# Programmatic approaches to the gender-related impacts of COVID-19 on education: Lessons from 2020

Case study: Malala Fund, India Chapter Advocacy and #BacktoSchool Campaign

By Anubhuti Patra, In Country Representative, Malala Fund

MALALA FUND
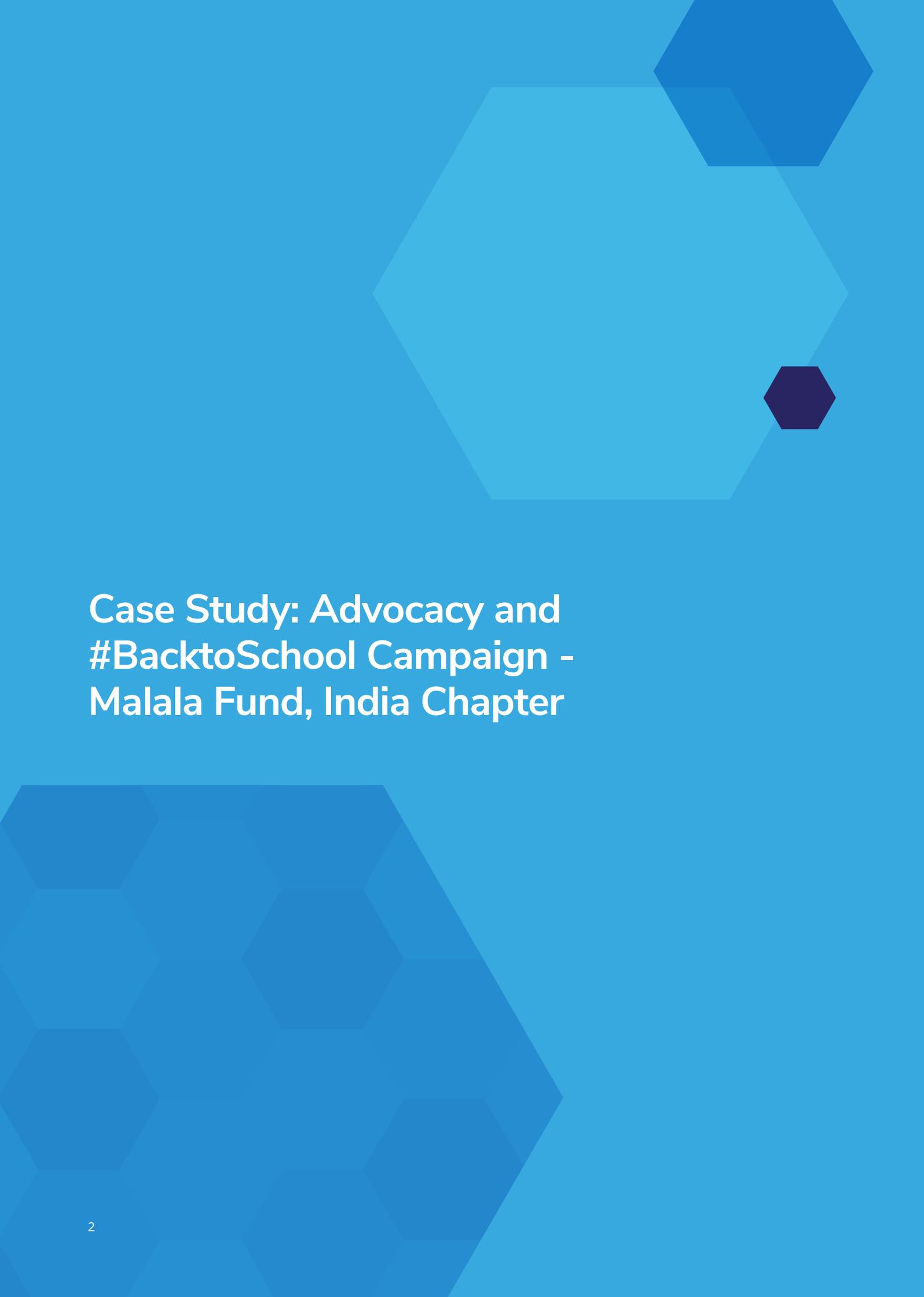
Case Study: Advocacy and #BacktoSchool Campaign - Malala Fund, India Chapter

About the India Chapter Advocacy

The Champions for Girls' Education (a national chapter of Malala Fund's Education Champions Network) is a network of education advocates and activists in India. In India, the network consists of eleven Education Champions who are challenging policies and practices that prevent girls from going to school in their communities. The India Chapter's work is focused on policy reform and advocacy demanding relevant policy changes to promote girls' education, including 12 years of free and compulsory education, greater public expenditure towards school education and quality infrastructure and facilities in schools. This network is facilitated and supported by Malala Fund.

UNGEI | UNITED NATIONS
GIRLS' EDUCATION
INITIATIVE

COVID-19 Context

The first case of COVID-19 in India was reported in January 2020. The government imposed a strict nationwide lockdown from 21 March onwards, which forced schools to close. As a result, children were confronted with the loss of instructional days, no access to midday meals, or school supplies. For girls in particular, school closures triggered an immediate loss of access to sexual and reproductive health services such as access to sanitary napkins and iron and folic acid (IFA) supplementation. The sudden restriction of movement also posed risks to the mental health and safety of children, particularly girls. Just 11 days into the lockdown, Childline, the emergency toll-free service for children run by the government of India, reported 92,000 SOS calls asking for protection from abuse and violence[1].

For students in lockdown, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (responsible for school education) emphasized learning through digital platforms. This mandate did not take into consideration that only 17.6% of the population have access to internet and only 12.5% of females above 5 years of age know how to use the internet[2]. As such, access to education became a significant issue for girls during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially girls in rural areas who have the least access to digital technologies.

Advocacy response to the gender-related impacts of COVID-19 on education

In response to school closures, the India Chapter created a targeted advocacy campaign   which included public mobilization, data collection and dialogues with decision makers. The campaign aimed to influence government commitments to gender-responsive education policy, programming, planning and budgeting to ensure girls do not drop out of school due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While school closures posed a temporary setback to the realisation of girls' rights to free and compulsory education, the campaign supported efforts to build better and more resilient systems for the future.

Drawing attention to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls' education

In response to the emergent needs of school-going girls, Malala Fund's Education Champions Network (ECN) in India held an internal consultation to identify advocacy priorities and formulate an appropriate response. This included supporting the Right to Education Forum in drafting and sending a memorandum to the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister's office advocating for the delivery of mid-day meals to the homes of school children, provision of safe and secure community spaces to children affected by domestic violence, and the supply of menstrual hygiene products to adolescent girls.

In order to draw attention to the violation of rights of students, the Education Champions Network participated in efforts led by SPHERE network[3] to formulate a call to action. The ECN also provided support to the Right to Education (RTE) Forum[4] by appraising the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) about the problems that learners were facing, particularly in the North-Eastern States. Early on, the ECN raised issues of inequity in accessing digital platforms for education, especially for girls. As the pandemic progressed, in addition to supporting national grassroots advocacy groups, the ECN launched a public mobilization campaign.

1   Govt helpline receives 92,000 calls on abuse and violence in 11 days (2020) The Economic Times
2   Key Indicators of Household Social Consumption on Education in India (2018) Government of India
3   Sphere India
4   Right to Education Forum

UNGEI | UNITED NATIONS GIRLS' EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Launch of the #BacktoSchool campaign

The objective of the #BacktoSchool campaign was to protect progress on quality education for girls and ensure girls' education is central to efforts to build back better after COVID-19. The campaign aimed to mobilize public voices through social media by generating evidence around the impact of COVID-19 on girls' education. The campaign targeted policymakers and duty bearers to advocate for gender-responsive school reopening plans. This included calling for reduced costs for schooling, targeted outreach to girls most at risk of dropping out of school, making school infrastructure safe and gender-responsive, addressing trauma and distress caused by prolonged lockdown and exposure to violence, and building resilience for future crises.

A campaign page was developed by Youth Ki Awaaz (an Indian media platform)[5] with the aim of initiating dialogue with young people through information and statistics on the gendered impacts of school closures. The campaign also invited young writers to contribute articles on the impact of COVID-19 on girls' education, their own experiences as a student during lockdown, or what can be demanded from policy-makers. In one month, Youth Ki Awaaz (YKA) published 13 articles submitted by young activists on the campaign page, along with 25 posts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Mapping the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of school-going girls in India

The Center for Budget and Policy Studies conducted a rapid assessment survey[6] on behalf of the ECN to understand the impact of COVID-19 on marginalised girls. The assessment surveyed three thousand girls and boys across five states: Bihar, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Telangana. Data was collected using phone-based or in-person surveys (keeping in mind social distancing requirements and movement restrictions during the lockdown) with school-going children followed by a short discussion with a parent.

The study concluded that most poor households have suffered great economic losses. In addition, 70% of girls interviewed reported that they were engaged in household chores during school closures, which has implications for girls' access to learning broadcasts or individual study time. While 30% of children reported a lack of access to smartphones, this number was significantly lower for girls. Based on the findings of this study, a report lays out a set of recommendations for how government officials at all levels can ensure the safe, gender-responsive reopening of schools.

The study was disseminated through national media, social media, and direct interactions with policy makers. The findings were converted into policy briefs, infographics, and a digital "call to action" which was hosted by Youth Ki Awaaz. The "call to action" aimed to mobilize young citizens to reach out to policy makers and call for safe, gender-responsive school reopening. The findings of the study were also widely disseminated across the country through webinars and roundtables, attended by policymakers, administrators, educationists, and activists.

---

5   Demand Education for Girls with #BackToSchool, Youth Ki Awaaz
6   Girls' education and COVID-19 in India (2020) Malala Fund

UNGEI | UNITED NATIONS GIRLS' EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Advocacy and campaign outcomes

The #BacktoSchool campaign garnered a large scale response through social media. For instance, it had a reach of nearly 400,000 accounts through Instagram and made close to 265,000 impressions through Twitter. Interactive sessions like live events, quizzes, and chats helped to generate this reach. Among young users, educational posts on the impact of school closures on mental health, loss of learning, and access to education generated the most interest. Media outreach across print and digital outlets, including articles, opinion pieces and press releases garnered greater awareness of the gendered impacts of the pandemic. Targeted media outreach was planned around key moments such as National Day of Girl Child and International Human Rights Day, which enabled coverage by more than twenty-four national media outlets. The campaign and insights from Education Champions Network received media coverage in major global and national media outlets: News 18, The Times of India, Economic Times, Devex and the Washington Post[7].

The roundtables and webinars contributed to starting community dialogue on the conditions in the districts as education departments are preparing to open schools. These meetings highlighted the diverse issues that children, caregivers and other stakeholders are facing due to the pandemic and restrictions on movement. The rising trend of child and early marriage and child labour was one concern shared by local stakeholders. Other concerns that emerged included the abuses children are facing at home and the risk of increased dropouts. Stakeholders also discussed the learning gaps appearing in all children, even those who had   access to online education during school closures and gender-related barriers faced by girls in admissions, entrance exams and matriculation. In Bihar state, the roundtable discussions brought together policymakers who promised to mobilize support towards developing a state policy for education with a gender focus.

7   Examining India's new education policy through a gender lens (2020) Devex
     India coronavirus school closures: How the pandemic is endangering the future of India's most vulnerable students, especially girls (2020) Washington Post
     '54% girls in Uttar Pradesh uncertain of return to school after Covid-19 (2020) The Times of India
     कोरोना की वजह से दुनिया की दो करोड़ लड़कियां शायद कभी स्कूल नहीं लौट पाएंगी: रिपोर्ट 2020) The Economic Times
     देश के 5 राज्यों में हुआ सर्वे, स्कूली लड़कियों पर कोरोना का भयावह असर, करोड़ों छोड़ेंगी पढ़ाई (2020) News 18

UNGEI | UNITED NATIONS GIRLS' EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Learnings and challenges

An internal review process with the Education Champions network found lower engagement with the #BacktoSchool campaigns at the subnational level among target audience groups at the subnational level. This may be due to a lack of familiarity with online platforms and using technology, which restricted their contribution to the discussions.

At the same time, during the COVID-19 pandemic, advocacy and campaigning activities shifted to the digital space. The government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), institutions and agencies were all distributing information online, leading to a saturation of content. This made campaigning online challenging, due to the volume of competing events, digital calls to action, and social media campaigns.

Looking beyond the immediate COVID-19 crisis

In the context of COVID-19 school closures, online education has emerged as a common substitute. However, children from underprivileged backgrounds are facing the biggest challenges to continued learning. In India, numerous girls at the intersections of gender, class and other structural hierarchies like caste, have little or no access to devices like smartphones or tablets. They also may be the first to be whisked away from their studies towards domestic duties.

The planning for the second phase of the COVID-19 campaign is already underway. The campaign will continue focusing on gender-responsive planning to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on girls' education. Initial study reports[8] suggest that significant numbers of girls from low income families may not return to school, especially at secondary and higher secondary level. The campaign will therefore focus on girls' enrollment and retention, as an immediate measure, whilst calling on state and district governments to implement measures such as bridge education and accelerated learning to close the gender gaps in learning losses.

Going forward, the Education Champions Network will continue calling for action to alleviate the economic effects of the pandemic to help families prioritise education and protect the gains made for girls' education in particular, and build back India's education system with gender at the centre to ensure every girl can learn[9].

---

8   Six million children out of school in India due to the impact of COVID-19; girls most affected (2020) National Herald India;
     Understanding How The COVID-19 Crisis Impacted Girls' Education In India (2020) Feminism in India
9   Girls' education and COVID-19 in India, Malala Fund

UNGEI | UNITED NATIONS GIRLS' EDUCATION INITIATIVE
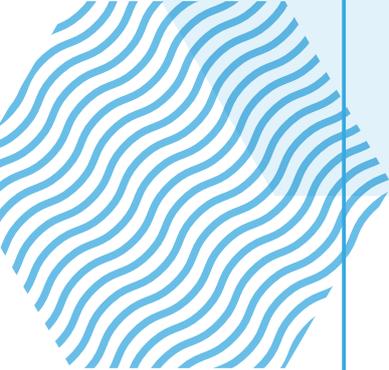
More resources to explore:

Girls' education and COVID-19 in India, Malala Fund

Understanding How The COVID-19 Crisis Impacted Girls' Education In India (2020) Feminism in India

Demand Education for Girls with #BackToSchool Youth Ki Awaaz

Demand Dialogue Around The Provisions Of NEP With Youth Ki Awaaz

**Contact the author:**

Anubhuti Patra, anubhuti@malalafund.org
In Country Representative, Malala Fund

Photo credit/caption:

Page 6 - © Malala Fund. District Dissemination in Kushinagar District, Uttar Pradesh.

Page 7 - © Malala Fund. District dissemination in Hardoi District, Uttar Pradesh.

UNGEI | UNITED NATIONS GIRLS' EDUCATION INITIATIVE

UNGEI | UNITED NATIONS
GIRLS' EDUCATION
INITIATIVE
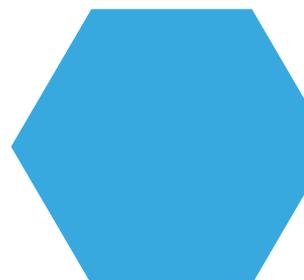
United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI)
3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017

/UNGEI

/UNGEI

/ungei

/ungirlseducation

ungei.org

info@ungei.org