


ADOLESCENT LIVES IN COVID TIMES

Insights from the Plan-It Girls
Follow-Up Survey in Delhi and
Jharkhand, India



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The advent of COVID-19 led to strict nationwide lockdowns and social distancing measures, disrupting access to services and opportunities. It is critical to understand the effect that the pandemic lockdowns and social distancing measures had on the lives of adolescent girls, and inform policy and programming going forward.

Introduction

Plan-It Girls was a multi-level and multi-stakeholder program to build agency of adolescent girls and promote gender equality to support their aspiration through interventions with girls, their parents, male peers, teachers and communities. The program aimed at equipping girls studying in Classes 9 and 11 with gender perspective, life skills and employability skills over a period of two academic years. Plan-It Girls intended to support their transition from school to work through a gender integrated curriculum, which concluded with a career fair.

To assess the impact of Plan-It Girls program both in Delhi and Jharkhand, ICRW conducted a mixed-method impact evaluation study. This impact evaluation study had two phases — baseline (September 2017–February 2018) and endline (December 2018–March 2019) followed by a qualitative study that was completed in February 2020.

The advent of COVID-19 led to strict nationwide lockdowns and social distancing measures, disrupting access to services and opportunities. It is critical to understand the effect that the pandemic lockdowns and social distancing measures had on the lives of adolescent girls, and inform policy and programming going forward. A telephonic follow-up study was conducted with the following objectives:

- To assess the status of education, employment and marriage of the girls from Class 9 and Class 11 cohorts;
- To examine the effect of COVID-19 on education, work and marriage related plans of the cohort girls;
- To understand the effect of COVID-19 on access to basic amenities, health and girl's time use.

The telephonic follow-up study was conducted during October–November 2020 with both the younger and older girls' cohorts from

intervention and comparison schools in Delhi and Jharkhand, who were part of the Plan-It Girls evaluation study (both at baseline and endline surveys) and were reachable on the phone.

In Delhi, only 15.4 percent girls of Class 9 (out of 1176) and 12 percent girls of Class 11 (out of 1657) and in Jharkhand, 15.7 percent younger girls (out of 1831) and 20.7 percent older girls (out of 1038) could be interviewed over the

Table 1: Background Characteristics of Girls Interviewed During Follow-up Survey, Delhi and Jharkhand

Socio-economic characteristics at baseline	Delhi		Jharkhand	
	Class 9	Class 11	Class 9	Class 11
Caste				
Non-SC/ST	71.8	78.6	78.8	76.3
SC/ST	28.2	21.4	21.2	23.7
Religion				
Hindu	81.8	95.0	76.4	78.1
Non-Hindu	18.2	5.0	23.6	21.9
Father's education				
No Schooling, Classes 1-8	53.0	44.8	68.4	57.2
Classes 9/9+	47.0	55.2	31.6	42.8
Mother's education				
No schooling, Classes 1-8	74.0	71.1	88.9	82.3
Classes 9/9+	26.0	28.9	11.1	17.7
Father's occupation				
Others	36.5	26.4	54.5	39.1
Service in government / private or own work	63.5	73.6	45.5	60.9
Mother's occupation				
Not working	69.1	72.6	69.1	67.9
Working	30.9	27.4	30.9	32.1
Wealth index				
Low-below median	47.5	44.3	53.1	54.4
High-above median	52.5	55.7	46.9	45.6
Total (N)	181	201	288	215



Teachers and girls at the morning school assembly | Photo credit: Ketaki Nagaraju/ICRW Asia

phone. These were girls who responded on the functional phone number (collected during the endline survey), and gave their assent and received parental consent for the interview. The background characteristics of girls across the telephonic follow-up survey and the endline survey were almost similar (less than 5 percent dissimilarity), except in the Delhi Class 11 cohort, which had a greater proportion of Hindu girls (6.7 percentage points higher) as compared to the endline survey.

The phone survey was conducted through the IVR platform¹ using telecalling service. The major reasons for non-response were incorrect or out of service phone numbers; phones being switched off, not reachable or registered for the Do Not Disturb service; girls did not attend the

call (despite at least three attempts) or girls were not available on the given phone number; and refusal to participate in the survey.

The sample size achieved in the phone survey for each of the four population sub-groups was small; hence, the intervention and comparison groups were pooled together for analysis. This did not allow for further analysis to draw inferences about the protective effect of the Plan-It Girls program on girls who were part of the intervention. Given the limited sample, to assess the effect of key empowerment indicators — self-esteem, self-efficacy, and gender attitudes on the status of the girls related to studies, marriage, work for pay — a logistic regression post propensity score matching on key background characteristics was conducted.

Table 2: *Girls Interviewed through the Telephonic Survey*

	Delhi-9			Delhi-11			Jharkhand-9			Jharkhand-11		
	C	I	T	C	I	T	C	I	T	C	I	T
Girls Interviewed through the Telephonic Survey	99	82	181	133	68	201	172	116	288	90	125	215
C = Control; I = Intervention; T = Total												

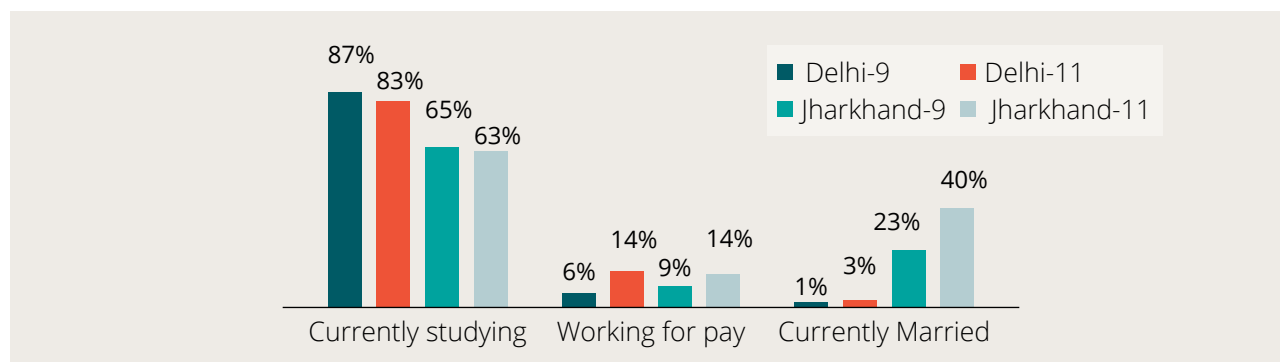
¹ **IVR or Interactive Voice Response** is a technology which allows incoming callers to navigate a phone system before talking to a human operator.

WHERE ARE THE GIRLS DURING THE PANDEMIC?

Most of the girls are currently enrolled in educational institutions (ranging from 63–87 percent across younger and older girls' cohorts from Jharkhand and Delhi).

Over a 20 percent-point urban-rural differential was observed. Almost 50 percent girls in Delhi (47 percent from the younger cohort and 56 percent from the older cohort) and about 60 percent girls in Jharkhand (55 percent from the younger cohort and 63 percent from the older cohort) stated a lower possibility of completing their education due to the pandemic.

Figure 1: Current Status of Girls

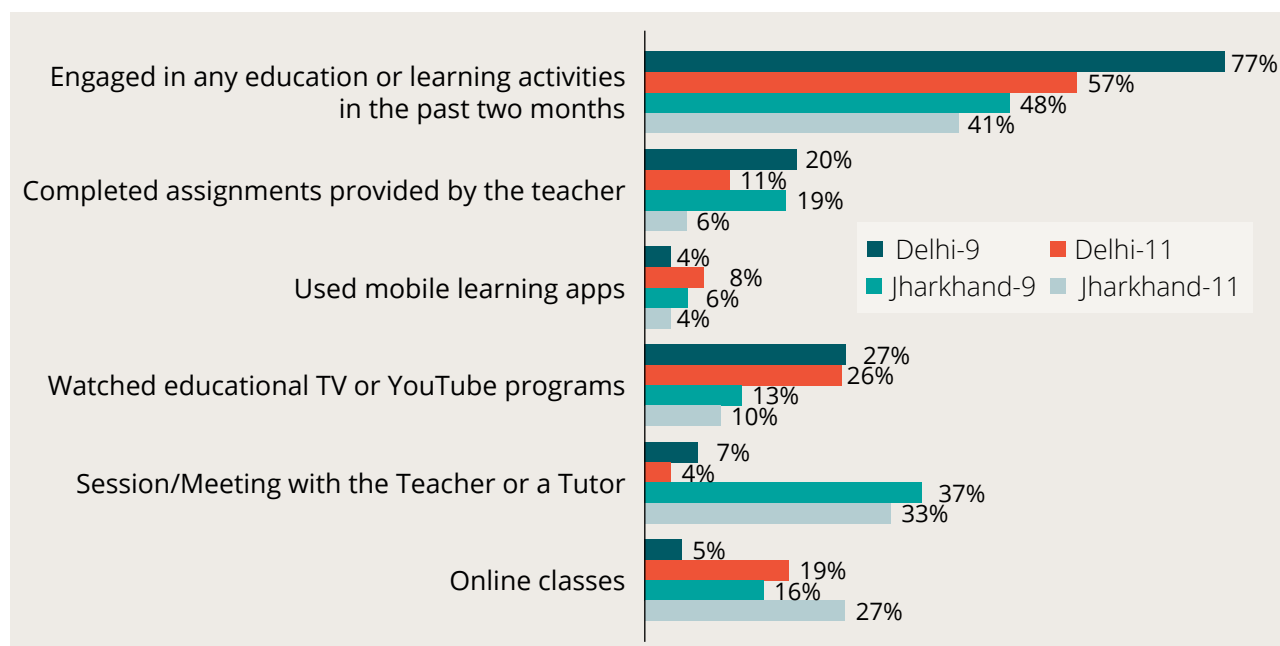


57–77 percent girls in Delhi and less than half of the girls in Jharkhand were engaged in any education or learning activities over two months prior to the survey.

Among those who were engaged in learning activities, over one-fourth of the girls in Delhi and 10–13 percent girls in Jharkhand reported watching educational TV or YouTube programs. While

about one-third girls in Jharkhand reported meeting with the teacher or a tutor, less than 10 percent of girls in Delhi reported the same. A survey conducted by Young Lives (Favara et al., August, 2020) also found a pattern similar to that of Jharkhand where about 7 percent girls engaged with educational TV, radio or learning apps.

Figure 2: Engagement in Any Education or Learning Activities





Adolescent girls huddle together while listening to a YF at a career fair at their school | Photo credit: Ketaki Nagaraju/ICRW Asia

14 percent older girls in both Delhi and Jharkhand reported working for pay, while less than 10 percent younger girls engaged in work. During the pandemic a small proportion of older adolescent girls reported a drop in the time spent on own business, which was mostly giving tuition.

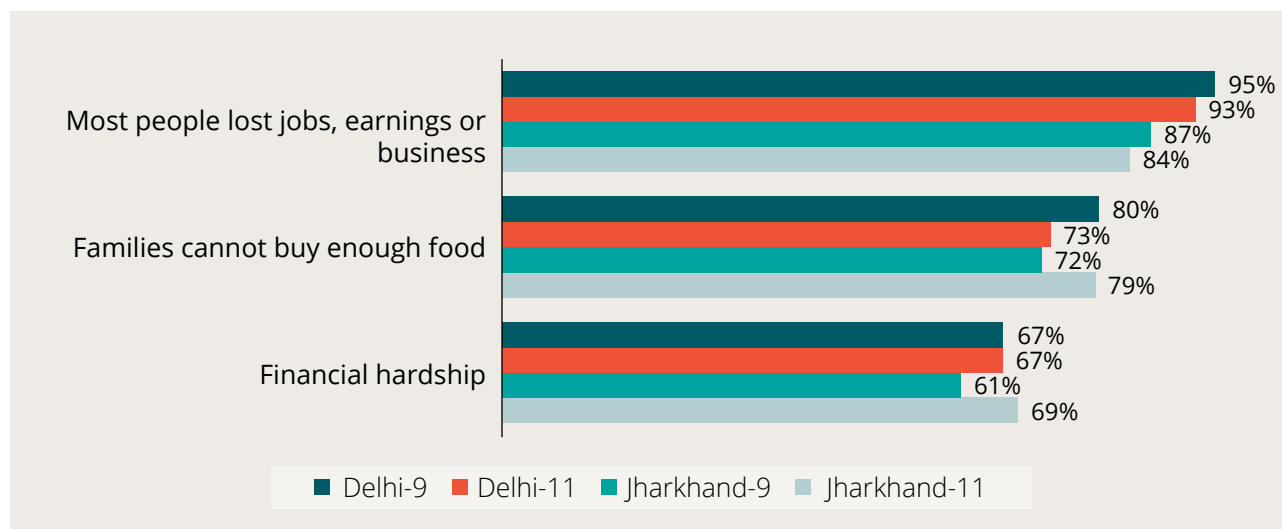
In Jharkhand, 40 percent older girls and roughly 26 percent younger girls were currently married, of which 12 percent from the older girls' cohort and 30 percent from the younger girls' cohort reported to have married before the age of 18. Among those unmarried, a very small proportion (2–3 percent in Delhi and 8 percent in Jharkhand) reported that their marriage was being pushed to earlier than planned post the COVID-19 pandemic.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LIVES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS

COVID-19 had a negative effect on the economic and social lives of adolescent girls, their families and their communities.

Most girls reported a substantial number of people in their community losing jobs and facing a lack of resources, inability to afford enough food and financial hardships. Similar economic shocks were observed during the phone survey conducted in India in November 2020 (Favara et al., 2020).

Figure 3: Economic Effects of COVID-19 on Households



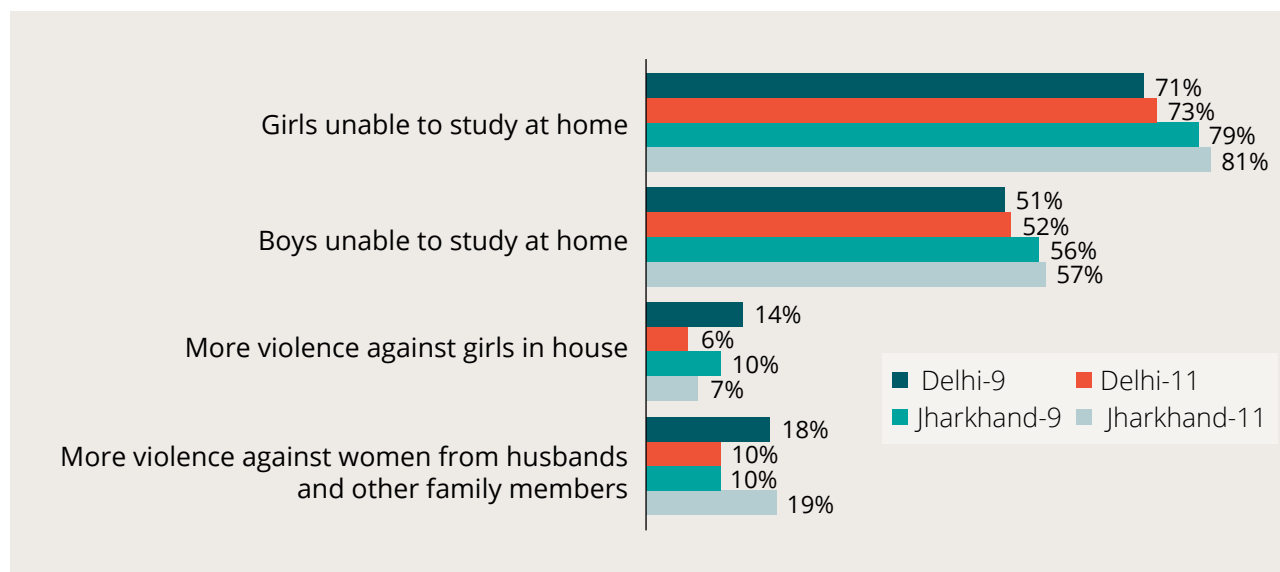
10–19 percent girls reported an increase in violence or abuse toward women from husbands or other family members. 7–14 percent of girls reported more violence or other abuse toward adolescent girls in households,

with a greater proportion of younger girls' cohort reporting violence. While the survey attempted to capture violence against women and girls during the pandemic, there could be underreporting owing to the sensitive nature

of the subject. It is also worth noting that a greater proportion of girls (71–73 percent in Delhi and 79–81 percent in Jharkhand) felt

that girls in their communities were unable to study at home as compared to boys in their communities.

Figure 4: Social Effects of COVID-19 on Households

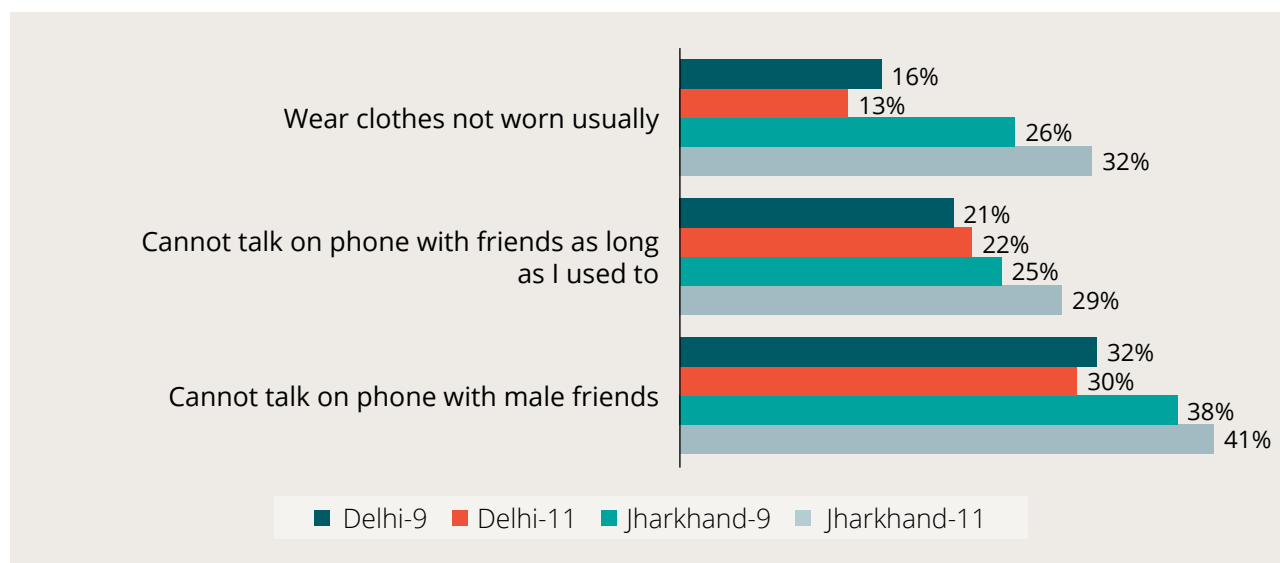


Girls faced stricter restrictions within the household because of the presence of male family members.

13–32 percent girls reported constraints on type of clothes worn at home; the constraints were greater in rural Jharkhand. One in four girls reported that they cannot talk to their friends on phone or chat online and about one-third reported that they cannot talk on the phone or chat online with male friends

for as long as they used to previously because male members of the family are now home and do not like them doing so. Older girls reported more constraints than younger girls in Jharkhand. Another study (Briggs et al., 2020) made a similar observation about girls' access and usage of phones being monitored by family members in India.

Figure 5: Restrictions Girls Faced within Households





Girls reflect during a session at the youth resource center | Photo credit: Ketaki Nagaraju/ICRW Asia

6–12 percent girls in Delhi and almost 10 percent girls in Jharkhand reported an increase in unpaid care work. Over one-fourth of the girls from Delhi and one-fifth of the girls from Jharkhand reported an

increase in time spent on cooking and other domestic work since the pandemic.

Another study (Briggs et al., 2020) noted similar patterns in Bangladesh and Kenya.

Figure 6: Time Spent in a Day on Unpaid Care Work

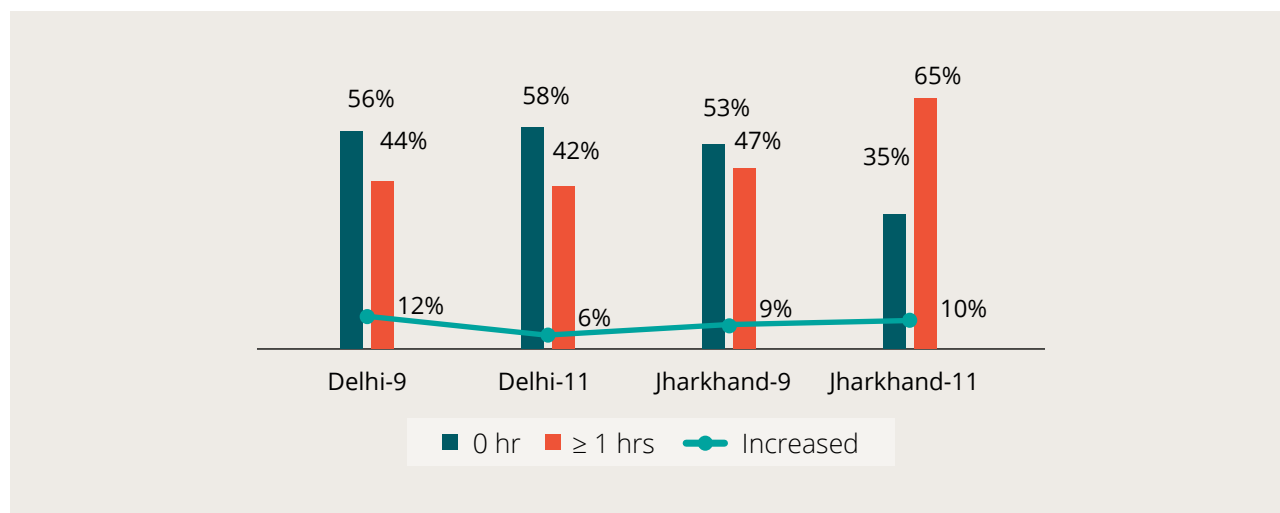
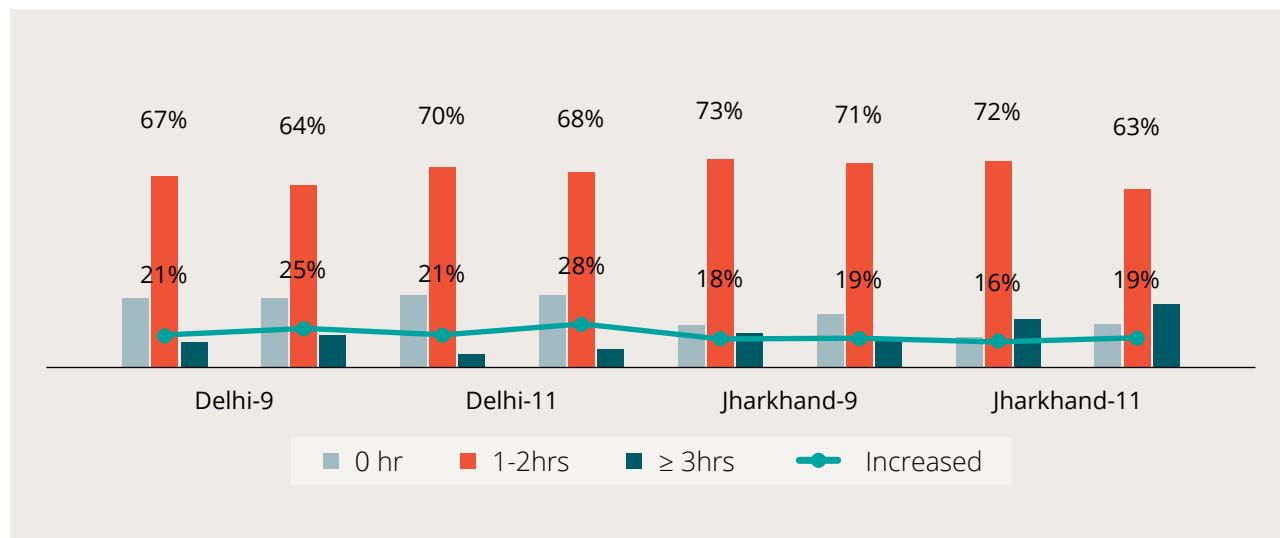
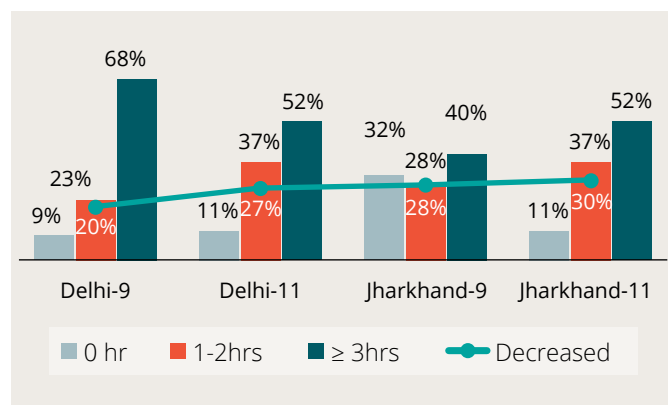


Figure 7: Time Spent in a Day on Cooking and Domestic Work



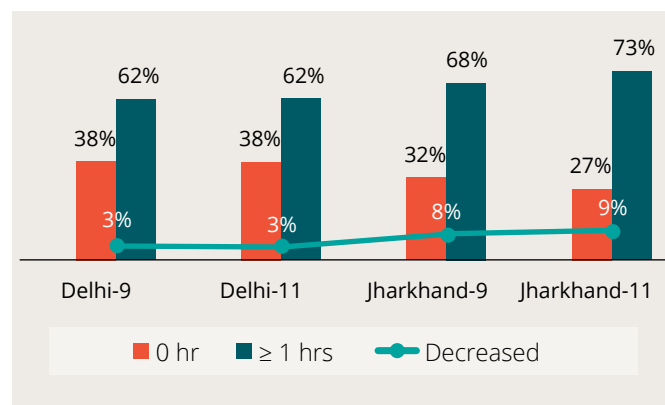
There was a decrease in time spent for homework or studies (as per 20–27 percent of girls from Delhi and 28–30 percent of girls from Jharkhand)

Figure 8: Time Spent in a Day on Studies



along with time for personal care (as per 8–9 percent of girls from Jharkhand and 3 percent of girls from Delhi).

Figure 9: Time Spent in a Day on Personal Care

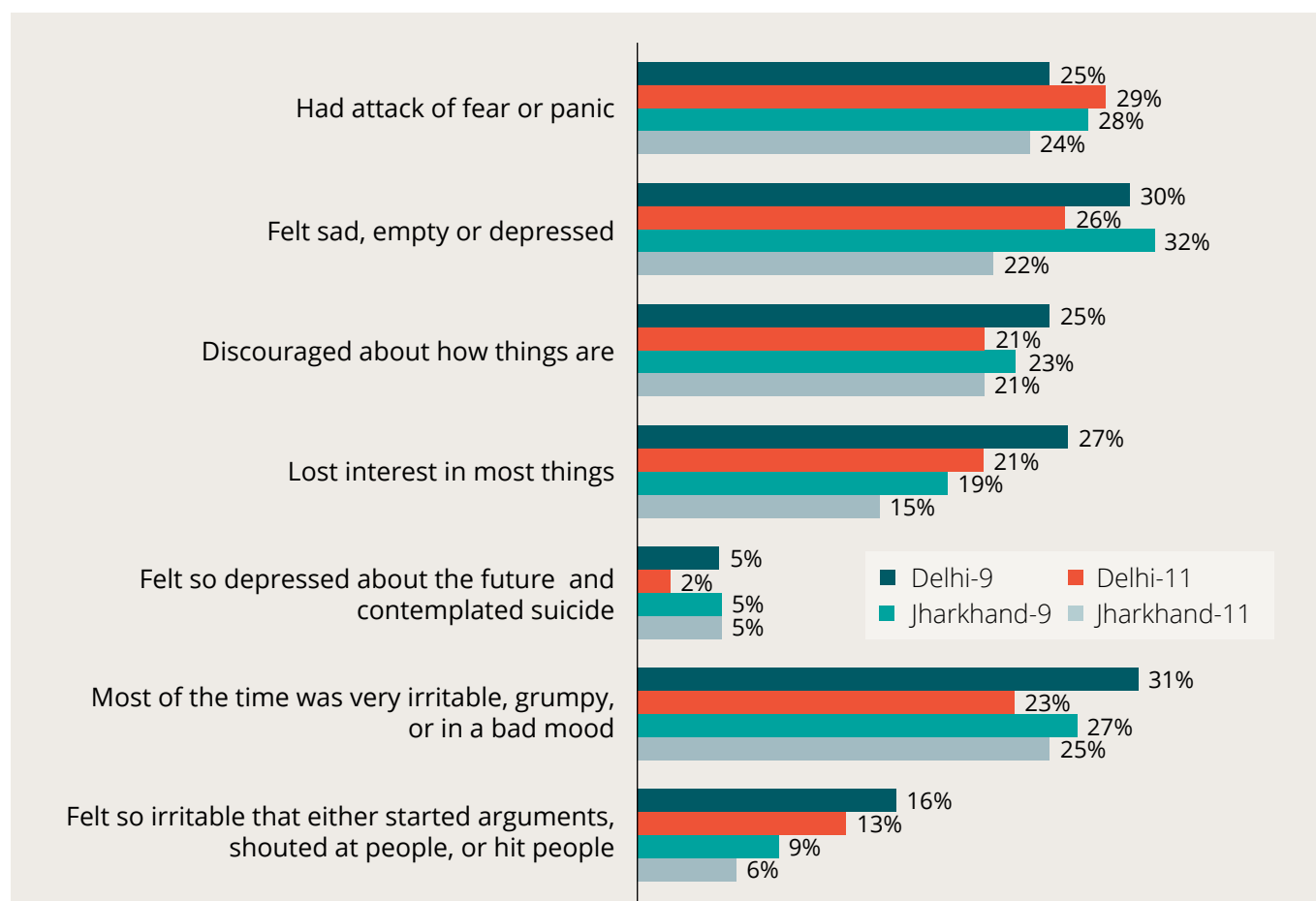


One in four girls reported that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their mental health.

Overall, almost one-fourth of the girls reported anxiety or panic attacks, 22–32 percent of girls reported feeling sad, empty, or depressed and few

even considered attempting suicide. The proportion of girls reporting mental health issues in this survey is higher compared to adolescents in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, where 10–11 percent reported mental health issues (Favara et al., November, 2020).

Figure 10: Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health





Children move to classes after the morning school assembly | Photo credit: Ketaki Nagaraju/ICRW Asia

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SELF-PERCEPTION, GENDER ATTITUDES AND LIFE OUTCOMES

Equitable gender attitudes and high self-esteem helped girls continue studies and delay marriage. The pooled analysis² found that girls who had equitable gender attitudes at baseline, across both the intervention and comparison groups, were found more likely to continue studies and less likely to be married

despite the pandemic. High self-esteem among girls also impacted their possibility of continuing education.

The multivariate results indicate the criticality of empowerment outcomes such as gender attitudes and self-esteem in determining long-term outcomes related to education and marriage for girls. The telephonic survey results present strong evidence on the positive influence of gender equitable attitudes. However, the analysis does not show a similar influence of self-esteem on long-term outcomes related to education and marriage due to limited evidence.

Table 3: Effect of Key Empowerment Outcomes on Current Status of girls regarding Studies, Marriage and Work for Pay

Logistic regression (Coefficient)	Currently studying			Currently married			Currently working for pay		
	Pooled	Delhi	Jharkhand	Pooled	Delhi	Jharkhand	Pooled	Delhi	Jharkhand
Gender attitude (high vs low)	0.114***	0.004	0.102**	-0.092***	-0.010	-0.065	0.018	0.061*	-0.003
Self-esteem (high vs low)	0.102***	0.085*	0.069	-0.007	-0.017	0.022	0.025	-0.014	0.001
Self-efficacy (high vs low)	0.043	0.030	0.126**	-0.007	0.012	-0.003	0.021	0.067	0.061
N	885	382	503	885	382	503	885	382	503

- Pooled: Includes all the girls who were interviewed at baseline, endline and phone survey across region (Delhi/Jharkhand) and class cohorts (Class 9/Class 11 cohorts)
- Each empowerment variable — self-esteem, self-efficacy and gender attitudes is split into low and high by the median value at baseline.
- To understand the effect of three empowerment indicators — self-esteem, self-efficacy, and gender attitudes — on the status of studies, marriage, work for pay of the girls, a logistic regression analysis was conducted after propensity score matching of the girls in the high and low empowerment groups (done separately for self-esteem, self-efficacy, and gender attitudes) by key socio-demographic characteristics at baseline such as girls' age, religion, caste, parents' education, father's occupation, mother's occupation, number of siblings, presence of a male sibling and median wealth.
- The index scores were categorized into high and low from the median value.
- *** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .1

² Pooled analysis increases the sample power but does not account for socio-cultural differences in the two states (Delhi and Jharkhand), which is a limitation. Also, due to data limitations, we could not compare girls from the intervention group to girls from the comparison group, which was the intent of the follow-up study.

DISCUSSION

Findings from the Plan-It Girls follow-up survey on the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of adolescent girls are similar to the findings from other surveys. The telephonic follow-up survey shows increased unpaid care work and more time spent on domestic chores since the pandemic, which is supported by other studies in Bangladesh and India (Amin et al., 2020; Young Lives, 2020). These can act as additional barriers to keeping girls in school or impede their ability to enter and progress in the labor market (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2018).

The proportion of girls reporting mental health issues in this survey was much higher as compared to the Young Lives study (Favara et al., November, 2020); thus, indicating an urgent need to promote the mental well-being of adolescents. When left unaddressed, mental health issues during adolescence are known to have long-lasting effects on the lives of individuals, often limiting their ability to lead fulfilling lives (WHO, 2020).

Due to data limitation, the protective effects of the Plan-It Girls program on girls during the COVID-19 pandemic and long-term outcomes could not be assessed. However, the analysis showed that self-esteem and gender equitable attitudes have a protective effect on long-term outcomes of continuing education and delaying marriage, which was the intent of the program.

The telephonic survey provides a direction vis-à-vis the impact of COVID-19 on lives of adolescent girls; thus, meriting further research. A study with a representative sample can provide greater insights and support development of future gender-integrated programming to minimize the risks and mitigate the effect of crisis scenarios such as COVID-19.

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About ICRW

The International Center for Research for Women (ICRW) is a global research institute, with regional hubs in Washington D.C., United States; New Delhi, India; Kampala, Uganda; and Nairobi, Kenya.

Established in 1976, ICRW conducts research to identify practical, actionable solutions to advance the economic and social status of women and girls around the world.

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Girls discuss their learnings from the Plan-It Girls program | Photo credit: Ketaki Nagaraju/ICRW Asia

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