40% of adolescent girls report symptoms of anxiety and depression (Indian Journal of Psychiatry 2020), exacerbated by their multitasking and demands of time to do chores. Mental health disorders are a leading cause of disability among adolescent girls in India, which not only diminishes their quality of life but also hinders national economic productivity. (World Health Organization (WHO), 2019)

Chronic stress from overwork leads to issues such as chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, and low self-esteem (National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences), often flowing into adulthood.

5. The economic impact

Within households and across society, decisions are made on how much health care is provided to individual children. These decisions "have significant implications for the intergenerational transmission of poverty and the potential for upward mobility across generations" (Doss 2013). Low investment in child health therefore has far-reaching consequences for economic growth and welfare (Duflo 2003). Adolescent girls clearly fall in this bracket of low investment and poor ability to contribute to the economy.

UNICEF estimates that girls from poor families are three times more likely to drop out of school than their male counterparts, with domestic labour being a primary contributing factor. The dropout rate for girls in secondary education in India is around 17.6%, compared to 12.6% for boys (District Information System for Education 2020-21). Household responsibilities, early marriages, and limited access to educational resources are the prime reasons for this gap. Employment for women varies greatly from country to country. Some of the biggest improvements have come from Singapore and Spain, both of which already boast relatively high participation rates. Meanwhile, India remains a country at the bottom of the labour force participation rates.¹⁰

When girls drop out of school, they fail to build valuable skills and an education that could empower them financially and politically. School dropouts often end up in low-paying, informal, or unskilled jobs, perpetuating the cycle of poverty (International Labour Organization, 2020). This gender gap in earnings and employment opportunities stunts overall economic growth. Gender disparities in education and labour participation reduce productivity and economic output. The

⁸ Dey, Dr Neelam C, Mental Health of Adolescents and Youth in India: A Critical Analysis in the Era of AI (December 02, 2024). <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5056368> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5056368>

⁹ WHO Mental Health of adolescents October 2024

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<https://www.goldmansachs.com/insights/articles/cutting-the-gender-employment-gap-could-boost-global-gdp-by-6-percent>

underutilization of potential talent means slower economic development, particularly in sectors that require skilled workers, such as technology, healthcare, and education. (World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023).

3. Conclusion

A future still ours to shape?

This research underscores that the significant challenges facing adolescent girls in India—academic pressures, gender bias, and mental health struggles—are critical barriers to the country's socioeconomic aspirations. Policy reforms, including educational restructuring, enhanced mental health services, and broader societal shifts towards gender equality, are necessary. By investing actively in adolescent girls, India can unlock significant economic growth and foster a more equitable, productive society. Ultimately, empowering these young women is not merely ethical; it is essential for national progress.

The notion that immense challenges faced by adolescent girls in India encompassing academics, gender violence, unpaid labour, and mental health struggles is fait accompli is faulty; nothing can be further from the truth.

Representation of women in leadership roles is increasing, even if it at a gradual pace. Indira Gandhi served as the Prime Minister of India for over 15 years; she being the only child of Jawaharlal Nehru, with no brother, might have helped her reach this position. Women representation at less than 15% in Parliament is likely to increase with the enactment of the Women's Reservation Bill aimed at increasing women's political participation.

In an opinion piece, Professor Janaki Nair explores ways to increase women's presence in politics. She speaks of the practical power of women's presence in politics, underscoring how role models can inspire others and change societal expectations over time. However, this shift requires both top-down interventions (like quotas and policy reforms) and bottom-up efforts (like education, socialization, and public discourse). Real results and transformation also require a cultural change. For that, there has to be a change in how men are socialized to perceive women in leadership roles, or their general attitude towards women.

Then there has to be greater representation of women in top roles across sectors. The 2019 Deloitte India Gender Diversity Report speaks of women only at 12.5% of board members in Indian companies. Those at CEO levels are under 4%. The global average is at 16.9% of CEOs in Asia-Pacific companies (Catalyst's 2020 report). Figures are low, both nationally and internationally. But they will get better with policy shifts and cultural realignment for greater women participation in the economic life of a nation.

At the global economic stage, nearly 50 multilateral companies have Indian origin CEOs, including trailblazers, like Indira Nooyi. The quotas for women on boards as mandated by the Securities and Exchange Board of India in 2014 has increased the numbers. Though, recent scams involving women CEOs in the banking sector have for some

been a "I told you so" moment. It is these traditional mindsets, insensitivities and gender roles that need to be broken.

The daunting structure will need the right blend of support of policies, and progressive civil society if the demographic dividend of 253 million minds is to be realised, with women being equal partners, ready to innovate, question, and rebuild. India cannot and will not achieve its dream of being a developed nation by 2047 without investing in its adolescent girls, read women power.

A study by Goldman Sachs found that closing the gender gap in India's labour force could add \$700 billion to India's GDP by 2025. Even as this target may need a few more years to fulfil, the powerful message it carries is that every adolescent girl has an undisputed agency. As one of them, I choose to believe—not in a future defined by limitations, but one shaped by dignity, voice, and boundless possibility. I choose to dream, to rise, and to flourish—not as a victim, but as a changemaker, a game changer.

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