

Understanding Sex and Geographical Differences in School Non-Attendance in India: The Need for Greater Focus on Rural Girls

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (1), to which India is a signatory, commit to “inclusive and equitable quality education,” and completion of primary and secondary school. India has largely achieved universal primary education, but continues to have notable proportions of students not attending secondary school institutions, particularly among girls and rural youth.

The 2019 Indian National Education Policy (2) includes prioritization of vulnerable groups, including girls and rural students, for school retention. Understanding who does not attend school, when, and why can help guide implementation of these policy efforts. We sought to understand these issues using national data from India

STUDY OBJECTIVE: To examine school attendance by age, sex, and rural or urban residence for youth 6 to 17 years, and to explore reasons for non-attendance by age, sex, and urban/rural residence among those 6 to 17 years.

DATA SOURCE: We analyzed household data from the 4th wave of the nationally representative National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), conducted in 2015-16 (3). The NFHS-4 provides individual and household level information on socio-demographics, fertility, family planning, health, nutrition, mortality, and water and sanitation. Interviewers also gathered data on school attendance and reasons for not attending school. The sample includes all youth aged 6-17 residing in NFHS-4 participating households, including those currently and formerly in school as well as those who have never attended school (N=677,381). Data come from the parent/guardian or youth directly.

DATA ANALYSIS: We graphed the prevalence of school attendance by sex, rural/urban residence, and age for our sample, and examined reasons for non-attendance by sex, rural/urban residence, and age categorizations of primary school (6-10 years), upper primary school (11-13 years), and secondary/higher secondary school (14-17 years), among those not in school (n=43,915).

KEY FINDINGS ON SCHOOL ATTENDANCE:

High Primary School Attendance: By age 8, we see school attendance at 96% for rural youth, 98% for urban boys and 97% for urban girls (See Figure 1).

Declines in Attendance in Adolescence: School attendance begins to decline at ages 10-11. That decline is greater for rural compared with urban youth, and for rural females more than rural males. At age 13, the decline escalates for all. By age 14, 14% of urban boys and girls, and 18% and 22% of rural boys and girls, respectively, are not attending school.

Rural Older Adolescent Girls Lost to Schools: In rural areas the gender gap in school attendance increases substantially in older adolescence. By ages 16 and 17, there is a 10% difference in rural school attendance rates by sex. Only 41% of 17 year old girls in rural India attend schools.

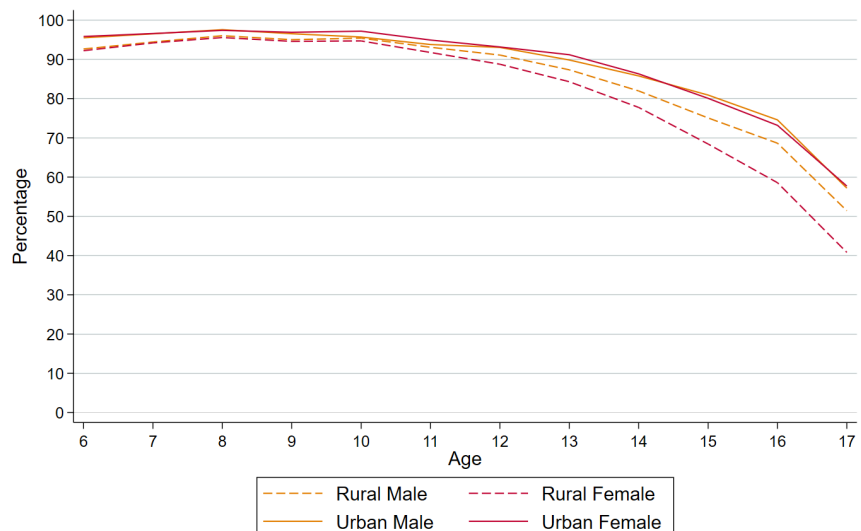


Figure 1. School attendance by sex, rural/urban residence, and age, among a nationally-representative household sample of youth age 6 - 17 in India [NFHS-4 2015 - 2016; N = 677,381]

PRIMARY REASONS FOR NON-ATTENDANCE:

Low educational interest was the most commonly reported reason for non-attendance of school across age groups, for rural and urban boys and girls (See Figure 2). However, boys were more likely than girls to report this reason. Almost half of all adolescent boys not in school reported non-attendance due to a lack of educational interest, compared with approximately one-third of same aged girls.

Financial concerns were also often reported as a primary reason for non-attendance, with 17% to 20% of youth aged 14-17 across sex and rural/urban groups. Among 6-10 year olds, this reason is a greater concern in urban areas (23% of boys and 20% of girls) more than rural areas (13% of boys and 15% of girls), and may be delaying timely school entry.

ADDITIONAL REASONS FOR NON-ATTENDANCE BY AGE:

6-10 YEAR OLDS:

Not getting admission is a primary reason for non-attendance, or non-entry into school, for 6-10 year olds, especially in urban India. Inexplicably, this is more likely for girls than boys (urban: 19% of girls, 15% of boys; rural: 14% of girls, 11% of boys). Among urban 6-10 year olds, 10% of girls are out of school due to *agriculture and paid labor responsibilities*, as compared with 3% of same age boys.

11-13 YEAR OLDS:

Domestic and caregiving responsibilities were identified as a primary reason for school non-attendance for girls more than boys, particularly for girls aged 11-13. 16% of urban girls and 19% of rural girls in this age group indicated this as their primary reason for non-attendance.

14-17 YEAR OLDS:

Adolescent marriage Among 14-17 year old females, marriage was reported as the primary reason for not attending school for 10% of rural girls and 9% of urban girls. This was a concern for less than 1% of males age 14-17 who were not in school.

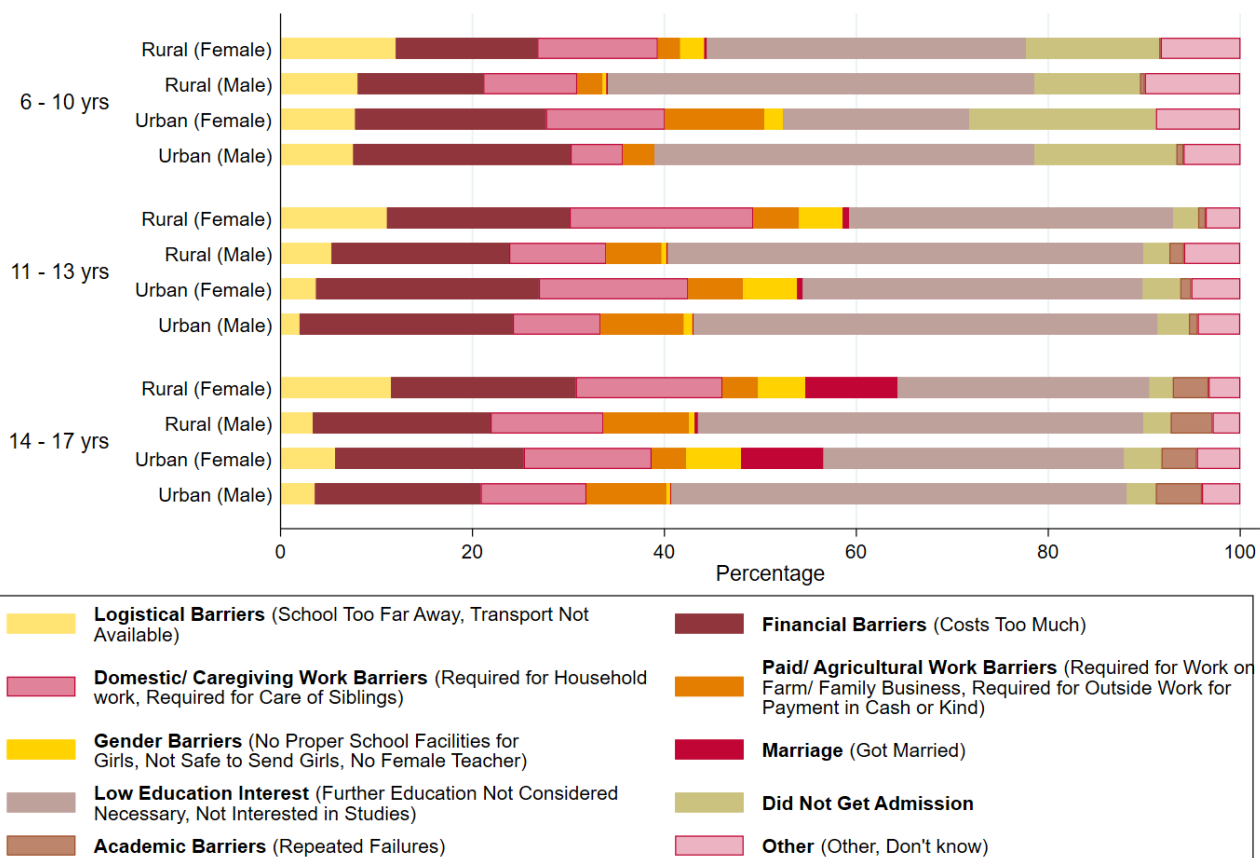


Figure 2. Reasons for not attending school by sex, rural/ urban residence, and age categorization, among a nationally-representative household sample of youth age 6 - 17 in India [NFHS-4 2015 - 2016; n = 43,915].

STUDY LIMITATIONS: The NFHS-4 data noted only the most important reason for students not attending school. It is possible that a combination of multiple reasons contributed to a student not attending school. Reliance on self-report, particularly from, in the presence of, or even from adults or other guardians on behalf of youth, may affect responses.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS: Findings from this analysis demonstrated that despite India's achievement of almost universal primary education, students' non-attendance in school remain a major concern for the country, both in terms of delayed start for primary education and non-attendance of 42 to 59% of 17 year olds, across sex and rural/urban groups. Rural girls appear to be the most vulnerable to non-attendance by 17 (59% non-attendance), but rural boys are not far behind (49% non-attendance); and while urban attendance is better, approximately two in five urban 17 year olds is not in school.

Low educational interest is the most commonly reported primary reason for non-attendance, across age categories and for rural and urban youth, but especially among boys. This may be a consequence of *push out* factors, such as inadequate teacher quality and engagement and lack of relevant curricula. Prior research from India evaluating primary school teachers at government schools show high teacher absenteeism, which in turn increases student absenteeism as well (4). Large class sizes, characteristic of government schools, often impede engagement and retention of lower performing and shy students (5). More effort is needed to support higher teacher quality, commitment and practice in India, and development of more engaging and meaningful curricula. At the same time, school cost and access must also be addressed as barriers to school attendance. For girls, particularly in adolescence, gendered barriers to education (e.g., no proper facilities, no female teacher) also persist, and these to require more focus.

Non-admission concerns are particularly important for timely entry into school, and more research is needed to understand why admissions are not occurring and if parents are declining school options where admissions are available due to quality. Higher prevalence of reports of non-admission of young girls relative to young boys also warrants further study. Urban youth are especially vulnerable to not getting school placement. These delays compromise the foundation of education for youth, and can impede effective learning later in school. Young rural girls' non-attendance and delayed entry due to agriculture or other labor responsibilities, particularly when this is not seen for boys, is also an important point for immediate intervention. Rural girls also face more logistical constraints to education (e.g., distance from school, lack of transport), across age categories.

While all age groups, across sex and urban/rural groups, are affected by non-attendance, escalation in non-attendance during adolescence had some important gender differences. At age 11 to 13, a time of escalating non-attendance, girls are leaving school due to domestic and caregiving responsibilities at home, and by 14-17 we see 9% of urban girls and 10% of rural girls leaving school for marriage. Rural girls are even more affected than urban girls by these social expectations and responsibilities, and this may explain why the gender gap in school attendance and retention persists in rural India in ways we no longer see for urban India.

India's strides over the past 30 years to achieve universal primary education must now be matched in achievement of universal secondary education. To reach this goal, more effort toward school retention is needed and should include sufficient numbers of accessible high quality schools for student admission, engaging curricula delivered by well trained and well supported teachers, and social norms change regarding perceptions of value of education relative to domestic labor and domestic life for girls. Improvements in supply and demand for secondary education with gendered considerations related to school completion will be important to ensure that more than 90% of today's children become tomorrow's successful secondary education graduates.

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