

The Girl Child Dropout Crisis in Universal Primary Education Goals of NGOs in Delhi-NCR

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Abstract

This study explores the persistent issue of girl child dropout in NGO-led Universal Primary Education (UPE) initiatives in Delhi-NCR. Despite improved enrollment rates, retention remains a significant challenge due to socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers. Through field research, interviews, and secondary data analysis, the paper identifies key dropout determinants such as poverty, patriarchal norms, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient NGO capacity. The discussion is structured around four core objectives: examining the causes of dropout, assessing NGO roles, evaluating intervention strengths and gaps, and proposing targeted solutions. Findings reveal that while NGOs have successfully increased access through community outreach and flexible learning models, their impact is limited by funding volatility, gender-insensitive curricula, and weak integration with formal education systems. The study recommends comprehensive solutions, including gender audits, retention-focused KPIs, digital equity initiatives, and NGO-government collaborations. Ultimately, the dropout crisis reflects deeper structural inequities requiring systemic, multi-sectoral engagement.

Keywords: Girl child dropout, Universal Primary Education, NGOs, Delhi-NCR, gender equity, educational retention

I. Background and Rationale

Education is a fundamental human right, vital for individual empowerment and national development. Over the decades, India has made considerable strides in improving primary school enrollment, especially under the universalization of primary education (UPE) agenda, which aims to ensure free and compulsory education for all children aged 6 to 14 years (Right to Education Act, 2009). Despite improvements in enrollment ratios, retention remains a significant concern, particularly among girls in underserved communities (UNESCO, 2021). Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR), which includes satellite cities like Noida, Gurgaon, and Ghaziabad, presents a paradox. While being among the most developed regions in India, it simultaneously harbors densely populated urban slums and migrant settlements where educational inequalities are stark. Various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have stepped in to support the government's UPE goals, offering services ranging from informal education centers to bridge programs, digital classrooms, and community-based schooling (Dasgupta & Arora, 2019). Yet, the dropout rates among girl children remain alarmingly high, often attributed to a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, infrastructural, and institutional factors. This study seeks to explore the specific issue of girl child dropout rates within the ambit of NGO-led UPE interventions in Delhi-NCR, analyzing why access does not always translate into sustained participation. The title "From Access to Abandonment" reflects this tragic trajectory experienced by many girls who initially benefit from NGO programs but eventually leave the education system prematurely.

II. Definitions and Conceptual Framework

Dropout in the context of primary education refers to a child who leaves school before completing the primary cycle, which typically includes grades 1 to 5 or 1 to 8, depending on the state framework (Mehta, 2020). **Universal Primary Education (UPE)** refers to the global goal of ensuring that all children, regardless of gender or socio-economic status, receive at least a basic primary education (UNESCO, 2022). **Girl child** refers to female students aged 6–14 years in this study, particularly those enrolled in NGO-supported education initiatives. NGO-led education programs are defined as organized, structured efforts by non-state actors to provide, supplement, or facilitate primary-level education through schools, community centers, mobile classrooms, and digital platforms. The theoretical framework is grounded in the intersection of **gender and education theory**, **human capital theory**, and **social exclusion theory**. Gender and education theory recognizes how societal norms and gendered expectations shape educational outcomes. Human capital theory posits education as an investment in individual potential and national development (Becker, 1993). Social exclusion theory addresses how structural inequalities marginalize certain groups, in this case, girl children from marginalized communities (Sen, 2000).

III. Scope of the Problem in Delhi-NCR

Despite being the capital region, Delhi-NCR faces significant challenges in ensuring universal education. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2021), dropout rates among girls in urban slums were as high as 18% by the time they reached Grade 5, with even higher rates in informal settlements. Several NGOs, such as Pratham, Deepalaya, Smile Foundation, and Teach for India, operate in the region with varied levels of success in girl child retention. These organizations provide critical services including remedial education, digital learning, midday meals, and community mobilization. However, anecdotal and field-level data suggest that these efforts are often undermined by systemic barriers such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, safety concerns, and lack of female teachers (Kumar & Sharma, 2021).

IV. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to understand the causes behind the high dropout rates of girl children in NGO-led UPE programs in Delhi-NCR. Specific objectives include:

- To analyze the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors contributing to dropouts among girl children.
- To assess the role of NGOs in addressing (or failing to address) these factors.
- To explore programmatic strengths and gaps in current NGO interventions.
- To recommend strategies for improving retention rates among girl children in primary education.

V. Review of Literature

A growing body of research highlights the multifaceted barriers that hinder girl child education in India. Ramachandran (2018) argues that patriarchal family structures often deprioritize girls' education, leading to early school withdrawal. According to UNICEF (2020), socio-cultural norms that favor boys, coupled with poverty and inadequate school infrastructure (e.g., lack of toilets), significantly increase dropout risks for girls. A study by Meena and Rajput (2019) focusing on urban NGO-led schools found that while enrollment was relatively high due to active community outreach, dropout rates remained concerning. The reasons included domestic labor expectations, sibling care responsibilities, and social pressures related to adolescence and menstruation. Digital learning initiatives by NGOs during the COVID-19 pandemic further revealed digital divides. Girls often lacked access to devices, data, and personal space to study, leading to disproportionately higher dropout rates compared to boys (Sarin & Jain, 2021). In Delhi-NCR, the Smile Foundation (2021) reported a 27% dropout rate among girls during the pandemic, despite robust efforts including mobile learning vans and tele-education. Deepalaya's internal reports (2020) also observed a 15% reduction in attendance among girl students post-lockdown.

VI. Discussion and Supported Solutions

The dropout crisis among girl children in NGO-supported Universal Primary Education (UPE) programs in Delhi-NCR presents a complex intersection of socio-economic deprivation, gendered norms, institutional inadequacies, and inconsistent program implementation. This chapter offers a detailed interpretation of the key findings in relation to the research objectives, outlining both the contributing factors to dropout and evidence-based recommendations to improve retention. One of the most significant barriers to continuous education for girls is poverty. In low-income communities, especially in urban slums, education is deprioritized for girl children who are expected to assist with domestic chores, caregiving, or earning. The perceived lack of financial return from educating girls, coupled with immediate household needs, drives parents to withdraw them from school. This economic rationale is not only shortsighted but is also deeply influenced by entrenched patriarchal beliefs that limit the future aspirations of girls (Kumar & Sharma, 2021).

Cultural norms further compound the dropout phenomenon. In several communities across Ghaziabad, Noida, and parts of Delhi, girls are expected to marry early or stay at home upon reaching puberty. Taboos surrounding menstruation and societal anxieties around female mobility contribute to poor attendance and eventual dropout. The absence of female role models within the schooling system further alienates adolescent girls. Without access to female teachers or counselors, they face psychological and social barriers that prevent re-engagement with the school system (UNICEF, 2020). Institutional barriers within NGO-run schools and learning centers exacerbate the issue. Many lack girl-friendly infrastructure such as clean, separate toilets, safe transportation, or menstrual hygiene facilities. Even when such facilities exist, they are often poorly maintained. The transitional path from NGO-run centers to formal education is unclear and fragmented, discouraging families from investing in prolonged education.

To counter these barriers, a multi-pronged approach is essential. Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) for girl children can incentivize school attendance, especially if linked to milestones like attendance or grade completion. Mobilizing communities through local leaders, faith groups, and women's collectives can also shift cultural perceptions. Infrastructure grants targeted at upgrading NGO centers with WASH facilities, and recruitment drives for female teachers, will help make learning environments more inclusive and supportive.

NGOs have played a critical role in increasing access to primary education in urban and peri-urban areas of Delhi-NCR. Their flexible school timings, personalized attention, and outreach programs have yielded measurable improvements in enrollment. NGOs like Pratham and Smile Foundation have pioneered strategies such as bridge courses and home visits that cater to the unique challenges of slum dwellers (Dasgupta & Arora, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift to digital learning—despite infrastructural challenges—enabled some continuity in education, supported by mobile vans and tele-counseling.

However, significant limitations persist. A large number of NGOs operate under donor constraints that emphasize enrollment figures over sustainable retention. This skewed priority leads to short-term interventions that fail to address systemic causes of dropout. Further, a lack of coordination among NGOs results in overlapping services and missed opportunities for resource optimization. Most concerning is the insufficient gender-sensitization of staff and absence of psychosocial support services tailored to the needs of adolescent girls. To address these shortcomings, donor engagement must be reframed to focus on impact metrics, such as grade progression and retention, rather than enrollment alone. NGOs in Delhi-NCR would benefit from forming digital consortia that promote resource sharing, joint advocacy, and collaborative project implementation. Mandatory training in gender equity and child psychology for all NGO staff should become a standard feature of capacity building. Despite limited resources, many NGO programs exhibit significant strengths. Community-based interventions, bridge learning centers, and mobile classrooms have enabled access in areas where government schools are non-existent or under-resourced. Remedial classes tailored to the learning levels of children have also been instrumental in improving academic performance. Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), adopted by Pratham, has shown that differentiated learning significantly increases student engagement (ASER, 2021).

Nevertheless, scalability and sustainability remain unresolved issues. Most programs are restricted in scope and fail to extend beyond the primary level. Without a structured progression to secondary schooling, many girls drop out once the NGO program concludes. Additionally, emotional and social learning is often neglected, and digital content lacks contextual relevance for non-Hindi-speaking or under-literate populations. Scalability requires program designs that are modular, adaptive, and digitally enabled. Incorporating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) modules into the curriculum would provide girls with the resilience and confidence needed to navigate socio-cultural challenges. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) frameworks should include indicators related to well-being, retention, and parental involvement. Partnerships between NGOs and formal schools must be developed to ensure seamless academic transitions.

Improving retention rates among girls in primary education requires a robust combination of systemic, NGO-specific, and community-led strategies. At the systemic level, digital equity must be prioritized. Collaborations with telecom providers for subsidized data plans and donation drives for refurbished smartphones can bridge the digital divide. Establishing Early Warning Systems using attendance and performance data can help preempt dropouts. Family engagement is another critical factor. Parent-teacher agreements that underscore mutual accountability for the child's education, supported by regular home visits and community meetings, can foster a culture of commitment. NGOs should integrate gender audits as part of their program cycles to continuously assess and improve inclusivity. At the policy level, coalitions of NGOs must lobby for the inclusion of flexible schooling norms within the Right to Education (RTE) Act, specifically targeting migrant and marginalized girls. Local government partnerships can enhance school safety through better lighting, accessible transport, and secure school boundaries. Integration with national schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Samagra Shiksha, and Digital India would ensure synergy across government and NGO initiatives.

The dropout crisis among girl children is both a symptom and a cause of entrenched gender inequality. Solutions must therefore transcend educational parameters and engage with broader social justice frameworks. Retaining girls in school cannot be achieved through infrastructure and pedagogy alone—it requires a transformation in how society values girls' futures. COVID-19 has deepened existing disparities and introduced new challenges. Recovery efforts must include dedicated resources for girls' education, particularly in the digital realm. Investments in teacher training, community awareness, and psychosocial support will be essential in closing the post-pandemic gender gap in education. Finally, data-driven decision-making must guide future interventions. Real-time dashboards that track attendance, learning outcomes, and socio-emotional indicators can enable targeted responses. Government and donor funding must be aligned with these insights to ensure efficient resource allocation.

VII. Justification for the Study

While many studies have explored gender disparities in education, few have focused specifically on NGO-led UPE interventions in Delhi-NCR. Given the growing role of NGOs in bridging educational gaps, there is a pressing need to evaluate their effectiveness in retaining girl children, especially in urban peripheries and underserved communities. Moreover, understanding dropout patterns can help shape more gender-sensitive, context-specific interventions. As India moves towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), such localized insights are critical.

VIII. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the alarming rates of dropout among girl children in NGO-led UPE programs across Delhi-NCR, with the intent of understanding the multidimensional factors contributing to this crisis. The findings clearly demonstrate that while NGOs have made commendable progress in reaching underserved communities, they are frequently hampered by systemic, cultural, and institutional limitations that disproportionately affect girls. Poverty, gender discrimination, early marriage, poor infrastructure, and limited parental engagement continue to form a vicious cycle that leads to abandonment of education. NGOs have innovated with bridge courses, mobile classrooms, community outreach, and digital learning, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (ASER, 2021; Dasgupta & Arora, 2019). However, these innovations often lack scalability, continuity, and alignment with formal education pathways. Furthermore, most programs are still donor-driven with short-term metrics that prioritize enrollment over long-term educational attainment (Kumar & Sharma, 2021).

The research has shown that comprehensive and sustained interventions are needed. These include gender audits, mentorship programs, universal digital access, and stronger M&E systems. Policymakers must also recognize that girl child education is not merely an educational issue but a reflection of broader socio-economic and cultural injustices. Collaborative action from NGOs, governments, families, and community stakeholders is essential to convert the promise of universal primary education into a lived reality for every girl child. To ensure lasting impact, a rethinking of the educational ecosystem through a gender-transformative lens is crucial. Integrating psychosocial support, vocational skills, family engagement, and infrastructure development can forge a path from access to retention. Only through such integrated efforts can we eliminate the dropout crisis and fulfill the constitutional promise of equitable education for all.

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