

REFLECTIONS

{ **ENGENDER** }

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A model to educate marginalised girls

One of the positive trends that the pandemic has brought out in India is the strengthening of community involvement and initiatives. This is particularly evident in marginalised sections which faced several setbacks, and girls, especially adolescents, in education. The pandemic has affected them significantly in terms of access to education, nutrition and health care. For these girls in the rural and tribal areas, online classes are not an option with low penetration of the internet and poor access to smartphones.

This is something that the non-governmental organisation (NGO), Educate Girls, has sought to address. Earlier, it set up the world's first Development Impact Bond to educate girls and boys from disadvantaged sections in Rajasthan. It has scaled up now. What started as identifying children who were out of school, has now stood the NGO in good stead amid the pandemic.

Safeena Husain, founder of Educate Girls says, "We had boots on the ground in the areas we work in so we were able to assess the impact on households with girl children. We decided that since online classes was not an option for them, we would take learning to them." So their Team Balika community volunteers fanned out and collected children from these households and brought them to community centres with all Covid-19 protocols firmly in place.

They were given lessons in Hindi and mathematics; they could meet other children and educators and also engage in fun-based learning activities. The success of this has been the fact that the volunteers already had a good rapport with the parents and community elders built over the years. This way, they were also able to keep a check on underage marriages in the communities they were working with. Husain says that in one home, she became aware that a girl, despite her parents being poor,

suddenly acquired new clothes. On being questioned, it was discovered that she was to be married under pressure from male relatives. This was stopped in time.

The other reason for the success of this project which aims to cover a million girls by 2024 is the fact that there has been smooth working with governmental organisations at the grassroots. This way, Educate Girls was the interface between people and the bureaucracy. Many people did not know how to access government schemes for themselves and their girl children during Covid as the paperwork was daunting.

Farida from Pakhriyavas in Ajmer says that she had to drop out of school due to the pandemic. Then she came to know of Camp Vidya, a community initiative for learning run by Educate Girls. She met a Team Balika volunteer who convinced her parents that she should be allowed to come to the camp and learn for two hours a day. "Now, I am preparing for my Class 10 and studying regularly at the camp," she says.

Eight-year-old Ritika from Gawla village in Khandwa district in Madhya Pradesh had never been to school as her family was migrating for daily wage labour throughout the year. When they came back to the village due to the lockdown, she began going to Camp Vidya where she was taught to read and write through innovative games. "Today, I can read and write and am about to go to Class 2 soon," she says proudly.

Husain feels that such models can be replicated across India to ensure that the girl child emerges from the pandemic with the skills to join formal in-person classes. This community effort has produced incredible results and is something we must build on after the pandemic as a key tool to ensure inclusion.

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