

# Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Families and Children in India

Findings from a survey by Magic Bus covering 3700 families





# Secure Livelihood, Save Childhood

## Survey Findings on the Impact of COVID-19 on Childhood and Livelihood in India

The COVID-19 crisis has brought the entire world to a standstill as millions have been affected by the disease. Everyday lives have been severely disrupted as most nations have mandated complete lockdown in order to prevent the spread of the disease. In India and around the world, already - marginalized groups are the most affected. India has seen a cascading effect on livelihoods and children's education.

While the immediate impact on these millions of young people is an important concern, larger issues must be and considered. How might these young people be encouraged to return to their education? How might families be supported today so that they can imagine a better future for their children? What can be done to lessen the downward impact on India's economic stability? The Indian government and NGOs must be nimble in identifying the issues, developing appropriate interventions at scale.

With over 20 years of experience working throughout India with children at risk, Magic Bus recognized this gap and immediately conducted a rapid assessment survey. This preliminary data sheds light on a number of critical issues that have emerged in the childhood education and livelihood space as a direct effect of Covid-19 and the ensuing lockdown.

The survey results will inform strategies for addressing the impact of this crisis in the months and years following lockdown. The basis of these strategies? Building income security for families and ensuring the well-being and continuity of learning for children.

## SUMMARY

The Magic Bus COVID-19 Impact Survey identifies the ripple effects of lockdown on school education and livelihood among the marginalized populations in India. The key findings anticipate a significant increase in the scale of poverty in India.

Magic Bus surveyed the most vulnerable constituents within our nationwide network: the economically disadvantaged, rural populations, those lacking a formal education, and workers in the

informal job sector. The team conducted the Survey to develop response strategies that Magic Bus might implement in the post-lockdown recovery period. The critical question to be answered – how might the parents/adult income-earners in the household continue to provide for their families, thereby ensuring the well-being of children and the continuity of learning.





## STUDY METHODOLOGY

A telephonic survey was conducted in April, 2020 among registered participants of current Magic Bus programmes.

Magic Bus staff interviewed adolescents and their parents across 39 districts and 21 states in India, representing the four regions of East, West, North and South, where Magic Bus has presence. The representative sample was determined via the Probability Proportional to Size (PPS) method.

In each selected household, one adolescent and one of the parents (either father or mother) were interviewed. Parents were questioned about the ways in which the pandemic has affected their livelihood and household food security.

## DEMOGRAPHY

Among 3699 parents of adolescents interviewed, 65% were male and 35% female. Female respondents were relatively low in the Western region (28%), possibly due to more men having access to mobile phones. Moreover, 3617 adolescents, 47% boys and 53% girls, were interviewed.

Approximately two-thirds of the adolescents interviewed were in the 6-8 grade (68%) while about a third were in the 9-12 grade (28%)

More than half of the respondents were from rural areas (60%)

While wide-spread loss of household income due to the pandemic is a generally accepted fact, the Survey revealed that many households are borrowing money for sustenance. Reduced income is leading to families resorting to reduced numbers of meals, less consumption of nutritious food, and smaller meal portions.

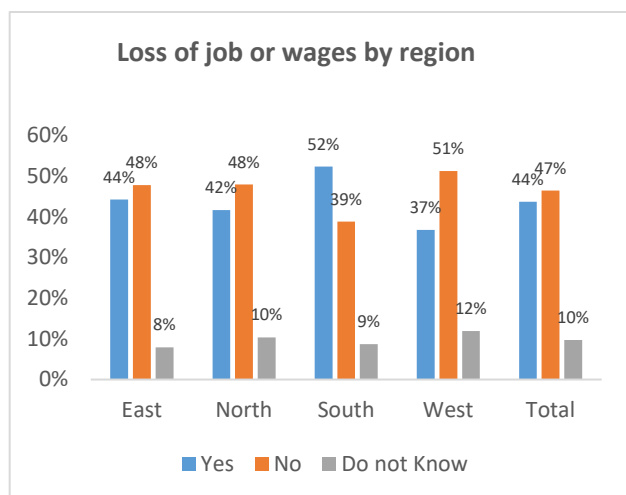
While children express their willingness to return to school and miss interacting with friends, they report challenges. In addition to their textbooks, some children do have access to mobile phones (although limited in rural areas) if they choose to access study resources. However, most of the children have difficulties focusing on their academic learning and expressed feelings of anxiety, sadness, and fear of contracting the disease.

All of these factors continue to exacerbate the pre-existing gender divide in these at-risk communities. With job loss, women lose the agency they may have claimed by contributing to the household. Further, they experience unequal access to food and an increase in household chores.

## EMERGING TOPICS FROM THE MAGIC BUS COVID-19 IMPACT SURVEY

### Disruption of Livelihoods

The plight of daily wage earners losing their jobs and livelihood due to the pandemic lockdown in India is well-known. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), 1 in 4 employees lost jobs across India in March-April. The unemployment rate stands at 27.11%, with urban areas experiencing a higher rate of unemployment (29.22%) vs. rural areas (26.69%).<sup>i</sup> Job loss may worsen with the repeated lockdown extensions.



The Magic Bus Survey shows a similar trend. There was a 73% loss of income per household in April (INR 2,893/USD \$38) over the previous month of March (INR 10,557/USD \$140). Almost half of Survey respondents (44%) reported that someone in their family had lost their job due to the lockdown.

### Households reported a 73% decrease in monthly income

More than half of the parents interviewed (55%) reported having no income during the lockdown - highest in the East (63%) and lowest in the West (40%). A more significant number of women vs. men reported having no income during the period of lockdown. The loss of livelihoods, coupled with the increase in unpaid, domestic caregiving work, may put women at a distinct disadvantage in the ongoing pandemic and beyond. A large proportion of parents interviewed reported wage loss (63%) as a major effect of lockdown.

### 55% of households reported having no income during the lockdown

### Economic State of Households

Many households in India are struggling for sustenance and are making difficult decisions based on their current economic situation. In the Survey, almost half of the respondents (45%) reported not receiving their regular salary from their employers.

Reports estimate that 400 million people in India may sink into poverty due to COVID-19<sup>ii</sup>.

More than half of the respondents (57%) mentioned receiving some form of Government support. Among these, 85% reported receiving food rations while 43% received cash transfer through Government schemes.

Almost half of the respondents (41%) reported borrowing money from others for subsistence. Also, one-third of the respondents (32%) indicated some delay in regular cash transfers and other government scheme-based transfers.

### 41% of households are borrowing money for basic needs

#### Household Food Insecurity

The lockdown is precipitating a rise in food insecurity. While the Government has announced relief packages to help meet the needs of families, this has proven to be insufficient. About a third of the parents surveyed (31%) estimated they had only a one-week food supply. Further, about a fifth of the respondents mentioned that they had supplies for 2-3 weeks (20%).

The Government's relief packages include 5kg (11lbs) of wheat or rice and 1 kg (2.2lbs) of pulses. Nutrient-rich Vegetables and fruit remains unaffordable among marginalized families<sup>iii</sup>. About



15% of Survey respondents are getting supplies through some Government scheme.

While about half of the respondents (48%) reported buying supplies at a typical market price, the same price, about a third (35%) were paying a higher price. A higher proportion of respondents in the East (42%) reported buying supplies at a higher price.

### **31% of households reported having only one week of supplies**

The majority of the parents reported making adjustments in their food habits due to the lockdown (70%). More women than men reported making these adjustments. Respondents described switching to less nutritious food (56%), reduced number of meals (47%), and smaller portions of meals (26%). More than a third of adolescents reported not being able to eat food like before the lockdown (37%). About a tenth of the adolescents indicated that they did not have equal access to food (12%).

About 35% of the respondents indicated that the midday meal provided to their children in school was essential, and they could not manage to feed their children without it adequately.

### **Impact on Education Continuity**

The impact on school education is manifold, and lockdown seems to be turning the clock back on education. Lack of focus on education is directly linked to loss of jobs and livelihoods. Most of the parents surveyed reported that their children studied in Government schools (81%) and the rest in private schools or aided schools.

According to the Survey, 92% of parents want to send their children to school or college after the lockdown ends. However, 41% of parents admitted

to not being in a position to afford education, which clearly shows the intent versus their ability.

As is often seen in times of crisis, education tends to lose priority as households are rethinking their spending. The economic realities within households, as well as the traditional bias towards educating boys, may result in far fewer girls and students overall returning to their studies.

### **41% of households indicated that they are unable to afford school fees**

During lockdown, most adolescents reported spending their time watching television (76%), studying (65%), playing indoors (52%), helping with household work (23%), and taking care of their family members. Though more than half of the adolescents said, they had a fixed place available at home for study (59%). Approx. 40% of adolescents reported that they did not have enough time to study and were not able to concentrate on their lessons.

Most of the adolescents reported having access to books (91%) and mobile phones as a family asset (55%) as study resources. The 2017-18 reporting by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) indicates that only 10.7% of Indians own laptops and computers, and only 23.4% have internet access. Further, in rural areas, only 4% of the population have laptops, computers, and internet access.<sup>iv</sup>

The Magic Bus Survey shows that 34% of respondents don't own a mobile phone, directly affecting accessibility to study resources. Among all, 83% of adolescents reported having no access to online learning resources leaving a significant student population with no learning support system.

These findings provide an insight into the potential changes to platforms and learning techniques that education systems might implement. Additionally, this speaks to the need for well-developed methods for counselling parents/guardians, to prioritize resources needed for continued learning.

Moreover, there is a need to offer aspects of the traditional school experience – active play, forming friendships, collective learning, engaging with role models, and many equally essential elements of socio-emotional learning.

### 83% of children don't have access to online learning resources

Among the people who migrated to their native homes due to job loss, about half (49%) said that they would return to their place of work or city after the lifting of lockdown. The question remains as to options for those children who will not return to their urban school. To ensure equity and inclusion among all student populations, rural and urban, a baseline strategy will be to address the digital divide.

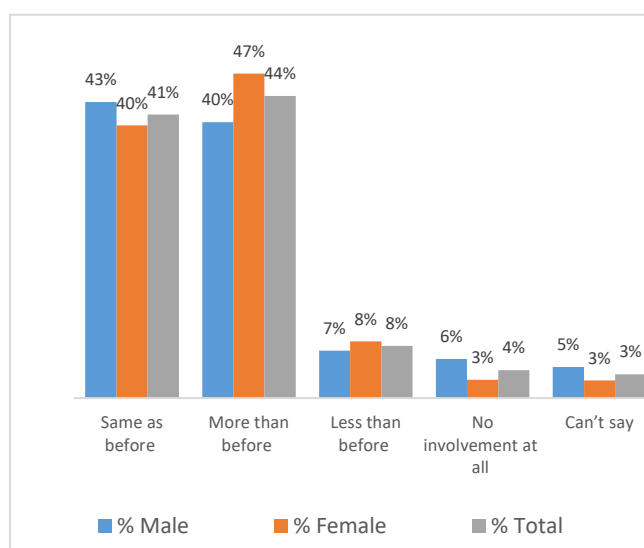
### Challenges to Gender Equity

The widening gap in gender equity within the pandemic environment is evident. According to the reported statistics, COVID-19 seems to have disproportionately affected men. But this is the result of an underlying only gender bias. Women are far less likely to report symptoms, get tested, or generally prioritize their well-being.

Further, women now are burdened with additional work with all family members staying indoors. Meanwhile, cases of violence against women have also escalated.<sup>v</sup> According to the Survey, women are more vulnerable with higher unemployment (18% as compared to 10% in men) and higher illiteracy (27% when compared to 14% in men).

Given this overall trend, women-led households are all the more vulnerable. The traditional division of labour, along gender lines, has re-established itself during the lockdown. A higher proportion of girls (47%) reported being engaged in household chores during the lockdown, as compared to boys (40%).

These girls and young women are less likely to find their way back to school as households look for additional working hands inside and outside homes.

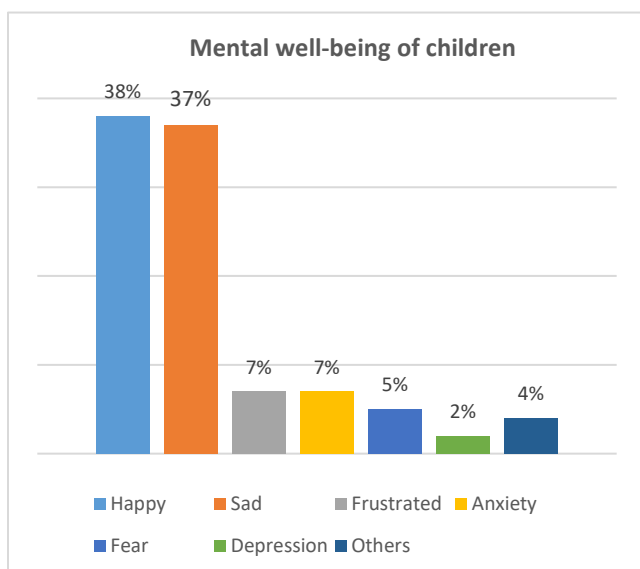


As food scarcity leads to the reallocation of resources in households, gender bias in the allotment and consumption of food becomes more evident.

### The unemployment rate among women is 18% as compared to 10% among men

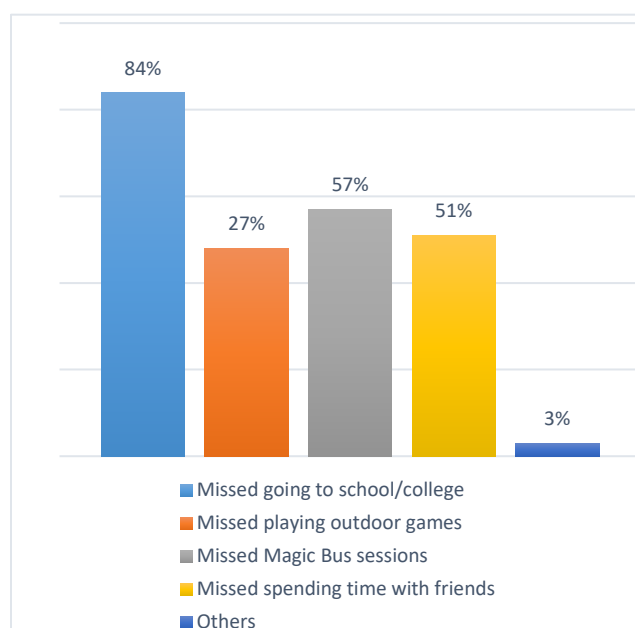
#### Social Isolation/Impact on Mental Well-being

Staying indoors for a long time during the lockdown has been a struggle for the adolescents who participated in the Survey. Right now, more than ever, we have to be focused on the mental health of the child rather than learning alone. The vast majority of them reported that they missed going to



school (84%), attending Magic Bus life skills sessions (57%), socializing with friends (51%), and playing outdoor games (48%).

### 84% of children miss going to school, and 57% miss attending the Magic Bus life skills sessions



While more than a third of adolescents were happy to be at home (38%), almost as many self-reported feelings of sadness (37%), frustration (7%), anxiety (7%), fear (5%) and depression (2%) due to the lockdown.

### Engaging Life Skills to Cope with Adversity

A substantial majority of the adolescents in the Survey reported that previous participation in Magic Bus life skills sessions promoted resilience and helped them deal with the current pandemic situation (82%).

Specifically, the life skills they described are teamwork (49%), problem-solving (48%), effective communication (44%), healthy eating (42%), and claiming self-confidence (33%). Most of the adolescents reported that they would like to resume life skills sessions when possible. (81%).

A majority of adolescents are optimistic that the current crisis will be “over soon” (61%), and they are confident in their future ability to deal with unexpected events such as this pandemic (86%). A majority of the respondents felt that they could overcome the distress caused by the lockdown (84%), save themselves and their family based on proper information (92%), and could “beat the virus” (85%).

Rather than further isolating themselves, most of the adolescents reached out to parents (66%), friends (53%), siblings (40%), outreach workers of Magic Bus (*Bhaiyya/Didi*) (30%), and teachers (26%) when they needed support. These findings speak to the need for careful consideration of life skills integration into education platforms in the future.



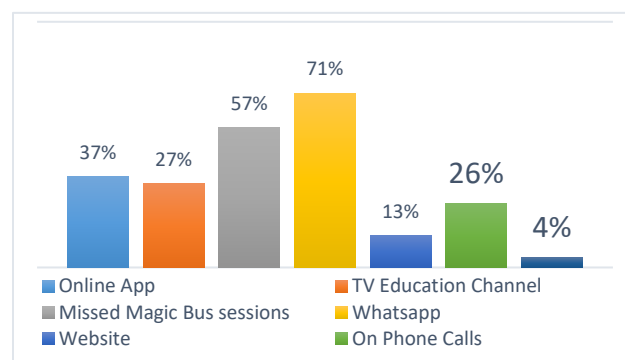
## Online Learning in a Post-Pandemic India

It is evident from the survey results that adolescents are very concerned about the livelihood of their families. A high proportion of adolescents reported that a decrease in family income (69%) is the primary concern, followed by loss of regular pay of family members (60%), and the fear of not getting the opportunity to play with their friends (57%). More than half of adolescents reported fear of discontinuing school or college (54%), and the fear of contracting the infection (53%).

Almost half of adolescents reported awareness that schools had introduced some form of online learning (48%). Adolescents also knew about different types of online learning resources, including WhatsApp

(71%), Online Apps (37%), TV Education Channel (34%), phone calls (26%), and web sites (13%).

Parents indicated that they could give their phone to their children for about 6 hours a week for studies.



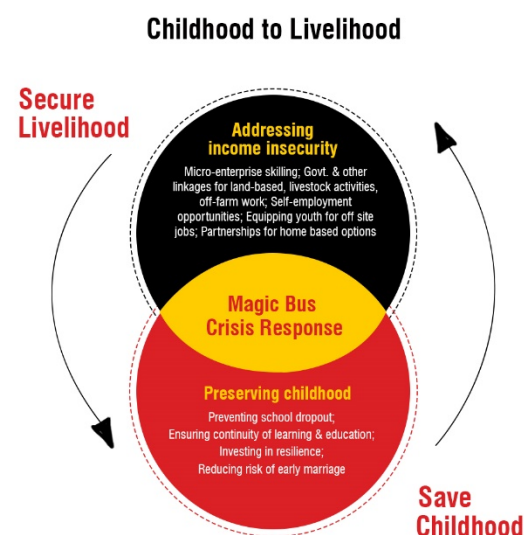
## KEY LEARNINGS

Addressing household poverty through restoration and stabilization of **livelihood** is the starting point to enhance the ability of the family to invest in **health, nutrition, and education** for their sons *and* their daughters.

Fundamental to bridging the learning gap is finding solutions to mitigate the **digital divide** between rural and urban student populations. This means creatively engaging children's interest in gaining knowledge, offering **alternative learning spaces** and finding a middle ground between the purely digital and traditional classroom curricula.

A **gender lens** must be applied in any holistic effort to increase access to resources, support education continuity and provide opportunities for livelihood.

School has always been a space for learning and is critical for a child's **mental and social well-being**. NGOs and government must help school systems evolve and find alternative ways to reach out to children, invest in socio-emotional learning and develop key life skills.







## THE MAGIC BUS VISION

*We imagine a world where children  
break out of poverty and lead fulfilling,  
rewarding lives, contributing to their community  
and to the world around them.*

Over the past twenty years, Magic Bus India Foundation has transformed the lives of over one million children and young people who were otherwise destined to remain in poverty.

We know that the biggest hurdle is for a child to believe that a better life is possible. Magic Bus programs build confidence, give opportunities to learn life skills and vocational skills, encourage school completion, and ultimately provide a *sustainable livelihood* in the organized sector. These young people become an asset to their family, the pride of their community, and tax-paying contributors to the national economy.

Founded in Mumbai, Magic Bus is one of the most extensive poverty alleviation programs in India, impacting 375,000 children and young people per year, in 22 states and 80 districts of India. We deliver our programs in close to 2000 communities and 1000 schools in both urban neighborhoods and remote rural areas. Since the inception of the Livelihood program 2015, Magic Bus has trained over 30,000 youth and placed more than 70% in jobs.

In 2017, Magic Bus expanded its Childhood to Livelihood Programs among at-risk communities in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, serving 6000 children in 40 locales.

We do this work in close collaboration with state and national governments, other civil society organizations, corporate partners, and with the generosity of global philanthropists.

Magic Bus has set the audacious goal, in keeping with the United Nations Sustainable development goals, of scaling up to reach 25 million children by 2030.

### About Magic Bus's COVID-19 relief efforts

Magic Bus young leaders and employees have been working in crisis zones in rural and urban locations across India to ensure children and their families are well taken care of in the wake of the pandemic. We have already provided food and essentials to more than 150,000 people across the country.

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<sup>i</sup> The jobs bloodbath of April 2020, 05 May 2020, Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy  
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<sup>iii</sup> What India has released from its Rs. 1.7 Lakh Crore relief package for the poor, 14 Apr 2020, Bloomberg  
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<sup>iv</sup> How India Can Send Children of Migrant Workers Back to School, 15 May 2020, The Quint  
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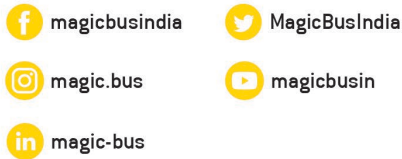


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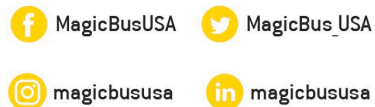
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