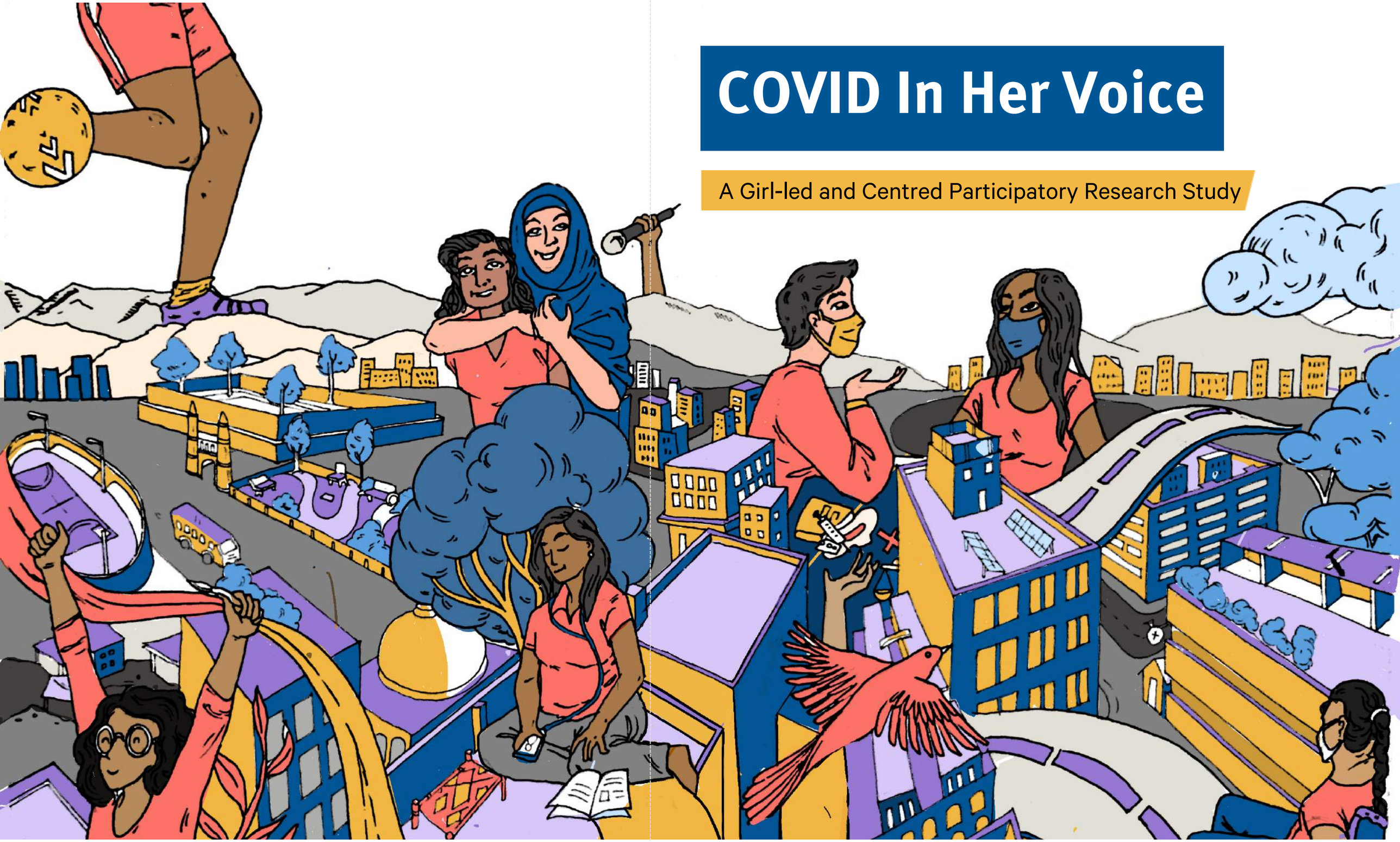
# COVID In Her Voice

A Girl-led and Centred Participatory Research Study



EMpower

UK Government

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# COVID
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# Acknowledgements

No complex, nuanced work happens without the contributions of many talented people. This report and the research that led to it, is no exception — especially as it took place during a compressed timeframe, November 2020–March 2021.

The report is dedicated to the 153 girls who shared their stories and their perspectives with us and to the remarkable 25 girl researchers of the Leaders Lab, whose dedication, insights, and energy were instrumental to the research design, implementation, and analysis: **Rani, Priya, Khursheeda, Aavda, Netravati, Lalita, Shreya, Shahjahan, Neha, Aliya, Geeta, Preeti, Alvish, Anjum, Roshni, Radha, Jyoti, Shubhangi, Soni, Monika, Vansita, Richa, Pooja, Shirin, and Zoha**. Their leadership, sisterhood, and commitment to their girl peers inspires us.

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**Tanvi Mishra** (Senior Communications Specialist) led the creative production of the report, with support from **Sara Saad** (Communications Fellow), to ensure a well-designed product that also reflects the centrality of the girls leading the endeavour, and its publication in Hindi, Marathi, and English.

**Prachi Gupta** (Development Strategist) stewarded this work and coordinated with the FCDO. **Nisha Dhawan** (Country Director, India) conceived of the project and contributed significantly to its strategy, research design, analytical framework, data analysis, and report writing. Together, they designed the sector specialist input process.

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Our grantee partners in India played an instrumental role. Each organization selected a representative who helped in onboarding, contributed to measures for safeguarding, and supported the girl researchers in their training, interviewing, and analysis.

We would also like to thank the sector specialists, our peers in this field, and EMpower's Girls Advisory Council who offered their reflections and insights on the data by sharing their thoughts with us in writing and through a roundtable where the initial research findings were presented.

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# Introduction

The true impact of COVID-19 upon girls living in cities is not yet known. But what we do know is that girls' lives have dramatically changed because of the pandemic. Girls have experienced more violence. They have withdrawn from school (in some cases permanently), are having to shoulder increased household responsibilities, and their opportunities to earn decent livelihoods have been curtailed. In some communities, girls have faced limited access to health services, especially sexual and reproductive health, and for many, basic sanitation and hygiene products are out of reach. Girls have always been the invisible citizens of the city, but the lockdown and curfews have further denied them access to the cities where they live.

As we respond to the crisis, we should not be looking to return to the pre-pandemic world. In this pivotal moment, one year since COVID-19 began to take hold, we have the opportunity to "unlearn" what has not been effective until now and build back in a more inclusive manner.

At EMpower, we believe that girls are experts on their own lives and best positioned to provide meaningful guidance to practitioners and policymakers. This means intentionally listening to girls, centring their voices, entrusting them with decision-making responsibilities, and ensuring that investments go to them. By shifting power, in both decision-making and resource allocation, we shine the spotlight on those who really matter—*girls*—and the issues that really matter to them. This report shares the insights of girls in India's cities on how to build a more just and equitable world and shows us how girls can author their own futures.

With support from the UK's **Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO),** we created the EMpower Leaders Lab. EMpower designed and incubated a three-month participatory research lab with 25 girls from urban areas in India to interview 153 other girls in their communities; and to analyse their findings. The girls were in charge of the design and implementation of this participatory action research project (PAR). The EMpower Leaders Lab is a knowledge and learning hub: a blended and collaborative programme, combining online masterclasses with on-the-ground research training to support girls in developing their leadership, critical thinking, and research skills in and beyond the crisis.

Our biggest learning from the girls has been that they are looking beyond the short-term; they are focusing on the future. While immediate aid and service distribution have been priorities, the girls are imagining their future in a more just, inclusive, and equitable world, as active citizens of the cities where they live. They are urging us to bring about long-term systemic change—as economies, societies, and schools gradually reopen.



The outcomes of this report have the potential to align with multiple policy frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The girls' advice is critical as it comes from their lived experiences, but also, importantly, because it speaks to and reinforces the objectives of the SDGs, which we have used to frame the data and their recommendations.

Specifically, we highlight:

- SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing;
- SDG 4: Quality Education;
- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth; and
- SDG11: Sustainable Cities and Communities.

We believe that SDG 5: Gender Equality and SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities lie at the heart of the girls' recommendations and are central to achieving the other SDGs. Only by acting on this advice collaboratively can we hope for transformational change. Therefore, we frame future avenues for this work through SDG 17: Partnerships.

This report is an embodiment of our ambitions to amplify the voices and wisdom of girls. In the process, we invite the larger ecosystem to meaningfully engage with, listen to, and be guided by the girls' recommendations.

## Guiding Principles

EMpower believes that the process of engaging girls and young women is central to the research outcomes, and important in its own right. This report centres adolescent girls as both primary researchers and respondents. The fundamental guiding principles of this participatory research study are:

- The greatest experts on girls' lives are girls themselves.
- The study is led by girls and is a testament to their unique perspectives and lived realities.
- All processes and decision-making touchpoints were designed to ensure the purposeful participation of girl leaders. Their perspectives and insights were featured and accounted for at every step of the research process.



This research has been performed with, rather than on, girls and young women. Throughout, girl leaders were asked to:
- Reflect on the context of the community.
- Ensure an iterative interview style, so that respondents could respond and reflect in more than one way on their experiences.
- See both the respondents and themselves as key actors in the learning.

# Methodology and Process

### Phase I Launching the Leaders Lab

EMpower reached out to 30 of their grantee partners, who recommended girls from their communities who: were between the ages of 13 and 24, lived in an urban area, demonstrated leadership, and had a good understanding of issues faced by adolescent girls within their communities.

Twenty-five leaders were selected to be the first members of the Leaders Lab from Ahmedabad, Alwar, Bareilly, Delhi, Lucknow, Mumbai, and Pune.

### Phase II Designing and Vetting the Research Plan

EMpower staff engaged with seven girl leaders for their insights to develop the questionnaire. The girls made changes to the form, such as adding marital status in the demographic section and providing more space in close-ended questions for reflections. As a result, the questionnaire comprised 48 close-ended and three open-ended questions, with each having two to four sub-questions.

EMpower curated and facilitated two sets of online masterclasses to equip the girl leaders with technical and soft research skills. The masterclasses focused on enhancing their interviewing skills, safeguarding measures, COVID-19-related precautions, and developing criteria for interviewee selection. Importantly, it also created space for the girl leaders to provide critical feedback to EMpower.

### Phase III Field Research

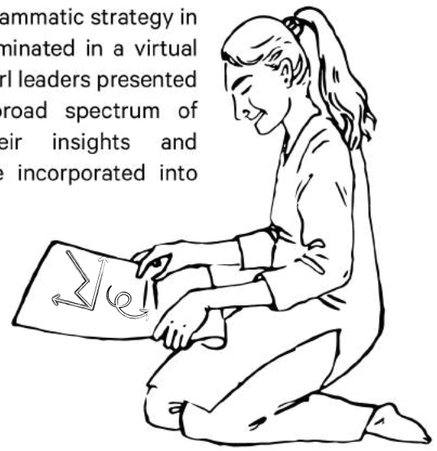
The girl leaders conducted research in their communities, interviewing six girls each. During this time, EMpower organized two optional check-in calls to resolve their queries or discuss their on-field challenges.

In addition, all girl leaders maintained a field diary to document their observations and experiences to further inform and enrich the research findings and outcomes. During the final stages of the research, the girl leaders leaned on these notes to share their insights, challenges, experiences and learnings, which greatly broadened the framework of understanding girls' lives, especially during the pandemic.

### Phase IV Data Analysis and Insights

EMpower staff developed a bottom-up coding approach to group all open-ended questions. For the close-ended variant, EMpower ran the data through STATA and conducted a bivariate analysis of responses against demographic data such as age, location, caste, and religion. The girls vocalised the importance of examining the data through the lens of caste and religion and ultimately decided the structure of the bivariate analysis employed. EMpower then presented preliminary trends and findings to the girl leaders for their analysis in a masterclass, and the girl leaders ultimately decided what was featured in the final report.

EMpower staff also engaged a group of sector specialists, who provided their perspectives and insights on the preliminary findings. This group included practitioners, donor agencies, academics as well as girls from EMpower's Girls Advisory Council, a group of 16 girls who advise EMpower on their programmatic strategy in India. This process culminated in a virtual roundtable where the girl leaders presented their findings to a broad spectrum of stakeholders for their insights and reflections, which were incorporated into the final report.



"I appreciate the adding of marital status to the demographic profile—it implies that married girls were included (or not excluded) from the process. This is important because usually girls who have already been married off fall through the cracks of NGO interventions, and are usually excluded from programs which focus on prevention of early marriage or interventions with unmarried girls."

–Manjima Bhattacharjya, Senior Advisor, American Jewish World Service

## Limitations

While the study maintained equity and openness between participants and researchers, and ensured a reflexive process at crucial stages of design, implementation, observation, and reflection, it had the following limitations:

1.This study relied on the researchers' perceptions and thoughts, a necessary and a distinctive feature. However, subjectivity may have crept into the findings.

2. The girl leaders were first-time researchers, and the rigour of their research techniques depended on their limited experience and the research skills they gained through EMpower's Leaders Lab.

3. This participatory exercise was conducted against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. The balancing act of ensuring interviewees' safety while staying focused on the research would be challenging at the best of times, let alone during a sui generis crisis situation.

4. Girls living in marginalised neighbourhoods face multiple restrictions at home, including space limitations. Even though the researchers tried to create an environment of trust, they reported that some of the participants hesitated in responding to questions in the presence of their family, which prevented them from openly speaking their mind.

5. The researchers also reported the following challenges:

a. They omitted a few details in their notes as they were unable to keep up with some of the respondents' answers during the interview.

b. They noted that a few respondents were hesitant in providing socially undesirable answers.



## Role of the Organisational Representative

Every grantee partner nominated one organisational representative who:

- Played a pivotal role in supporting the girls throughout.
- Ensured safeguarding during all stages of the process.
- Supported the girls in sharing their completed interview forms with EMpower.

"There are some important life lessons that one can take from our adolescent girls...being flexible and adaptive to the current situation and not losing hope. Their attitude of not giving up has been my key take-away. Also, this whole scenario has motivated me to work more efficiently for the girls and for myself."

—Vrinda Bajaj, Organisational Representative in the Leaders Lab, Swechha

## Safeguarding Considerations

Safeguarding was central to the end-to-end design of the Leaders Lab. EMpower:

- Discussed safeguarding with consultants, organizational representatives, and girl leaders.
- Created a detailed risk register.
- Communicated to the girl leaders that they could raise safety issues with designated staff.
- Provided stipends to the girl leaders—including additional allowances for COVID-19 kits, and travel.
- Emphasized and obtained informed consent from the girl leaders and respondents at every step of the study. In case they were under 18, their parent/guardian signed a consent form.

"I explained to the respondent's father that the data collected will be confidential. I shared that we will only conduct the interview you have all consented and if [your daughter] raises any objections through the interview, I will stop interviewing."

—Aavda (21, Delhi) Leaders Lab

## Respondents Versus Researchers

While the Leaders Lab is comprised of girls from the same communities as the 153 respondents who were interviewed, the research design excluded the researchers from partaking in the interview. This allowed the girl leaders to analyse the data that they collected in their role as researchers. The girl leaders had increased relatability to their respondents and could dismantle the power dynamic that often exists in field research between the researcher and the respondent. According to the girl leaders, this was because of three things:

**Empathy**

For many, sharing their experiences was a difficult emotional experience. They reported that the girls opened up to them because, they too, were girls from the same community. “Their experiences were similar to mine and other girls in my community. They trusted me and shared a lot, even things beyond the interview questions. Even though I was speaking with them for the first time, I listened to them as a researcher but also as a friend. They saw me as someone who understands the problems they are facing because we are similar.” Soni, (20 , Delhi)

**Building Trust**

The girl leaders believed that they were able to build trust. “It was difficult for the girls to talk about issues such as menstruation, lack of freedom and pressure on them to get married. I told them that there is no need to be shy or scared. When they understood that I’m not shy myself they gradually opened up and answered the questions.” Priya, (23, Lucknow)

**Remaining Judgement-free**

Anjum (16, Mumbai) described how “encouraging the girls to tell their own story without interruption was useful. I was calm and did not try to control [the conversation] even when they were saying something else. This approach helped the girls to be open. I listened to whatever she had to say without judging like parents and adults sometimes do.”

## Skills and Knowledge Acquired from the EMpower Leaders Lab

The girl leaders reported gaining new skills and knowledge. They:

- gained a contextual understanding of their peers, their experiences, and lived realities.
- gained a better understanding of how COVID-19 affected girls and young women.
- honed their ability to conduct research, conduct interviews, collect and analyse data.
- improved their listening skills, sense of empathy and respect, and objectivity while engaging with other girls.
- developed an appreciation of the importance of informed consent and confidentiality in research.
- had less fear and hesitation when speaking to new people.

# A Spotlight on Soni

“I see myself as a researcher,” said Soni when asked if she considered herself to be a leader.
“I can interview girls because I am able to ask questions in a way that makes them feel confident. They feel they can open up to me and share their thoughts and details related to their lives. I am confident I can speak to new people and conduct such interviews in the future as well.”

“Initially, I faced a few challenges while conducting interviews. Some people were suspicious. They didn’t want me, a stranger, to interview their daughters, their girls. But I persevered. I maintained my calm and convinced the parents that my work was important.”

- Soni, Age 20, Mumbai



Soni’s confidence is infectious. A part of the 25-strong girl leaders’ squad, she interviewed six girls from different communities. “I wanted to reach out to different groups,” she said. “The COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdowns took a toll on the lives of people and was especially harsh on girls.”

While she joined the EMpower Leaders Lab to acquire new skills and meet new people, the first few days were a grind. Not only was she getting used to being a researcher and familiarising herself with the different interview methods, she had chosen communities that were new to her and far from her home. “Initially, I faced a few challenges while conducting interviews. Some people were suspicious. They didn’t want me, a stranger, to interview their daughters, their girls. But I persevered. I maintained my calm and convinced the parents that my work was important.”

Soni is unfazed by challenges. Her journey isn’t very different from the girls she interviewed. Hailing from a small village in Uttar Pradesh, she migrated to Mumbai after she fell seriously ill. Her parents had migrated to the city for work earlier. Due to her illness and the family’s financial situation, she had to discontinue her education for three years. She managed to re-enter school once she joined a program for women and girls run by Vacha Charitable Trust.

Soni is completing her undergraduate degree, and since participating in the Leaders Lab, she is helping one of the girls she interviewed. “One of the girls I interviewed lives with a mental disability. She seemed neglected by the people around her. So, I meet her for an hour daily and teach her, speak to her. She feels happy, and so do I.”

# Who are the Researchers?

## EMPOWER LEADERS LAB

**Pooja Dinesh Gotal**
19, Mumbai

**Monika**
19, New Delhi

**Khursheeda**
20, Lucknow

**Geeta Deepak Chavan**
21, Pune

**Shahjahan Khatoon Salahuddin Idrisi**
18, Mumbai

**Aavda**
21, New Delhi

**Jyoti Bai**
24, Alwar

**Neha Vinayak Kalbhor**
18, Pune

**Lalita**
16, New Delhi

**Netravati Ningappa Naduvinmani**
19, Mumbai

**Preeti Singh**
24, New Delhi

**Anjum Parveen Mohammad Kamar Shaikh**
16, Mumbai

**Shubhangi Ramesh Jadhav**
18, Pune

**Priya Kaithwas**
23, Lucknow

**Rani Rawat**
20, New Delhi

**Soni Kamlesh Bharti**
20, Mumbai

**Radha**
23, Alwar

**Shirin Ansari**
22, Mumbai

**Shreya Ramesh Rajbhur**
13, Mumbai

**Zala Vansita Prakshabhai**
17, Ahmedabad

**Roshni Bharti**
16, Lucknow

**Aliya Wahid Bhaldar**
18, Pune

**Alvish**
14, Bareilly

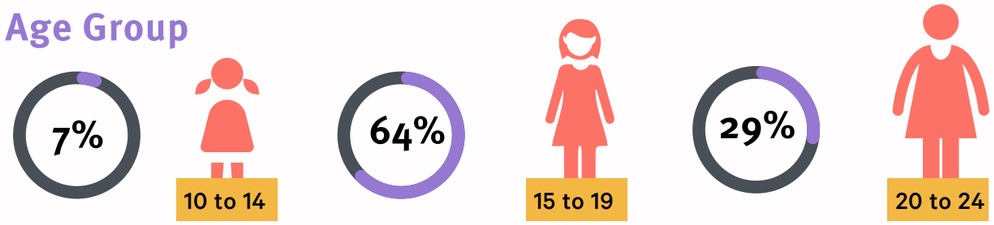
**Zoha Zakir**
18, Mumbai

**Richa**
18, Ahmedabad

# Who are the Respondents?

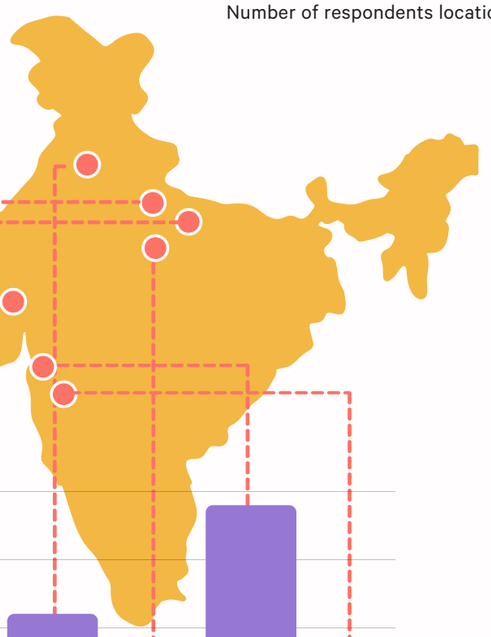
**153** girls from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds across seven cities were interviewed as part of this project. These girls come from communities at the margins because of their gender, caste, faith and multiple other factors. They are, the invisible citizens of the city.

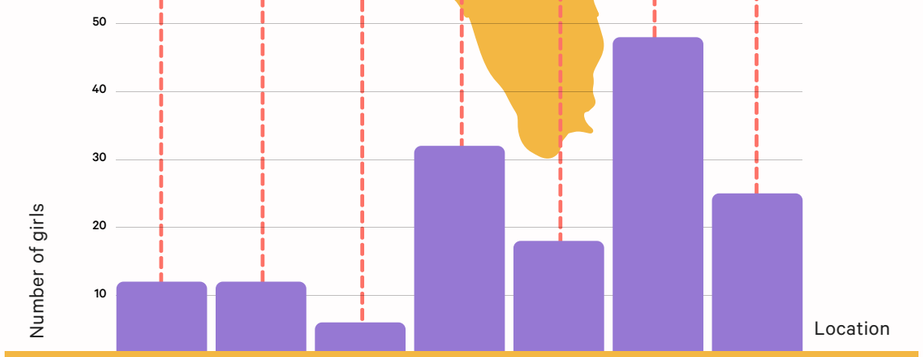
## Age Group




## Location

Number of respondents location wise






| Age | Ahmedabad | Alwar | Bareilly | Delhi | Lucknow | Mumbai | Pune | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10-14 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 11 |
| 15-19 | 9 | 5 | 5 | 21 | 9 | 30 | 19 | 98 |
| 20-24 | 2 | 6 | 1 | 9 | 8 | 13 | 5 | 44 |
| Total | 12 | 12 | 6 | 32 | 18 | 48 | 25 | 153 |



**100%**

of respondents identified as female.

**96%**

of respondents were aware of COVID-19.

10% of respondents returned to their village during the lockdown.
Girls travelled from Ahmedabad, Alwar, Mumbai, Pune, and Lucknow.
None of the girls from Bareilly or Delhi left the city during the lockdown.

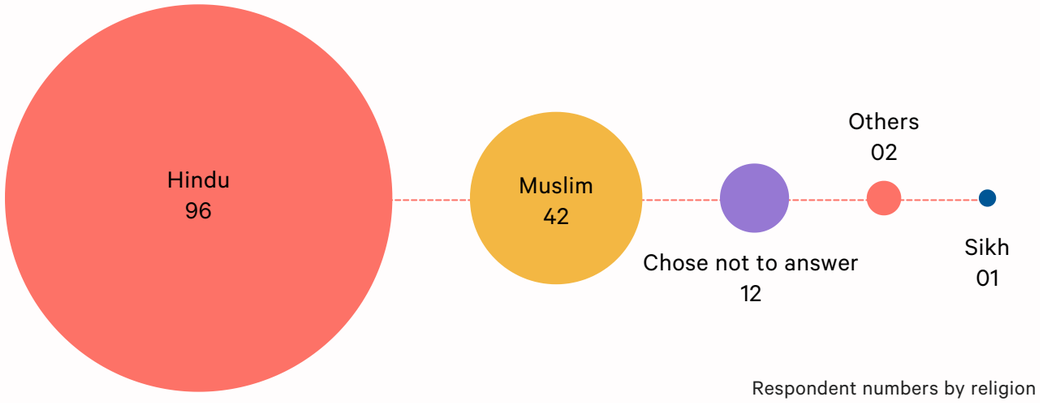
**3%**

identified as having a disability.

**6%**

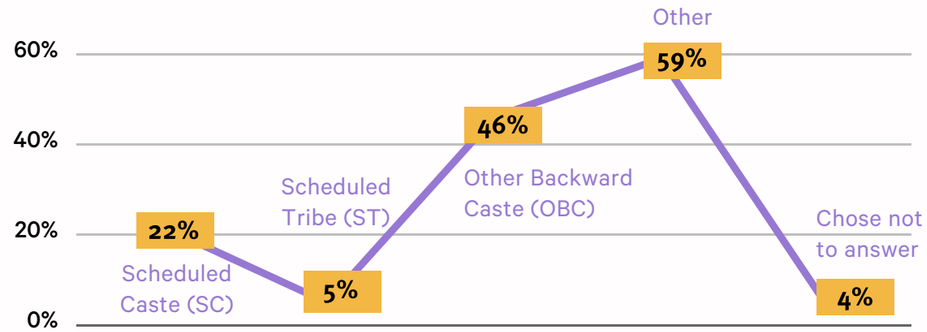
of respondents were married.

## Religion




Respondent numbers by religion

## Caste




Respondent percentages by caste

## Family

1-4

**48**

5 - 8

**78**

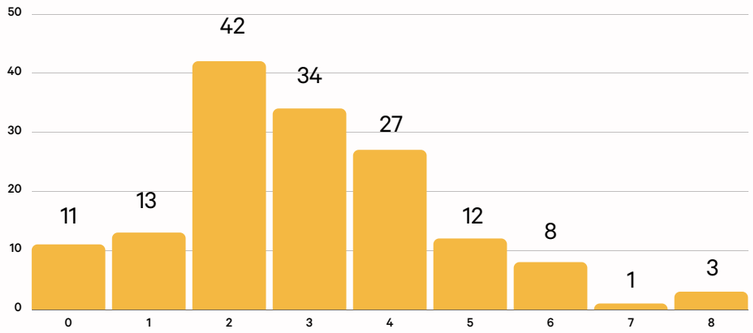
9+

**09**

Girls household size

Number of girls

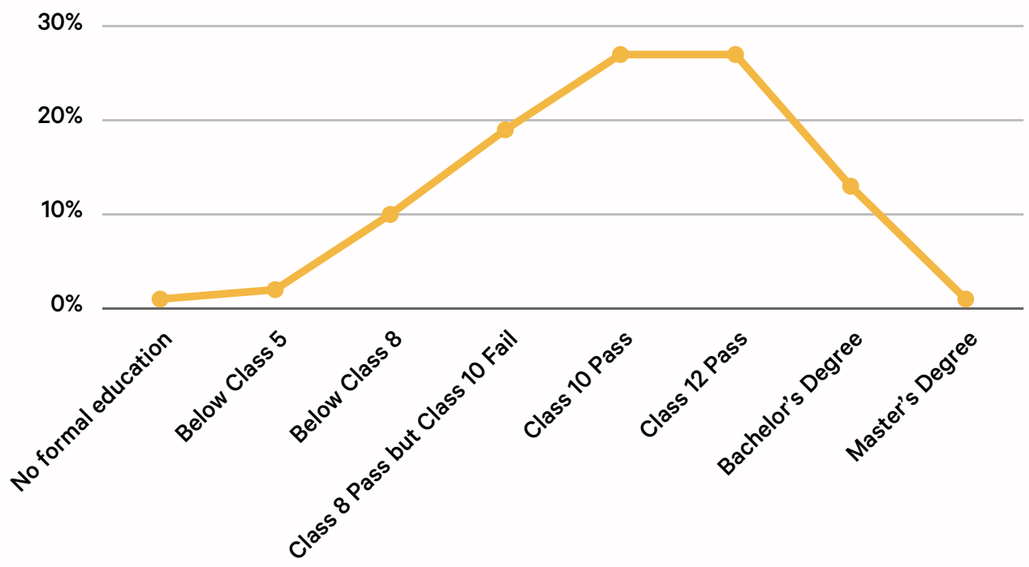
## Siblings




- The average household size of the respondents was 5.5 people.
- Most commonly, the girls lived with four other family members.
- On average, our respondents had 2.95 siblings and most commonly had two siblings.
- 70% of respondents had younger siblings, indicative of son preference.

## Level of Education

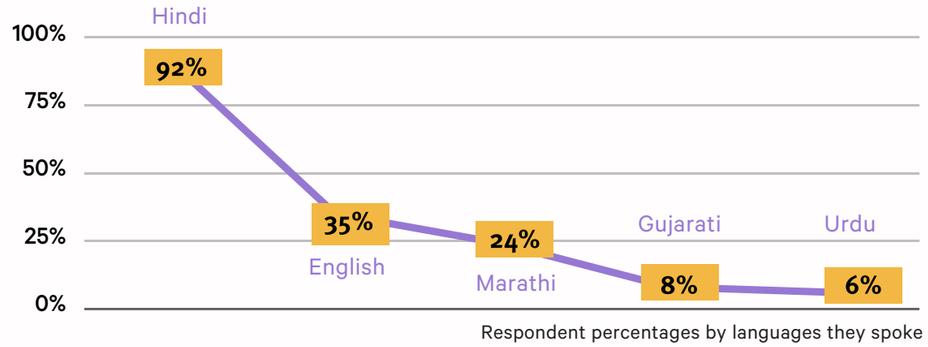
Respondent percentages by level of education




** Classes 5, 6, 10 and 12 are seminal years in the school system.



## Spoken Languages




Respondent percentages by languages they spoke

### 10-14 years

- 4 out of 11 girls are responsible for household chores
- Only 1 girl believes that a girl's caste, class or disability has a role to play in her exclusion
- Of the 9 girls in this group who menstruate, most use a sanitary napkin and 1 uses a cloth rag
- 8 out of 11 girls reported some form of mental health impact upon them
- 1 girl reported an increase of gender-based violence around her

### 15-19 years

- 81 out of 97 girls are responsible for household chores
- 22 girls believe that a girl's caste, class or disability has a role to play in her exclusion
- Of the 94 girls in this group who menstruate, 80 use a sanitary napkin, 13 use a cloth rag and 1 uses a menstrual cup
- 88 girls reported some form of mental health impact upon them
- 26 girls reported an increase of gender-based violence around her

### 20-24 years

- 37 out of 44 girls are responsible for household chores
- 9 girls believe that a girl's caste, class or disability has a role to play in her exclusion
- Of the 43 girls in this group who menstruate, 38 use a sanitary napkin, 4 use a cloth rag and 1 uses a menstrual cup
- 41 girls reported some form of mental health impact upon them
- 12 girls reported an increase of gender-based violence around her

# A Spotlight on Cities

## Ahmedabad

**None**

of the girls from Ahmedabad believe:
o That GBV has increased due to the lockdown
o That some girls are getting more impacted by COVID than others
o That a girl's caste, class or disability has a role to play in their exclusion

**All** of the girls reported that they had access to masks, sanitiser and handwashing facilities.

## Bareilly

of girls were hopeful about their career prospects

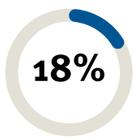
**Before the lockdown**

5 out of 6 girls were enrolled in school–now only 2 girls are in school.

**1/2**

believe GBV has increased (3 out of 6 girls).

## Pune




Of the 42% who believe that the pressure to get married has increased during COVID, 18% were from Pune.

**45%**

highest number of respondents who had migrated to the city with their families.

**44%**

Girls from Pune were least hopeful about their career prospects

## Lucknow

of girls who believe there has been an increase in GBV during the lockdown are from Lucknow.

**17/18**

girls said that household work is their responsibility and none of them receive any help from male relatives.

**Before the lockdown**

7 out of 18 girls were not in school.

## Alwar

Out of the 26% of girls who believe there has been an increase in GBV during the lockdown, 41% are from Alwar.

**5/6**

girls reported some form of mental health impact.

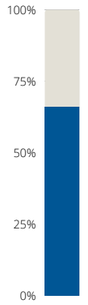
**All**

of the girls reported increased pressure to get married



## Delhi

of girls from Delhi are currently in school.




Out of 27 girls who are learning online 18 (66%) find it difficult.

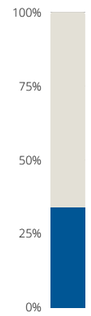
**None**

of the girls from Delhi left the city during the lockdown

## Mumbai

Of the 42% who believe that the pressure to get married has increased during COVID, 30% were from Mumbai.

Of the 29% think that girls' caste, class, or disability have a role to play in exclusion, 34% are from Mumbai.




## The Metros

Of the 30% of girls who are not in school, 55% are from metro cities.

of respondents are from metro cities in India.

Over half of the girls who have the tools they need to access learning are from metro cities.

Girls less hopeful about their career prospects than girls in non-metro cities (Mumbai 68% of respondents, Delhi 71%. Average result: 82%)

## Migration into the City

68% of all respondents were born in the city they currently live in, and 32% migrated into the city with their families.

**Of the girls who migrated to a city:**
o 31% of these girls travelled to Mumbai
o 35% of all respondents from Mumbai were migrants to the city
o 37% of girls who migrated into the city identify as ST/ST/OBC
o 25% of all migrants were Muslim, and 56% were Hindu
o Pune, at 45%, had the highest number of respondents who were migrants to the city

# Qualitative Findings

With an aim to capture girls' voices and their nuanced perspectives, the Leaders Lab designed a set of open-ended questions so that respondents had a chance to reflect holistically upon their pandemic experiences, unrestricted by close-ended questions. We asked:

**1) What was your life like before the COVID-19 pandemic versus your life now? What do you find to be positive and negative about the changes?**

**2) What do you want to keep from this time and what do you want to eliminate/change?**

To analyse the responses, a discourse analysis was conducted, labels were assigned to recurring themes. EMpower approached the data with a few pre-conceived categories, which were expected in the responses. Space for an inductive approach was created by allowing the qualitative data to define new codes. The codes were quantified to understand the trends. The graphs and world clouds below represent the number of respondents who mentioned the themes in their open-ended responses.

## Reflections from the Sector

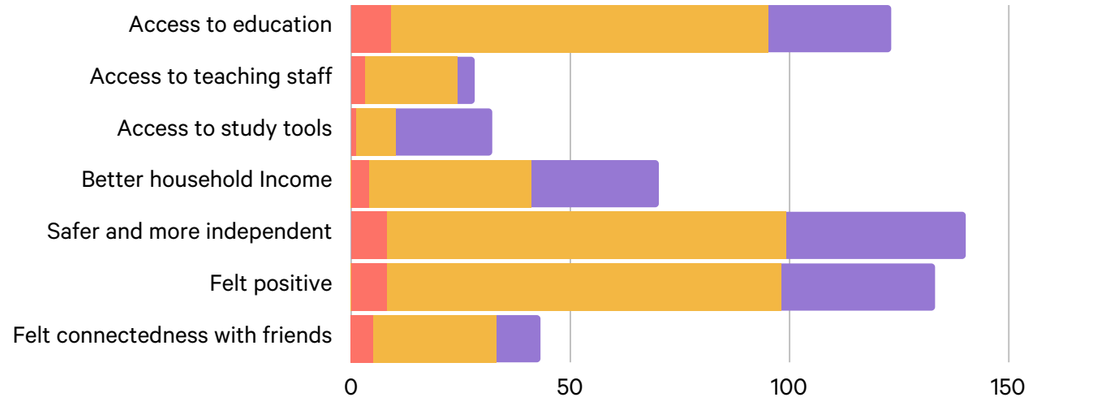
"It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns have only deepened the inequities that already existed due to patriarchy and racialized oppressions. I would caution against drawing any conclusions that could be interpreted as romanticizing pre-COVID times or...to view pre-COVID times are some sort of baseline or benchmark.
For example, if only 21% of respondents reported access to a wide range of resources pre-COVID then already dire conditions for girls would only worsen during a pandemic."
**–Dr. Ramatu Bangura**
Executive Director, Children's Rights Innovation Fund

"Before, girls were used to facing the "usual problems" but COVID created some "new problems" that the girls weren't even aware of...I'm not sure if previous days were [actually] better or if we were just blindfolded by the fact that we were used to those issues."
**–Seema Dosad, Age 20**
EMpower Girls Advisory Council Member

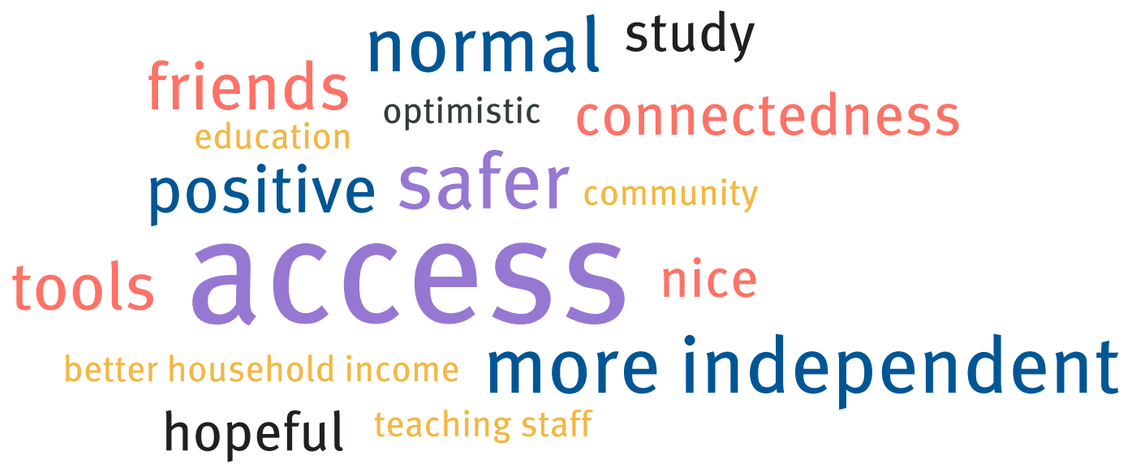


## What was my life like before *vs.* What is my life like now?

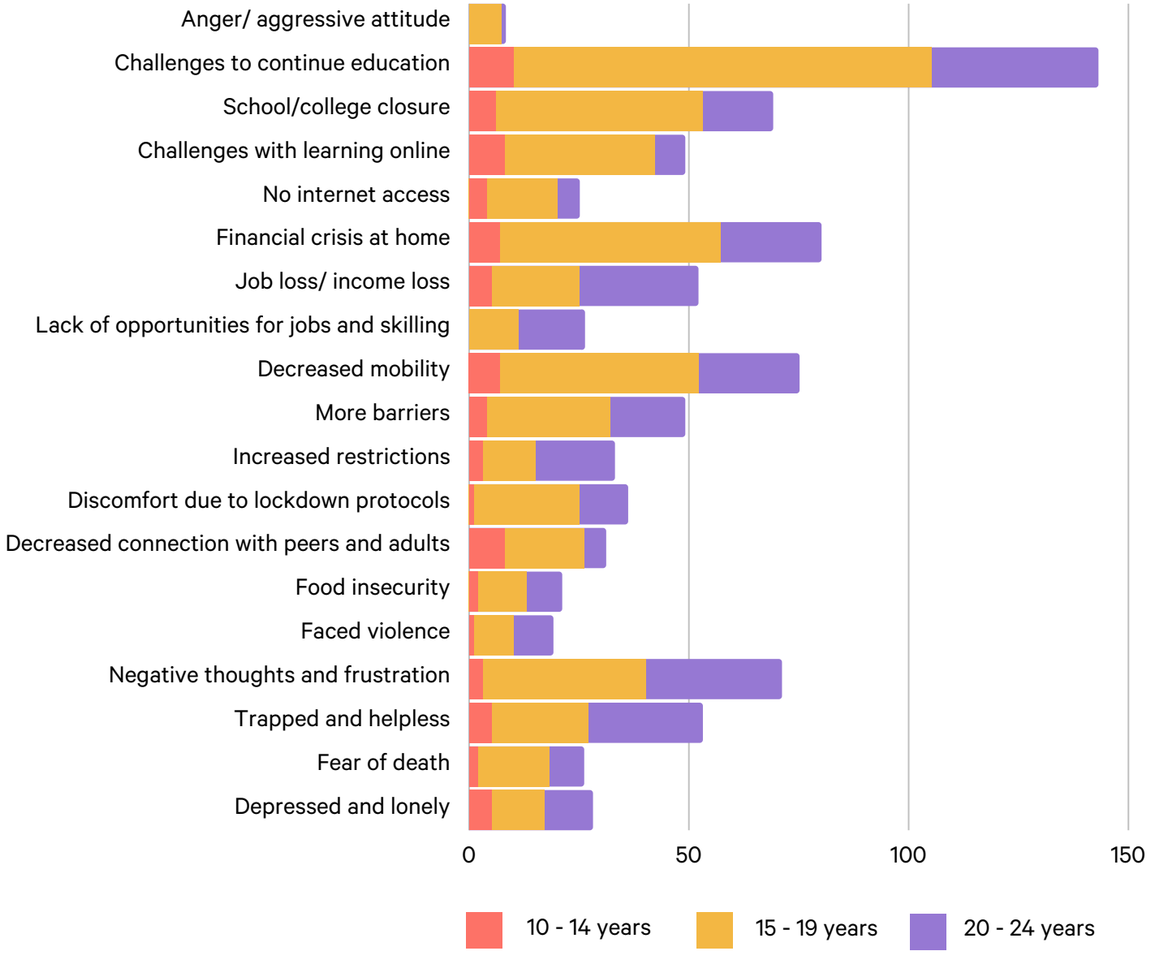
### Before COVID 19

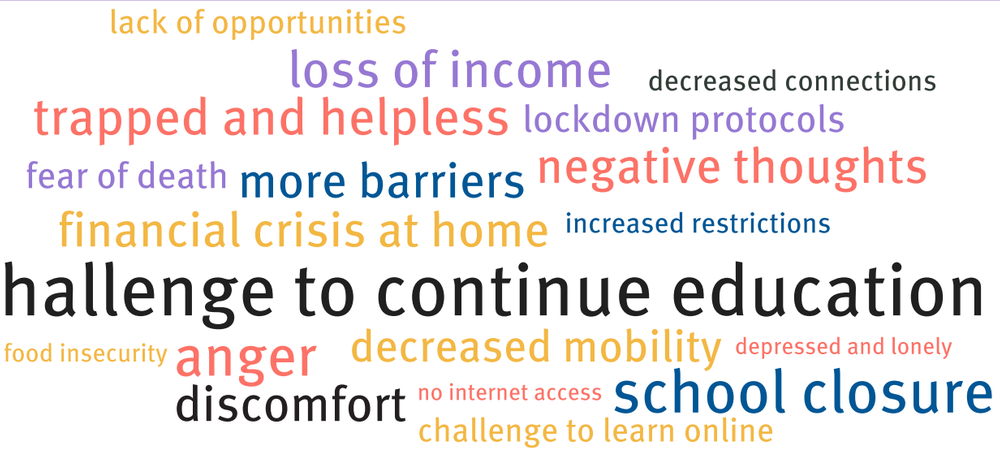



10 - 14 years  15 - 19 years  20 - 24 years



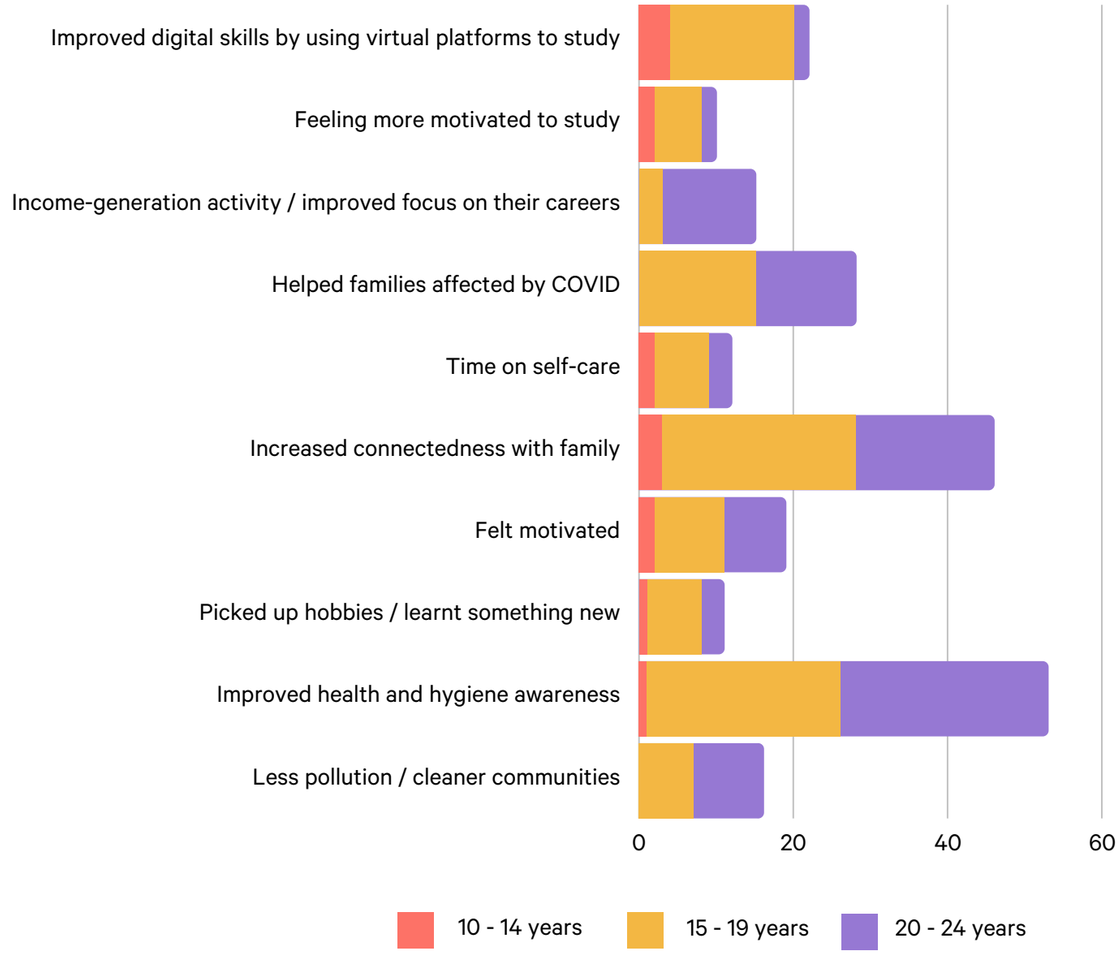
## Challenges Due to COVID






## Positive Impact



## What do we want to keep from the past 12 months

- 32 girls want to keep learning online and through their phones so that they can continue our education from home.
- 32 girls connected with their family members and felt supported by them.
- 15 girls want to keep their friends, who stood by our side in difficult times.
- 13 girls mentioned the support and guidance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who provided them with masks, sanitizers, and hand-washing facilities.
- 12 girls enjoyed their clean, pollution-free, and disease-free surroundings with no traffic because people were staying at home.
- 10 girls want to continue with the happiness, positivity, and hope to deal with situations like COVID-19.
- 3 girls want the government to continue restricting the number of wedding guests to reduce financial burden on girls' families.

## Reflections from the Sector

"It is great to see that people are enjoying spending time with their families, but there is still a huge ratio of girls and women who do not feel safe in their own homes."
**–Kaajal Singh, Age 22**
EMpower Girls Advisory Council Member



# Intersections with the Sustainable Development Goals

In the following pages, we compile our findings thematically under the SDGs. In each section, we cite three sources of information: the respondents, girl leaders, and stakeholders (academics, researchers, and peers working with adolescent girls as well as girls from EMpower's Girls Advisory Council).

1) From the **153** girl respondents we include:

• Data from the close-ended questions, entitled:

**Data from the Field**

• Quotes from the girl respondents to add colour to the data set, entitled:

**Voices from the Field**

• Recommendations from the girls for post-pandemic planning, entitled:

**Advice from the Field**

2) From the **25** girl leaders we include:
- Reflections from their field diaries and their data analysis masterclasses, entitled:

**Reflections from the Leaders Lab**

3) From stakeholders within the ecosystem we include:
• Reflections on the data and their experience working with adolescent girls, entitled:

**Reflections from the Sector**

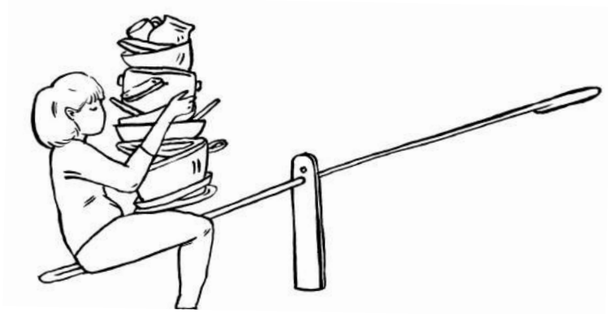
## SDG 5
## Gender Equality

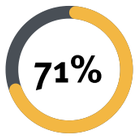
## SDG 10
## Reduced Inequalities

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities. For adolescent girls and young women, it has intensified the effects of patriarchy and gender discrimination. The lockdown increased unpaid care work, early marriage, exclusion, neglect, and the closing up of spaces for mutual support and solidarity.

# Data from the Field

**80%** of girls said that household chores continue to be their responsibility despite everyone being home during the lockdown.

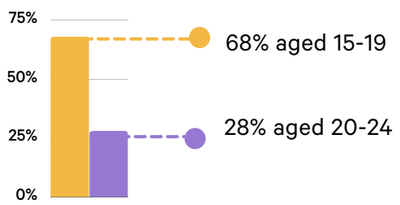


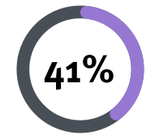



reported getting help primarily from other female relatives.

Only 9% of male relatives help in household chores.

**29%** think that girls' caste, class, or disability have a role to play in exclusion.



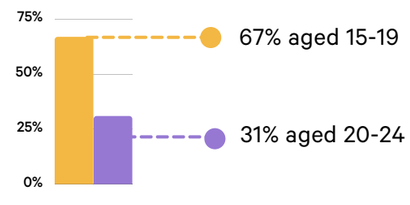



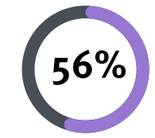

identify as OBC.

35% of all Muslim respondents believe this and only 15% of Hindu respondents believe the same.

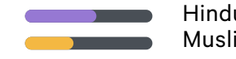
**16%** From Lucknow
**34%** From Mumbai
**18%** From Pune

**42%** of girls believe that the pressure to get married has increased because of COVID-19. Most commonly, 16-year olds felt this pressure.




identified as ST/SC/OBC.




38% identified as Muslim, and 56% as Hindu.

**30%** From Mumbai
**18%** From Pune

# Voices from the Field

## Increased chores

"I have to work with my mother in the kitchen because everyone wants to eat something all time."
–Age 18, Alwar

"Before the lockdown I only had to help my mother in the evening but now I am expected to work with her all day."
–Age 22, Pune

## Restrictions

"What are neighbours going to think? What kind of a girl are you? ....Whenever I try to do something good, it is considered as bad."
–Age 16 Pune

"We were not allowed to celebrate our festivals, but other people did. My brother went shopping and no one invited me to go to the market."
–Age 14, Lucknow

"I am not even allowed to wear jeans and shorts which I like to wear. My life is not good anymore."
–Age 16, Pune

## More barriers for marginalised girls

I have become more dependent on my parents this year due to the lockdown.
–Living with disability, age 22, Ahmedabad

I had only limited mobility due to my disability and my mother used to take me out sometimes. During the lockdown I am confined at home.
–Living with disability, age 14, Mumbai

I am now staying with my sister and her family. I don't have much say in the household and I am always made to feel like a burden.
–Divorced, age 18, Ahmedabad

I have mental health problems and during the lockdown my problems have been aggravated. My parents try to help me, but they are also frustrated.
–Age 19, Mumbai

After I lost my father, my family members discriminate against me and my mother. They are also superstitious, so we are excluded from festivals and cultural practices.
–Age 18, Mumbai

## Reflections from the Leaders Lab

The leaders highlighted that COVID-19 has led to additional restrictions on girls, worsened by pervasive myths and rumours, incorrect information, and confusion. Because many of the girls didn't have phones and couldn't meet their friends, they were more reliant on adults or other family members."Typically, girls have had restricted freedom. But with the lockdown and everyone stuck at home, their freedom was further curtailed with family members constantly judging their every move."
–Roshni, (16, Lucknow)



## Advice from the Field

The Leaders Lab girls have prioritized the advice, which has been highlighted in purple.

### With communities

Develop **informed perspectives** on gender equality that value girls, their decisions, and choices.

Change **traditional and conservative norms** and practices that discriminate against women and girls.

### With Girls

Build the capacity of girls and young women on **core life skills.**

Invest in perspective-building for girls and young women to know and **exercise their rights and freedoms.**

.

## Reflections from the Sector

"The increased marginalisation and [diminished] freedom that girls are facing in their lives is alarming but sadly, no surprise. Low percentages of time spent on self-care is also no surprise and confirms the need to support girls and young women, giving them space and time to rest and move through traumatic experiences."
**–Ruby Johnson**
Gender Justice Consultant/Girls and Women's Rights Specialist

SDG 3

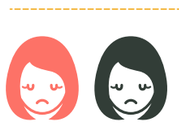
# Good Health and Wellbeing

## Data from the Field

### Mental Health

The dominant discourse around COVID-19 positions it as a physical health threat. However, it has pronounced mental health impact as well, particularly on girls. The respondents described several complex challenges and concerns—from uncertainty to social isolation and parental angst—which affected their mental health and capacity to manage their emotions.

reported experiencing mental distress and despair, including: depression, lingering sadness, lack of confidence, loneliness, and helplessness.



**Nearly half reported negative thoughts,**
and less motivation to do activities that they would otherwise enjoy.

## Voices from the Field

"I feel depressed and helpless, not wanting to do anything. I am constantly worried and scared like never before."
–Age 16, Mumbai

"My education has stopped completely. My dad lost his job and recently picked up some work but is not earning enough. I don't know how to cope with life."
–Age 17, Delhi

"I lost two family members and could not pay my last respects. I feel down all the time."
–Age 18, Lucknow

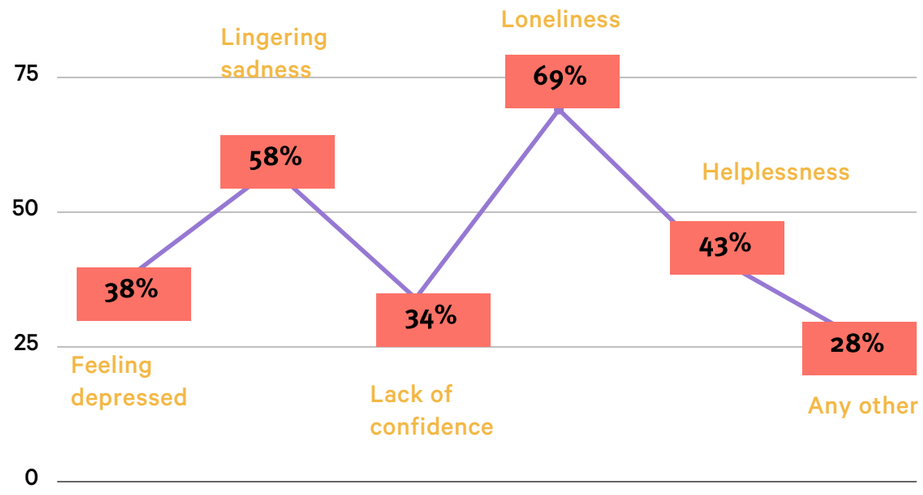
"I am constantly anxious and fearful of my future. There is increased pressure to do household chores and my parents scold me all the time. I don't meet my friends anymore as I have stopped schooling."
—Age 15, Pune

"Earlier we had enough to get by but now we have no savings left. We do not have enough to buy things for everyday use.
–Age 16, Bareilly





3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING




## Reflections from the Leaders Lab

The girls felt that most respondents reported one or more mental health challenges. None of them had any information on coping mechanisms except expressing a desire to talk to their friends or teachers, instead of their family members. The girl leaders emphasised the importance of creating resources for mental health, similar to how the government and NGOs provided simple steps/precautions on protecting oneself from COVID-19. One girl leader stated, "Girls need to speak about their problems with friends or teachers to feel better. At home, parents tend to lecture and blame them. But, when someone listens to their problems, they feel better." The leaders also noted that because the girls were not in school or college, they lost access to their peers. Regular school and college routines and connecting with friends and trusted adults are typical coping mechanisms that help individuals deal with mental health challenges.

## A Spotlight on Hope

"I started painting. It makes me happy."
–Age 16, Bareilly

26% of respondents reported feeling positive, happy, cheerful, optimistic, safe, hopeful, and less stressed about the future.

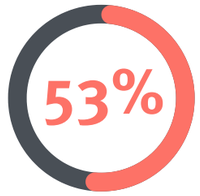
"I write about what I would like to do when school resumes. It motivates me."
–Age 17, Pune

"My sister helped me to learn new things and my brother helped me in cooking new dishes."
–Age 17, Alwar

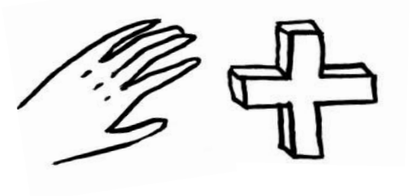
"I spent quality time with my parents and siblings."
–Age 16, Lucknow

## Physical health

Most respondents did not share much on how the lockdown affected their physical health, except for three respondents who reported being ill.
Several did describe a disruption to their access to healthcare and information as well as the unaffordability of health services.




reported that they could not visit a doctor when they needed to.

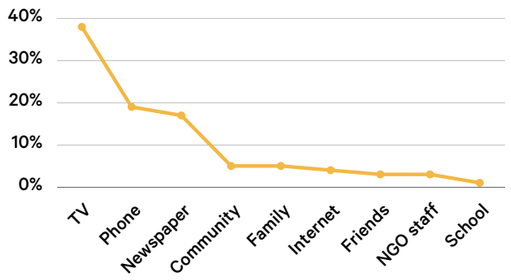


were constantly afraid of getting COVID 19.

believed that social distancing has led to increased discrimination such as increased caste-based violence and communal fights during the lockdown

> *"Earlier, we would visit the nearest government hospital. But the lockdown prevented this. Also, private hospitals were out of reach as they are expensive." –Age 22, Delhi*

**Where do you go to find out about COVID-19?**



**had access to masks and sanitisers.**

*"It was a huge relief to receive food, facemasks, and hygiene products for women from NGOs." –Age 18, Delhi*

33% still believed they could not maintain physical distancing.

## Reflections from the Leaders Lab

The girls agreed that because of COVID-19, resources were diverted from routine health services. This further limited the ability of marginalised communities and vulnerable individuals to access basic healthcare. Additionally, the girls and their families faced economic burdens that diminished their capacity to obtain and afford health services.

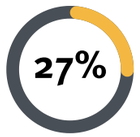
The girls reported that NGOs had a major role to play in distributing masks, sanitisers, and supplies for frequent handwashing. They agreed that that they would not have had access to these essential products if civil society had not intervened, especially during the first lockdown.



3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

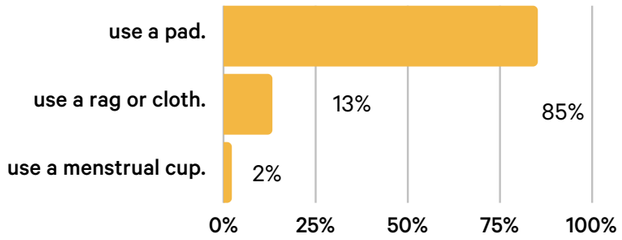
## Menstrual Health Management

of the respondents menstruate.




reported that their access to sanitary products was impacted due to COVID-19.

Currently, of the girls who have their period:




% of respondents using these products

## Advice from the Field

The Leaders Lab girls have prioritized the advice, which has been highlighted in red

### Mental Health

Invest in **counselling** girls and young women to deal with depression and stress.

Work with families to build **strong support and response mechanisms** within the home.

### Menstruation

Make **sanitary pads more widely available** and affordable.

**Reduce the shame** and stigma around menstruation.

### Healthcare facilities and access

Improve access to **high-quality health facilities** and provide quarterly body check-ups and medicines.

## Reflections from the Leaders Lab

Girl leaders stated that the lockdown initially caused a shortage of sanitary products because schools were closed, few stores were open, and girls couldn't easily leave home. However, NGOs stepped in and were instrumental in providing these products as a part of their COVID-19 relief efforts.

The girl leaders also noted that some respondents were hesitant to discuss menstruation and tried to avoid answering these particular questions.

## SDG 4

# Quality Education

Education was the issue that the girls spoke most about, both from the perspective of what has been most impacted by COVID but also in terms of what needs to be done as we think about post COVID reconstruction.

## Data from the Field

### Respondents currently in school/college:

**70%** respondents are.

**85%** attending school online.

**28%** attending with the assistance of a civil society organisation.

**23%** attending through community-based classes. (some are attending more than one)

**52%** are from metro cities.

**30%** of respondents are not.

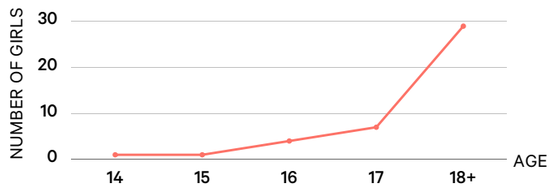
**37%** left school because of household work.

**31%** because schools closed due to COVID-19.

**24%** lost interest in school.

**18%** Drop out rate due to COVID-19.

**13** girls are of school-going age.




Number of girls not going to school as per their age



"Education is the most crucial issue. During COVID, classes moved online...I don't think online classes could reach everyone. Many students do not have smartphones or laptops; they are completely excluded from accessing education online. They do not have the resources to continue their studies and build a better future for themselves." –Age 20, Alwar

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

### What percentage of respondents attending school online have the tools to access online learning:

Of the girls who are in school

**72%** of the girls have the tools.

**28%** do not have the tools that they need.

**33%** have access to the internet.

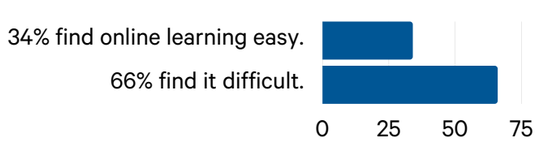
**13%** have access to the internet on their phone.

**53%** have access to computers.

**79%** because of their financial situation.

**10%** because their school does not offer online learning.

**28%** because more than one sibling needs the tools.



**64%** of girls and young women do not have the space or get the time to study online.

## Voices from the Field

### Access to school

"I miss my classroom, my friends. Our school had many resources."
–Age 17, Pune

"My family could no longer pay for school."
–Age 17, Pune

"I dropped out of college because I couldn't pay the fees."
–Age 20, Ahmedabad

### Remote learning

"The classes are different now. I do not know how to learn."
–Age 16, Delhi

"I am not able to understand the online lessons and I can't speak to teachers and classmates to clear my doubts."
–Age 17, Ahmedabad

"I do not have any tools to attend online classes. So, I am missing college."
–Age 20, Alwar

"I don't know how to use laptop or how to finish homework and classwork online."
–Age 19, Delhi

### Other Barriers

"It is very difficult to learn and study at home. When I used to go to college, I used to have time and regular access to other resources. When everyone is home it is very loud, and I cannot concentrate."
–Age 23, Pune

"There is unrealistic amount of work and syllabus to complete. I have no help or support from family."
–Age 17, Mumbai

# Advice from the Field

The Leaders Lab girls have prioritized the advice, which has been highlighted in blue.

## Financial Support

**Provide free, good-quality education**
for girls beyond grade 8.

Offer
**scholarships**
to promote access to higher education, school reintegration, and continuation.

Serve
**mid-day meals**
to girls throughout secondary school.

Invest in books, spaces to study, transportation, and community-level libraries.

**Foster educational opportunities**
for girls who have to work.

## Safe Schools

Create
**safe spaces**
and reduce gender and caste based discrimination within schools.

Invest in
**educational infrastructure,**
including girls-only schools.

Introduce free
**self-defence**
training.

## Digital Access

Advance
**digital access**
to education.

Invest in
**blended learning options beyond the pandemic.**

## Mentorship

**Develop programs to mentor girls**
and young women.

> “Helping girls, their parents, and the community understand the returns from schooling and secondary education is important. Programmes that help girls with homework and education support are necessary to ensure that girls do not drop out of schools as a result of educational failure.”
> **–Dipa Nag Chowdhury**
> Director of Programmes, Population Foundation of India

# Reflections from the Leaders Lab

The girl leaders noted that many respondents didn’t have the resources or equipment to attend digital school. Respondents also expressed difficulty in keeping up with their studies. They argued that virtual settings did not compensate for a real classroom. They could no longer have one-on-one discussions, engage in problem-solving with their teachers, or receive support and empathy from classmates. At the same time, there are benefits to online learning because girls who might have otherwise been pulled out of school have had the opportunity to continue their studies.

## SDG 8
# Decent Work and Economic Growth

The impacts of crises are always gendered, and COVID-19 is no exception. Economic stress on families due to the outbreak has a direct impact on the future prospects of girls.

## Data from the Field

### Because of COVID 19

**82%** of respondents wish they could approach someone for career counselling and employability advice.

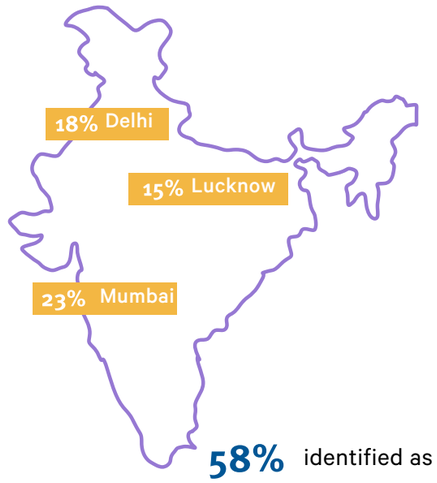
**59%** of respondents reported that COVID-19 has affected their income at the personal or family level.

**28%** of respondents said they had to discontinue skills-training.

**13%** of respondents reported losing their job or home-based work.

### Before the Pandemic

**34%** of respondents engaged in income-generating activities were between the ages of 15-19.




**58%** identified as SC/ST/OBC.

## Voices from the Field

### Income loss

"I lost my job and have no income to support my needs and my family."
–Age 22, Ahmedabad

"My sister and I had to leave school because our father lost his job."
–Age 17, Delhi

### Unable to afford amenities

"We could not pay our rent, bills. It was very difficult time."
–Age 24, Mumbai

"We could not buy ration for a long time. This caused a lot of distress and quarrelling in our family."
–Age 20, Lucknow

"Earlier we had enough to get by but now we have no savings left. We do not have enough to buy things for everyday use."
–Age 16, Bareilly



8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

## Reflections from the Leaders Lab

- Girl leaders noted that the respondents had limited access to money during the lockdown. Earlier, they would receive cash gifts from relatives or parents, but no longer.
- Respondents mentioned the additional expense of buying new phones, resulted in increased economic burden and added loans.
- Respondents reported increased household expenditures with everyone at home.
- “If girls want to buy something, they need to ask every family member. But no questions are asked when any other family member makes a purchase.” –Netravati (19, Mumbai)

### Reduced skilling and income-generation opportunities

"Due to the lockdown, the local market remained closed, my mother and I were unable to sell products."
–Age 21 Delhi

"I am applying for jobs but not getting any. There are no jobs due to the lockdown."
–Age 21, Lucknow

"The training centre closed down and the other centre is too expensive."
–Age 20, Pune

### Reduced reserves and debts

"All the savings that we had are drained out."
–Age 17, Delhi

"We have to take loan from someone twice."
–Age 20, Alwar

# Hope

of respondents feel hopeful about their career prospects.

**The age group that felt most hopeful** 15–19 years

**More hopeful than the average result:**

Girls from Alwar (83%), Bareilly (83%), and Lucknow (88%).

Muslim girls (83%).

**Less hopeful than the average result:**

Girls from Delhi (71%), Mumbai (68%), Ahmedabad (75%), and Pune (44%).

Girls who identified as ST/SC/OBC (79%).

Hindu girls (81%).

**44%** of all respondents said that someone counsels them on their studies and work prospects during COVID-19.

"In comparison to 2020 this year will be better."-Age 17, Mumbai
"The situation is not good today, but it will change for good. I am hopeful."-Age 24, Mumbai

## Reflections from the Sector

"There is, however, hope for the future–if only the State and society can listen to the voices of these girls and young women. The message that comes out is clear: An expansion of economic opportunities for women must go hand-in-hand with an expansion of their social, cultural, and political freedoms. The two are mutually reinforcing and can lead to transformational changes in Indian society. Of the many reversals in recent years, the decline in India's female labour force participation is particularly worrying. An urgent priority, as flagged by the girls and women, is to invest in generating decent work opportunities and creating safe and non-discriminatory workplaces for girls and women. Such investments are essential for empowering women, accelerating economic growth, and above all, building a more equitable and just society."
–Dr. AK Shiva Kumar
Development Economist and Independent Researcher

## Reflections from the Leaders Lab

"There is a feeling of hope for a lot of reasons; the first is because things were so bad during the lockdown that once things began to open up people became more hopeful about their future prospects. Also, there were a lot of government officials distributing ration and taking surveys which people hadn't seen before and people from NGOs became visible in the community. Seeing all of this made people hopeful about their own futures because it seemed as if people were listening."
-Preeti (24, Delhi).



## Advice from the Field

The Leaders Lab girls have prioritized the advice, which has been highlighted in blue.

### Training

Invest in technical, skill-building and employability training and include **self-efficacy and leadership training** as part of the curriculum.

Create training centres in close **proximity** to the communities where girls live.

Train girls to start **small-scale businesses** from home.

### Job Creation

**Develop policies and programs focused on job creation.**

Invest in creating job opportunities by tangibly **linking training to markets.**

Consider job opportunities for those with **disabilities** and those who are less **literate.**

### Right to Work

Build **non-discriminatory workplaces** for women.

Acknowledge the value of women's (paid and unpaid) work and ensure **equal pay for equal work.**

SDG 11

# Sustainable Cities and Communities

Public places within cities are 'off limits' for girls once they become adolescents; either because of the threat of violence or because girls who occupy public space are not perceived as being 'honorable.'

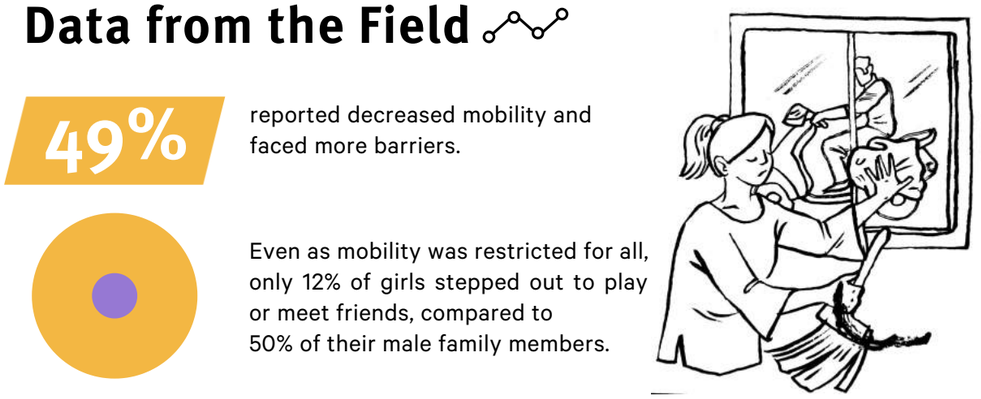
This issue was felt very strongly by the respondents who spoke extensively about gender-based violence (GBV) and accessing public space. While violence is both a public and private issue and relates to the systemic subjugation of women and girls, we have chosen to spotlight our findings about GBV under SDG11, because the advice from the girls relates to what cities, communities, and public infrastructure can do to address this pervasive social norm.



11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

## Data from the Field

**49%** reported decreased mobility and faced more barriers.

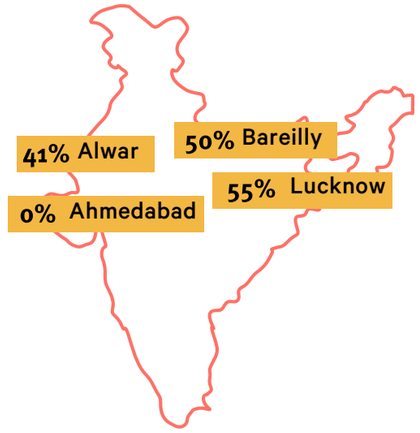


Even as mobility was restricted for all, only 12% of girls stepped out to play or meet friends, compared to 50% of their male family members.

**26%** of respondents believe there has been an increase in GBV.

Of those

% of respondents who believe that GBV has increased




**62%** are from non-metro cities

**66%** are aged 15- 19

**59%** from ST/SC/OBC backgrounds

## Voices from the Field

### Mobility

"I want to go outside but I know that it is not safe and my family will lecture me."
–Age 16, Lucknow

"It is not possible to go out in such circumstances or invite friends over. Earlier I could always hang out with my friends."
–Age 20, Alwar

"I can't even go to the community toilet near my home due to COVID lockdown rules. I faced violence when I tried to access the toilet.

I have to go to another community to access the toilet which is far from home."
–Age 22, Mumbai

### Violence and aggression

"I was beaten up a lot and did not receive enough love from my family."
–Age 12, Mumbai

"During the lockdown my dad use to drink a lot, fight with my mom...I was very scared."
–Age 16, Mumbai

### The Right to Play

"I miss playing football and my practice sessions."
–Age 14, Mumbai

"I do not play anymore because I cannot go to the park. My sister advised me to play at home but there is no time or space to play."
–Age 15, Pune

"The gym for women in the community is closed. I used to go there every week.

I don't work out anymore. I feel shy in front of my family."
–Age 22, Mumbai

# Advice from the Field

The Leaders Lab girls have prioritized the advice, which has been highlighted in purple

## Infrastructure

Improve
**basic infrastructure,**
including: housing, clean toilets, safe and affordable transportation, streetlights, water supply, and electricity.

## Cleanliness

Invest in
**cleanliness and sanitation**
so that girls and women can lead healthy lives.

Build green, clean,
**pollution-free**
cities.

## The Right to Play

Promote girls and young women's
**participation in sports.**
Allocate resources to build playgrounds and parks.

## Public Safety and Mobility

Create
**safe and violence-free spaces**
for girls and women within the city.

Frame laws and policies to prevent GBV and ensure they are implemented.

Enhance
**law enforcement**
to prevent sexual abuse and violence against women and girls by engaging the police, increasing patrolling, and acting against perpetrators.

Invest in
**community interventions**
to enhance girls' safety and mobility, enabling them to access opportunities and resources without the fear of violence or sexual abuse.

Engage with community members, boys, and girls to
**end victim-blaming**
and ensure that GBV is not normalised.

# Reflections from the Leaders Lab

- Mobility for girls was always an issue, but the limited access to public transportation during the pandemic—especially on buses, trains, and auto-rickshaws-further affected them. At the same time, it also led to cleaner, pollution-free cities.
- Public places are not places for women. There are always boys loitering and it makes it very tough to be out in public, because of the persistent fear of violence and even rape. When interviews were conducted in public places, Netravati (19, Mumbai) shared "there was a group of boys who began catcalling and it made us very insecure. We had to stop the interview and go to a private place because we could not do it outdoors."



11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

# Reflections from the Sector

"An avenue that requires further engagement is shifting social norms that normalise gender-based violence in the everyday lives of women, girls, and gender non-conforming individuals. Changing the narrative from surveillance and protection to agency and rights of girls will be crucial to ensure that the threat of violence doesn't become a reason for further curbs on women's mobility and access to public spaces. The key take away is to invest in girls and young women in communities as change makers, as they have the best understanding of their lived experiences of violence and discrimination. They also have a very clear articulation of what needs to change. Funding practices need to make a shift from viewing them as 'recipients' of development funding towards agents of change for gender justice."
**–Aparna Uppaluri**
Program Officer, Ford Foundation

"This data is accurate and I have seen this with my own eyes. During the lockdown, I helped provide girls with basic necessities and I saw how urban areas have also been affected–girls, despite being a part of developed & developing cities are still facing problems...What caught my attention [in the findings] is how the grievances of the entire situation were handled or solved mostly by females.
**-Seema Dosad**
Age 20,EMpower Girls Advisory Council Member

"Only 12% of the girls were allowed to go outside, play or meet friends compared to 50% of boys—that gap is huge and on a larger level I feel it relates to the mental health aspect of this study as well."
**–Abhimanyu Dey**
Organizational Representative in the EMpower Leaders Lab, Just For Kicks, Pune

- Shireen (22, Mumbai) shared that because of the fear and threat of violence in the city, people get their daughters married. In one of her respondent's communities, there was a lot of gender-based violence, and almost all the girls were married very early. Her respondent was 24 and unmarried, she got lucky because "she was disabled."
- "Everyone I spoke to talked about freedom, but leaving the house and being outside is looked down upon. Many of the girls wanted the freedom to roam in their own city."
  - Richa (19, Ahmedabad).

# Composite of the Girls' Advice and the SDGs

The Leaders Lab girls have prioritized the advice, which has been highlighted in blue.

## SDG5: Gender Equality and SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

We believe that these two goals lie at the core of the girls' recommendations and are central to achieving all the other SDGs.

With Communities

- **Develop informed perspectives on gender equality that value girls, their decisions, and choices.**
- Change **traditional and conservative norms** and practices that discriminate against women and girls.

With Girls

- Build the capacity of girls and young women on core life skills.
- **Enable girls and young women to know and exercise their rights and freedoms.**

## SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing

**Mental Health**

• Invest in **counselling** girls and young women to deal with depression and stress.

• Work with families to build **strong support and response mechanisms** within the home.

**Menstruation**

• Make **sanitary pads more widely available** and affordable.

• **Reduce the shame** and stigma around menstruation.

**Healthcare Facilities and Access**

• Improve access to **high-quality health facilities** and provide quarterly body check-ups and medicines.

## SDG 4: Quality Education

**Financial Support**

• Provide **free good quality education** for girls beyond Grade 8.

• Offer **scholarships** to promote access to higher education, school reintegration, and continuation.

• Serve **mid-day meals** to girls throughout secondary school.

• Invest in books, spaces to study, transportation, and community-level libraries.

• Foster **educational opportunities** for girls who also have to earn a living.

**Safe schools**

• Create safe spaces and reduce gender and caste based discrimination within schools.

• Invest in educational infrastructure, including girls-only schools.

• Introduce free **self-defence** training.

**Digital Education Access**

• Advance **access** to digital education.

• Invest in **blended learning** options beyond the pandemic.

**Mentorship**

• Develop programs to **mentor girls** and young women.

## SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

**Training**

• Invest in technical, skills-building and employability training and include **self-efficacy and leadership training** as part of the curriculum.

• Create training centres in close **proximity** to the communities where girls live.

• Train girls to start **small-scale businesses** from home.

**Job Creation**

• Develop policies and programs focused on job creation.

• Invest in creating job opportunities by tangibly linking training to markets.

• Consider job opportunities for those with **disabilities** and those who are less **literate.**

**Right to Work**

•Build **non-discriminatory workplaces** for women including facilities in the workplace.

• Acknowledge the value of women's (paid and unpaid) work and ensure **equal pay for equal work.**

## SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

**Infrastructure**

• Improve **basic infrastructure,** including: housing, clean toilets, safe and affordable transportation, streetlights, water supply, and electricity

**Cleanliness**

• Invest in **cleanliness and sanitation** so that girls and women can lead healthy lives.

• Build green, clean, **pollution-free** cities.

**Public Safety and Mobility**

• Create safe and **violence-free spaces** for girls and women within the city.

• Frame laws and policies to prevent GBV and ensure they are implemented.

• Enhance **law enforcement** to prevent sexual abuse and violence against women and girls by engaging the police, increasing patrolling, and acting against perpetrators.

• Invest in **community interventions** to enhance girls' safety and mobility, enabling them to access opportunities and resources without the fear of violence or sexual abuse.

• Engage with community members, boys, and girls to **end victim-blaming** and ensure that GBV is not normalised.

**The Right to Play**

• Promote girls and young women's **participation in sports.** Allocate resources to build playgrounds and parks.

# Stakeholder Mapping

Together with the EMpower team, the girl leaders conducted an exercise to map their priority recommendations against various stakeholders who could play an important role in actualizing these recommendations. They did this by coming up with specific asks for each piece of advice about how the stakeholders could operationalize these recommendations.

## Reform.

Incremental changes that can immediately be made to exisiting policies, schemes or interventions

## Transform.

New ideas, which can be implemented if the stakeholders involved have the conviction to implement these

## Aspire.

Aspirational, visionary ideas, which can help to chart the direction of travel in realizing the vision of the girls advice and recommendations



## However, in order to realise any of these suggestions the very first step is a seat at the table...

**Civil Society**
Involve girls in program design and implementation and have them lead interventions within the community.

**City Planners**
Make gender audits mandatory for all new city plans and projects. Meaningfully include adolescent girls in these meetings and action their ideas.

**Governments**
Consider setting up meetings for girls inputs on issues that affect them; like beti bachao, beti padao or skilling in ITIs.

### Girls at the center

We ask that you involve girls meaningfully in all that you do because the chances of success will increase if only we listen to the wisdom of girls.

**Donors**
Involve girls in your own organization's decision making, especially for programs that involve girls.

**Corporates**
Involve girls in crafting your CSR policies to understand the issues on the ground.

> “My biggest learning/takeaway from this report is that even if all of us are located in different cities and our conditions might vary, the challenges we face are the same and we need to address them together. Girls are taking bold steps and it’s your duty to make this journey easier by preparing the road ahead. It’s time to work together because for real change to happen, the world needs more than words.”
>
> **- Rubi, 20**
> EMpower Girls Advisory Council

# SDG 3
# Good Health and Wellbeing

Richa, 19 Ahmedabad / Aavda, 21 Delhi / Roshni, 16 Lucknow / Aliya, 18 Pune / Shubhangi, 18 Pune

| | Governments | City Planners | Civil Society | Donor Agencies | Corporates |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **REFORM** | | | | | |
| **An integrated mental health and sexual reproductive health rights curricula** | Include this as a module in the school curriculum | | Author the curricula and work with the government to implement this in schools and colleges<br><br>Use sports as a vehicle to speak about changing bodies, menstruation and mental health within the curricula | Fund these programme as part of your strategy | |
| **TRANSFORM** | | | | | |
| **Invest in City Health Clinics which provide:**<br>**-sexual and reproductive services**<br>**-quarterly bodily check ups**<br>**-mental health facilities** | Invest in urban healthcare infrastructure across the country. In these clinics:<br>• Create special days and times for girls<br>• Create health charts, which get updated during check-ups | Create spaces for city clinics within the community so that they are accessible to girls | | | |
| **Women's Health Helpline Number** | Create a national helpline for women's health | | Train operators of the national women's health helpline | | |
| **Mainstream messaging around mental health** | Include mental health sessions in government school curricula including:<br>• Suicide prevention<br>• Stress management during exams<br>• What to do if you fail a grade at school?<br><br>Actively begin judgment-free messaging around mental health in official communications | Create spaces in public parks to talk about mental health<br><br>Put up signs and posters in the community to normalize mental health | Provide counselling for families affected by the dowry practice, who often need a third party to speak to the bride, groom and their families | Include mental health and resilience within your organisation's strategy<br><br>Fund initiatives that focus on the mental health of girls<br><br>Fund suicide prevention programme and programme that focus on drug and alcohol abuse | De-stigmatize mental health by engaging through social media campaigns, ads etc.<br><br>Host a mental health day / week every month. |

| | Governments | City Planners | Civil Society | Donor Agencies | Corporates |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Normalise speaking about menstruation publically** | | Paint toilet walls with positive messages about menstruation | Work with shopkeepers to stop wrapping pads in black plastic bags,<br>work with families to destigmatize menstruation<br><br>Talk to boys about menstruation and safe sex to reduce unwanted pregnancies | Fund programme that destigmatize menstruation | Female staff members can volunteer in the community to speak about menstruation |
| **Make sanitary pads visible and available** | Provide pads and medicine in hospitals and in the community for menstruating girls | Install sanitary pad dispensers in public toilets, schools, hospitals and in the community | Provide pads free of cost to staff | | |

# SDG 4
# Quality Education

Vanshita, 17 Ahmedabad / Shahjahan, 18 Mumbai /
Geeta, 21 Pune / Pooja, 19 Mumbai

| Stakeholders | Governments | City Planners | Civil Society | Corporates |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **REFORM** | | | | |
| **Reform curricula so it is gender transformative and include blended learning options** | Consider blended learning options for girls in secondary school post-pandemic so they can continue to study online, if they choose to<br><br>Conduct a gender audit of all textbooks to rectify gender bias<br><br>Include gender equity as a unit in the school curricula | | Focus on tuition classes for girls so that they perform better in school | Consider funding blended learning options |
| **Facilitate girls' access to the internet** | Create subsidies for data packs for adolescent girls | Create the infrastructure for free wifi in the community | Create a computer room where girls can get online<br><br>Work with gatekeepers who limit girls' access to technology<br><br>Address cyberbullying as more girls get online | E-cycle old tablets and laptops and distribute these to girls in the community |
| **'Digital' Internships** | | | Connect programme participants to corporates for internships | Work with civil society to:<br>• Create digital internship programs<br>• Teach computing skills thorough employee volunteering |

| | Governments | City Planners | Civil Society | Donor Agencies | Corporates |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **TRANSFORM** | | | | | |
| **Digital Hubs in the community with charging stations and wifi access, especially in smaller cities.** | Allocate a budget for Digital Hubs in the community | Plan spaces for Digital Hubs in the community especially in cities with low internet penetration | Train teachers to conduct blended learning programs at the Digital Hubs | Adopt Digital Hubs in the community and fund civil society programme in these hubs | |
| **ASPIRE** | | | | | |
| **Free good quality education and access to schools** | Make secondary school free up to class 12 | Ensure that schools are in close proximity to the community<br><br>When planning the location of schools consider how students, especially girls, will get there and think about transport connectivity | Work with parents to ensure that girls are not withdrawn from schools | | |

## SDG 8

## Decent Work and Economic Growth

Preeti, 24 Delhi / Monika, 19 Delhi / Jyoti, 24 Alwar / Rani, 20 Delhi / Soni, 20 Mumbai

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

| | Governments | City Planners | Civil Society | Donor Agencies | Corporates |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **REFORM** | | | | | |
| **Strengthen employability curricula by including 'essential' (soft) skills and exposure to multiple career options** | Develop a scheme that focusses on employability skills for girls and include essential skills like public speaking and interview techniques | | Expose girls to multiple livelihoods options (not just the ones that girls usually do)<br><br>Engage with volunteers from corporates to impart work skills / essential skills<br><br>Build strong alumni networks for participants not only until girls find a job but even afterwards | Fund programme on essential skills as part of your livelihoods programming | Create volunteering programs with civil society where staff train girls on essential skills |
| **Proactively increase connections between skilling programs and jobs** | Work with corporates to understand the skills being sought in the market when planning skilling programs | | Work with corporates to plan your curricula based on skills that are needed in the market | | Form strong alliances with civil society and government skilling centers. Co-create the curricula based on what the market needs |

| | Governments | City Planners | Civil Society | Donor Agencies | Corporates |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Publicize vacancies with civil society organizations and government skilling programme for jobs in your company<br><br>Company polices should be gender-responsive. For ex: ensuring that girls can safely commute back home |
| **Modify existing skilling programmes to consider the most marginalized** | Consider home-based online skilling programme for those with disabilities and for girls who have many restrictions imposed upon their mobility<br><br>Consider practical exams instead of written exams for certificates: “everyone knows how to use a computer even if they are not literate, but the final exam is written and that is why so many people fail.” –Jyoti 24, Alwar<br><br>Skilling should be imparted regardless of whether someone has studied past class 8 | Hire girls with disabilities to weigh in on city projects, especially transportation, to make cities more inclusive | Create skilling curricula that is responsive to people with disabilities | Fund programs that specifically address employability skills for those who are disabled or less literate | |
| **TRANSFORM** | | | | | |
| **Community-Based Skilling centers** | Allocate a budget for community- based skilling centers | Create spaces to serve as skilling centers within the community since distance is the biggest reason that girls drop out (and it is far worse for married women) | Create the curricula for these skilling centers | | |
| **ASPIRE** | | | | | |
| **Shifting the narrative around equal work for equal pay** | | Fund artists to paint city walls to amplify the importance of equal pay for equal work | | | Make salaries more transparent, devise formal mechanisms to declare equal pay for women and men in your organization |

# SDG 11
# Sustainable Cities and Communities

Lalita, 16 Delhi / Priya, 23 Lucknow / Khursheeda, 20 Lucknow
Shirin, 22 Mumbai

| | Governments | City Planners | Civil Society | Donor Agencies | Corporates |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **REFORM** | | | | | |
| **Engage girls in decision making, city mapping, and enable visibility through campaigns** | Use the girls' city mapping when assessing gaps in law enforcement and infrastructure | Solicit girls' advice while conducting infrastructural repairs in communities to understand where the gaps are<br><br>Conduct a mapping of restrictions girls face in accessing public spaces to inform new projects<br><br>Intentionally make girls and women visible in public places through a campaign to claim their right to the city/public places: use street theatre, speeches by girls in the community and sports<br><br>Have girls-only spaces and times in playgrounds<br>return<br><br>Engage with civil society to better understand the needs of the community | Engage with city planners on new plans and projects to ensure that the voices of those at the margins are included in city plans | | |
| **Work with boys and communities on the issue of GBV** | | | | Create community-level curricula on GBV to engage adults and boys | Fund interventions that work with boys and community members to combat gender- based violence, so that boys become advocates for change |

| | Governments | City Planners | Civil Society | Donor Agencies | Corporates |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **TRANSFORM** | | | | | |
| **Provision of well-maintained, safe and free toilets in close proximity to the community** | Municipal corporations should ensure that toilets are built and take responsibility for their upkeep<br><br>People from low resource communities should not have to pay to use toilets<br><br>Ensure sufficient water supply in toilets | Include plans for a sufficient number of free toilets in the community, in close proximity to where girls live | | | |
| **Violence-free spaces in the city, for girls to congregate and go when they feel the threat of violence** | Allocate funding for violence free spaces | Create violence-free spaces across the city, where girls can meet, spend time, collaborate and work on their homework together, girls can also come here when they face the threat of violence | Run programs in violence-free zones developed by city planners | Adopt and fund violence-free spaces in the community | |
| **ASPIRE** | | | | | |
| **Gender-sensitization training for all law enforcement divisions** | Invest in gender-sensitization training for all law enforcement divisions with a mandatory annual certification<br><br>Work closely with civil society to develop this curriculum | | Work with law enforcement on gender sensitization training and annual certification | | |

# Reflections from the Sector

"Many of the challenges and setbacks due to COVID-19, articulated by the girls and captured in the survey, have been speculated upon by gender studies scholars. Hence, these being echoed by a field study is very valuable...what I did find heartening was that many of the girls stayed positive and were still hopeful about the future. This hope can only fructify if girls, and their recommendations, are listened to."

–Dr. Ravinder Kaur
Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology
Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi

"Having these numbers to back up girls' experiences is useful and can be used in advocating for more and better resources for girls...We so often look at one aspect of a girl's life depending on what we think is most important: her education, or her body, her economic wellbeing, etc. But this data tells a full picture of what she is experiencing and puts her—instead of one aspect about her—at the centre. The way the data is written also helps to demonstrate the diversity of experiences that girls have and that they are not a monolith. Based on all sorts of factors, girls will be impacted differently, and it's important to account for that."

–Jody Myrum
Gender Justice Consultant

"One of the main challenges girls and young women in our country face today is having a voice, but not being heard. This makes the In Her Voice research study even more relevant, given that it has been developed by, with, and for girls. In the backdrop of this global pandemic, the education, economic situation, health, and social welfare of young girls across India have been gravely impacted...In such a situation, the least we can do is to offer young girls the ability to create their own solutions to these challenges."

–Naghma Mulla
President and COO, EdelGive Foundation

"This is an important piece of work that will bring nuance and texture to what has been broadly reported about the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on those already most marginalised."

–Rosa Bransky
Co-Founder and Co-CEO, Purposeful



17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

# Looking Forward

## through SDG17 Partnerships

Policymakers, program leaders, the media, and others rarely put girls first—in the policies and programme they develop, the resources they allocate, and the social narratives they create. Girls' voices are not heard within their households and communities, much less in broader forums. This invisibility existed prior to the pandemic, and—as our research revealed—has only worsened over the last year.

As we think about post-COVID-19 reconstruction and different ways of supporting underserved communities, this moment provides us with a unique opportunity. The aim should not be to go back to the way things were, because the pre-COVID 'normal' was detrimental for many adolescent girls in India and globally. Now is the time to pivot, to not only listen to what girls are saying, but to leverage their deep insights. While the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have caused deep hardship for many, the need to rebuild also gives us a chance to create better realities for girls, families, and communities.

This research shows the power of listening to what girls tell us. However, only by implementing changes based on their recommendations will their lives be different. We can and should amplify and elevate their knowledge and experience so that they have a say in co-creating the programmes that affect them. As funders, practitioners, policymakers, and academics, we must act on their recommendations and allocate resources to support them. Only when we heed girls' advice, can we expect the 'next normal' to address systemic gender inequalities.

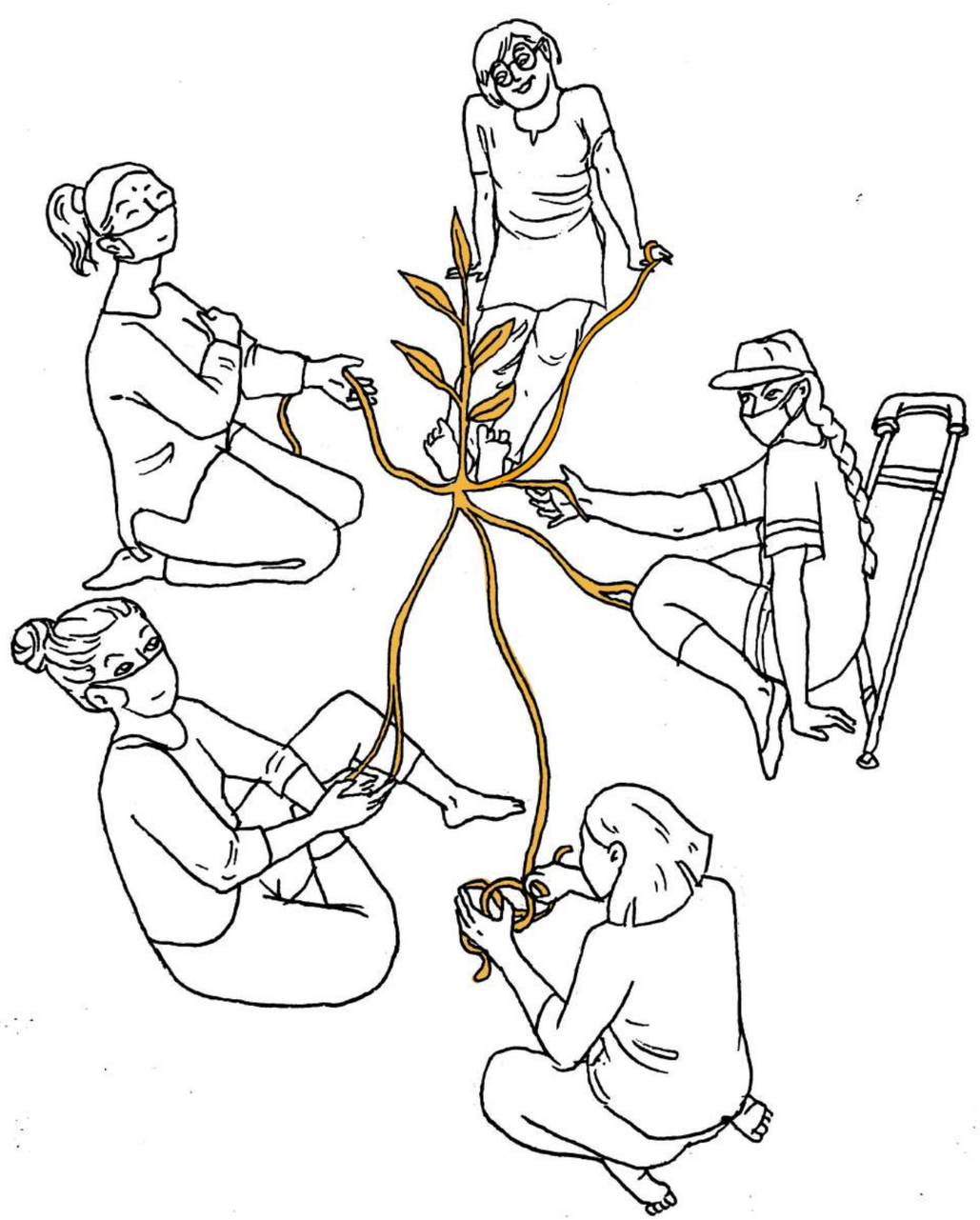
At the heart of long-term sustainable impact lies partnership, therefore we invite you to:

**1. Use this information**

This report and its findings are in the public domain and can be used by relevant stakeholders to mainstream in their work by putting the girls' recommendations into practice.

**2. Support and fund girl-led decisions**

The SDG India Index 2019, a baseline report to track progress made on India's SDG commitments, categorises India in the 'aspirational' category for gender equality. Without increased strategic investment to mainstream gender so that it is considered across all the other SDGs, the picture for India's women and girls will not change. The call to action is therefore to resource programming that centres girls as protagonists in their own lives and to consider gender across all social development objectives.

**3. Build a coalition of like-minded partners**

We can be more than the sum of our parts. By centring girls' voices in our programmes and actions, we can be assured that their needs are being more adequately addressed. We need to collectively embed girl-led approaches in the work that we do, build a common community of practice that mainstreams girls' voices and flows resources to this end, including private-sector channels. We must maximize strategic investment for girls in the areas that they have highlighted in this report. Together, we can advance their ideas and solutions and make true progress in achieving gender equality.