

Lost Potential: Girls' Secondary-School Retention and Future Workforce Participation in Semi-Urban Ahmedabad, India

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Abstract: *This study examines factors associated with secondary-school discontinuation among adolescent girls in semi-urban areas surrounding Ahmedabad, Gujarat, and considers their implications for later workforce participation. The study draws on semi-structured interviews with approximately 15 girls aged 12 to 16 years, conducted in Hindi or Gujarati and subsequently translated into English. Participants described barriers including household responsibilities, financial pressures, expectations of early marriage, inadequate sanitation facilities, bullying, limited teacher support, and family attitudes toward girls' education. The findings are illustrative rather than statistically representative because of the small and non-random sample. Nevertheless, the interview accounts broadly correspond with previous research on gendered barriers to school retention in India. The paper argues that improved school infrastructure, teacher support, parental and community engagement, and access to skills training may help girls complete secondary education and strengthen their opportunities for formal employment. The study highlights the relationship between educational continuity, gender equity, and longer-term economic participation.*

Keywords: girls' education; secondary-school dropout; workforce participation; gender inequality; semi-urban India; Ahmedabad; skills training

1. Introduction

Christine Lagarde once said that “raising women's participation in the workforce to the level of men can boost Indian economy by 27 per cent” in an interview with NDTV.[1] This is a substantial figure, and one that reflects a reality India has yet to fully address. Despite being one of the world's fastest-growing major economies, India has not been able to successfully integrate women into the workforce.

Many girls in urban and semi-urban areas today are unable to complete their high school education. [2] This problem is because families move from rural India to semi-urban spaces in their search for work. [3] This migration places families in unfamiliar situations, and they often prioritise a boy's education over a girl's, who is more likely to end up doing household chores. [4]

The claim here is that keeping girls in high school and enabling them to get their higher secondary certificate (HSC) will go a long way in increasing the country's workforce potential and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The author's study, undertaken with girls in semi-urban high schools in Ahmedabad (Gujarat), suggests that there are various factors contributing to the problem of girls dropping out of school. With Gujarat being one of the fastest growing states in India, the findings of this study may be relevant across the state. A girl who drops out of school in semi-urban Ahmedabad is not failing as an individual; she is the byproduct of a system that has failed her – economically, socially, and culturally.

The sections that follow examine the economic, social, and structural dimensions of this systemic failure, beginning with the Return on Investment (ROI) India stands to gain when girls remain in school.

Economic Downside Of Withdrawing Girls From School:

India is the world's most populous country with one of the highest percentages of youths and adolescents. Despite this, India remains only the sixth-largest economy in the world, surpassed by several countries with smaller populations. [5] One of the reasons India still lags behind can be attributed to the fact that India's working population does not fully include women. Moreover, Shishir Gupta & Aalhya Sabharwal from Center for Social and Economic Progress estimate that around \$700 billion is lost from India's GDP because women are unable to join the workforce [6]. Aditi Singh in *The Economic Times* reports that despite accounting for nearly half of the population, women contribute only 18% to India's GDP.[7] The report further states that reducing this gender gap could drive economic growth by 30%.

If there is a strategy to help girls stay in school, the Indian GDP will grow, and ROI will become sizable. The connection between girls remaining in school and this ROI is direct. Once girls are able to work as part of the formal economy, the Indian GDP will see growth as there will be more employment and more spending. This approach is utilitarian economics to justify female education. When a girl completes her HSC, she can be formally employed. When that occurs, she can contribute meaningfully to her family's income. This, in turn, increases the standard of living of the family, and ultimately the surrounding community. When this connection between education and family earnings becomes visible to families, they are more likely to invest in a daughter's schooling. However, this factor remains underrecognised and is either ignored or overlooked both by families themselves and communities as a whole.[8]

Families in the semi-urban demographic need to be made aware that when a girl completes high school, she is considered literate and employable. She is able to maintain a higher standard of living for her family, is capable of raising educated children,

and helps break the cycle of poverty. Napoleon Bonaparte's often-cited quote "Give me an educated mother, I shall promise you the birth of a civilized, educated nation" captures a pattern shown in the data: reported by Singh Sumanjeet, educated mothers tend to set a higher bar for their own children's schooling, extending the economic benefit across generations.[9]

When families encourage their daughters to work in their own households or in that of others, it leads down a path of informal employment. A girl who becomes a maid has no fixed income, and is thus informally employed. Govindan Raveendran *et al.* state that employment in India is overwhelmingly informal: Nationally, 92% of working women are in the informal economic sector.[10] The World Bank reports that girls who drop out early also have reduced lifelong earning potential.[11] They fail to be properly integrated into the workforce and often remain unemployed. This demographic represents a disproportionately large number of India's population. This is why it is so important to ensure that girls are able to attain their HSC so that they can be formally employed and have a stable income.

Psychological And Developmental Cost Of Early School Withdrawal:

Beyond the economic factors, when a girl is withdrawn from school by her family, the effects ripple throughout society. Marphatia *et al.* find that girls who drop out and marry early face a significantly higher likelihood of adolescent pregnancy, with lasting health consequences for both the mother and the child.[12] When a girl goes through teen pregnancy, she is often permanently removed from the labour market and has to bear the physical and emotional burden of motherhood. These girls also have less knowledge about their own body and reproductive functions; many end up going through early pregnancies and are not equipped to handle them.[13]

There is also a significant psychological and developmental cost of early school withdrawal. Smile Foundation reports that girls who drop out early suffer major mental health consequences. Studies find most girls are teenagers when they drop out from high school.[14] This is the stage when friendships are important and they learn to build social networks. This is also the stage when they meet and interact with people outside their families and gradually adapt to being adults. When girls are made to drop out at this stage, either because of kinship or by social and cultural pressures, they become isolated at home and begin to feel helpless. This leads to various other problems such as anxiety and/or other mental health issues.[15] It is understandable then that when girls who are already suffering from such issues are married off early, they become physically and psychologically weak mothers and may not be able to parent their children well. Another crucial factor is that girls choose to withdraw from school at the onset of menstruation, a point that will be discussed below.

Challenges and Obstacles

According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics data cited by Smile Foundation, nearly 40% of girls in India drop out of

school before Grade 10, meaning many never get the chance to complete their schooling, let alone be formally employed. [15] Girls drop out of school for a variety of reasons, including societal pressures, early marriage, financial hardships, lack of sanitation facilities at school, and distances in travelling to school. Elementary or primary schools run by an area's municipality are closer to a family's dwelling, but middle or high schools are often farther away. As a result, families often consider it unsafe for post-pubescent girls to travel such distances from the safety of their homes, and may also struggle with the travelling costs. [15]

It is a common phenomenon in semi-urban areas that girls in high school are dissuaded from completing their studies, wherein some of the common denominators are family and kinship pressures, as well as societal taboos about girls being *too* educated. [16] Satyanarayana Ramanaik *et al* found through their study that in some semi-urban areas a girl who is sent to school beyond a certain age is deemed to be "of questionable character" and brings "shame" to her family.[16] Because of this, there are many families who will pull girls out of school or not send them regularly to avoid the "shame" and ensure their daughter remains "pure of character". According to this study, which involved interviews with 36 adolescent girls in northern Karnataka, parents sometimes wish to send their daughter to school but are unable to do so due to fear of societal judgment.[16]

Menstruation is also a part of their lives that affects the attendance of girls in school and also affects their mental health. Girls are embarrassed, made to feel their bodily functions are shameful, while parents view the onset of menstruation as a sign that the girl is a woman now and can get married. Even if they do continue going to school, many are uncomfortable, and some have to discontinue, because of the lack of clean, safe and private bathrooms.[17] Moreover, a report by Niti Aayog (a government policy think tank) indicates that over 98,000 schools in India do not have functioning girls' toilets, and over 61,000 do not have toilets at all.[18]

Another reason that girls drop out is financial constraints and prevalent family issues such as sick relatives, or younger siblings who need to be taken care of, which causes additional work. A family's decision to remove a girl from school to make her do household chores comes not only from traditional and patriarchal gender norms, but also from a lack of finances. The World Bank estimates that as of 2022, 23% of Indians live below the poverty line, meaning that financial struggles are persistent across a large portion of society.[19] Since it is traditional in lower class families for boys to work after completing the HSC, educating the girl child is considered unproductive financially or a liability culturally; she is jettisoned as soon as financial difficulties arise. [20] Because a girl's education is not considered to be as important as her getting married, these families prioritise their sons' education and their daughters' marriage.[15]

Teachers and parents also have an influence on girls staying in school. Parents thus determine the likelihood of the child

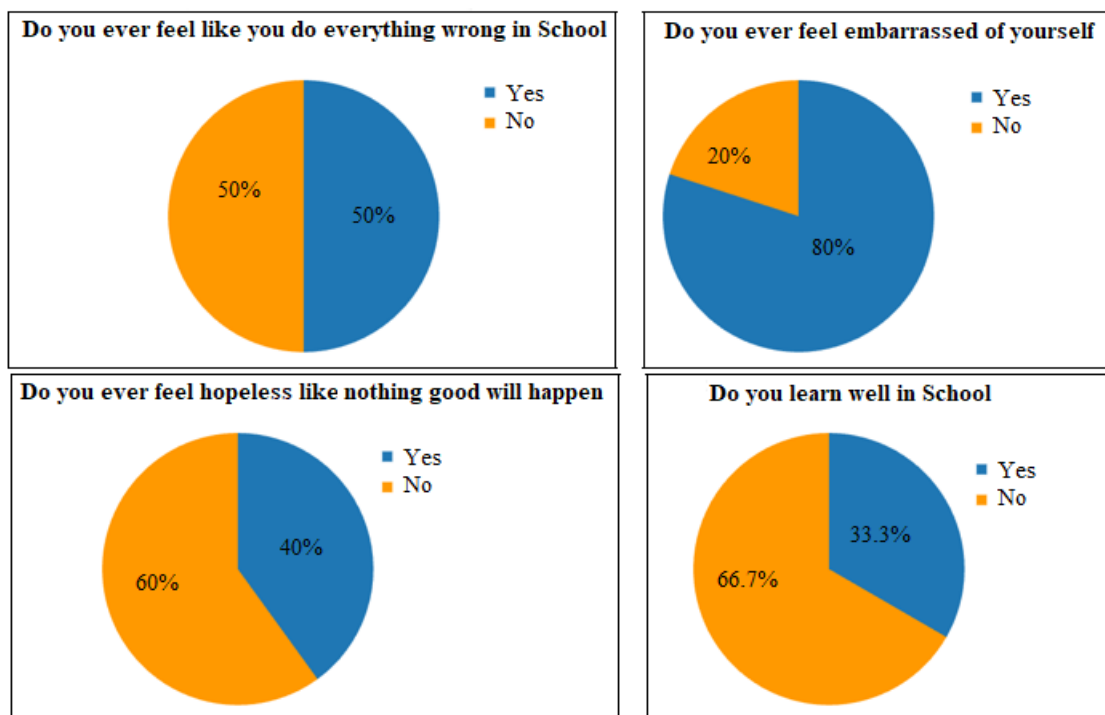
completing school. An older sister who is kept at home can also become an unintended role model, normalising the same outcome for younger daughters in the family. [21] Additionally, teachers and school administrators often fail to encourage girls to stay in school. They pay scant attention to the progress girls make in the classroom and often treat girls and boys differently. Because they are often ignored, sometimes actively discouraged in the classroom, girls feel alienated and dejected.[22] Their recourse is to draw back from all school activities.

As girls approach adolescence, it is important for them to have supportive, female teachers that they can look up to, as said by Mathieu Brossard *et al.* of UNICEF.[23] Supportive teachers encourage girls to do well and focus on their education, instead of neglecting them when they are not able to do certain things. Teachers also play a role in preventing bullying and harassment in classrooms. Girls are often targeted by boys and subjected to teasing or bullying, especially after adolescence.[24] This then later turns into larger forms of harassment or abuse, which leads to girls sometimes dropping out just to avoid the bullying.[25]

out how education is a practical change agent. This study is limited in this sense as I was able to work with students in the semi urban high schools surrounding Ahmedabad. My study draws on semi-structured interviews with approximately 15 girls between the ages of 12 and 16, all attending middle or high school in semi-urban Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Participants were approached independently by the author during visits to these areas, and all interviews were kept anonymous. Since most girls were more comfortable speaking Hindi or Gujarati, interviews were conducted in these languages and later translated into English. The conversations focused on school attendance, household responsibilities, and how families viewed their daughters' education. Because of the small sample size and the way participants were recruited, these findings are to be read as illustrative rather than statistically representative. Because the participants were minors and were discussing sensitive family and personal circumstances, care was taken to ensure they were comfortable and didn't feel pressured to talk about anything they didn't feel safe saying. Their consent was obtained and those who said no were not pressured further. The interviews were conducted outside their school. Of these interviews, 6 are presented below.

2. Methodology

I have conducted this study because I am a young woman in a good high school in Ahmedabad and am interested in finding



Interviewee 1(8th grade):

Question- Do you learn well in school?

Answer- "I don't go to school."

Question- Why not?

"After my mother fell ill and had an operation, I had to stay at home to take care of her while my brothers went to school. Now

she is better but my father says there is no reason for me to go back to school and that I should learn to do housework instead".

Interviewee 2 (7th grade):

Question- Do you ever feel like you do everything wrong in school?

Answer- *"Yes. I can't do schoolwork because I have to help my mother with housework. I try to focus on studies but I don't have time. The teacher scolds me and my parents are saying that I don't have to know much, I just have to get married so maybe I will just do that".*

Interviewee 3 (7th grade):

Question- Do you learn well in school?

Answer- *"No."*

Question- Why what stops you?

Answer- *"I was bullied and teased by the boys in my class, when I would tell the teacher she didn't do anything. I didn't know what to do so I began disliking school."*

Interviewee 4 (6th grade):

Question- Do you ever feel hopeless like nothing good will happen?

Answer- *"Yes."*

Question- Why do you feel like that?

"My parents say that I don't need to study after 10th, they will just get me married. But I don't want to, but I am helpless because of my parents."

Interviewee 5 (8th grade):

Question- Do you ever feel like you do everything wrong in school?

"I don't like going to school because the teacher yells at me."
(did not want to elaborate further)

Interviewee 6 (8th grade):

Question- Do you go to school during menstruation?

Answer- No I don't like to, there is no proper bathroom and I feel ashamed

3. Findings and Analysis

Several of the students were intimidated because they were uncertain about their answers being kept confidential. They also hesitated to trust the interviewer as she came from Ahmedabad and was of a higher class. They were not forthcoming with the answers because they didn't want their parents, especially their fathers being made aware of their responses. This is one of the reasons for the small sample size.

Within the sample interviews girls didn't want to expose their teachers for scolding them for not completing homework. It was not their fault, but teachers seemed insensitive to family burdens on girls, even though all of them share common family values. Teachers also did not stop boys from teasing girls.

Anecdotal conversations with girls standing nearby who did not want to participate in the interview pointed in the same direction. When the question of menstruation came up, all of them gave answers similar to Interviewee 6's: they were ashamed of their periods, and the lack of sanitation facilities and privacy was a big deterrent.

The responses in the present study are broadly consistent with earlier research on why girls drop out of school, even though that research is based on larger samples and is not localised to Ahmedabad. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that girls withdraw from schooling for a variety of interacting reasons.

4. Results and Recommendations

The author recommends that, in order to help retain girls through high school and ensure they complete their HSC, schools improve their infrastructure and strengthen teacher support. Safe and sanitary bathrooms that girls can access are essential so that girls do not miss school during their menstruation cycle. Teachers should be trained to encourage girls instead of discouraging them when they are not able to complete school work, to treat boys and girls equally so that there is gender parity, and to create a healthy and safe learning environment in which girls are not bullied. Having female teachers also sets a better example for girl students to work hard. Parents should be made more aware of the importance of educating their daughters and should be supportive of their daughters getting their HSC. Along with this, government schemes like the mid-day meal also make a significant difference in parents' willingness to send their daughters to school. As reported by NDTV, another such initiative is the "Samras Vidya Setu" campaign, launched by the Gujarat government in July 2026. As said by Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel, "this initiative is aimed at achieving zero-dropout and ensuring that no child is left behind in the education system" the campaign works to re-enroll over 80,000 school dropout children back into age-appropriate classes and decrease the state's dropout rate as a whole.[26] This campaign relies on teachers, community leaders, and local public representatives working together to encourage parents to send their children back to school, mirroring this paper's recommendation that widespread community involvement is essential to retaining girls in school, involving teachers, parents and community leaders. Although the campaign is not specifically targeted at girls, its scale and infrastructure suggest a state-level framework that could be extended to address the gender-specific barriers this paper identifies.

Skill Training:

Another recommendation is to enroll girls in skills training programmes. Skills training refers to structured programmes that equip individuals with the knowledge, abilities, and skills needed to perform specific tasks in the workplace. Girls who have completed their schooling can be skill-trained to work for companies, NGOs, or government offices in specific tasks like basic data entry work, being a receptionist or secretary, working in a factory, painting and basic carpentry work, etc.

Examples of industries that they could then be employed in include the textile and garment industry, the tech industry, etc. India's textile sector is the country's second-biggest employer after agriculture, providing direct jobs to over 45 million people and supporting roughly 60 million more through allied industries.[27] A pioneering example in skill training in the textile industry is *Shahi Exports*, with more than 100 skill

centres where they have skill training for girls and women, which enable them to earn and provide for themselves and their families.[28] Through this, girls and women can also enter the formal economy and chart a different path for themselves.

Another sector where women who have received skills training could excel is the technology sector. With programmes like the *Sapna Center* that trains girls and women to code and gives them an opportunity to enter the fast growing technology sector, more women could be trained by initiatives like this and enter the data and technology industry.

While these serve as excellent examples, the fact remains that there is still much to be done in India to implement such schemes at a large scale. We cannot depend on small scale initiatives run by companies themselves; the government must implement central schemes, similar to these, that help skill train girls in various fields.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights several interconnected barriers that can disrupt girls' secondary education in semi-urban Ahmedabad, including household responsibilities, financial constraints, expectations surrounding marriage, inadequate sanitation, bullying, and insufficient school support. Although the small qualitative sample does not permit generalisation to all girls in Gujarat or India, the interview accounts are broadly consistent with concerns identified in the wider literature. Supporting girls through completion of secondary education may improve their opportunities for further study, skills development, and participation in formal employment. Measures such as safer and better-equipped schools, supportive teacher practices, family and community engagement, and accessible skills programmes therefore warrant continued attention. Further research involving larger and more systematically selected samples would help establish the relative importance of these barriers and assess which interventions are most effective in improving educational continuity and subsequent workforce participation.

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