

Virtual Classrooms: Challenges handled by the Schools and Muslim Girls in COVID-19 times: A Study of 10 Muslim Managed Schools of Vadodara

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Abstract

The pandemic Covid-19, that the world is facing has terrifying and severe impact which has stunned the entire world, distressing all the sectors of the economy. According to the UNICEF report¹, the coronavirus pandemic will badly affect over 290 million students across 22 countries.

With each passing day, with no direct solution to break the pandemic of Covid-19, the educational sector not only will have a temporary impact on the continuity of education for 285 million² Indian students but also will provoke a comprehensive economic and societal consequences. The structure of teaching and learning are very much affected by these closures and lockdowns. To combat with the situation, digital education only seems to be a practical option, till the classrooms recommence, which is initiated by the schools to ensure the continuity of education among the students.

Bearing in mind the participation of students in virtual classes, the participation of female students in Indian context, is limited as compared to the male students, and more precisely the participation of females belonging to the Muslim minority is an issue of concern, where the educational progress of Muslim girls is much lower according to the statistical Census data 2011.

This paper addresses the issues, challenges and measures adopted by the Muslim managed schools in Vadodara city, to support and to ensure continuity of education of Muslim girls studying in their higher secondary classes and the problems encountered by the Muslim girls in attending simulated teaching – learning process.

Keywords

Virtual Classes, Pandemic, digital education, higher secondary

Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic that the entire world is facing today is one of the largest public health risks, which has led its impact over, all the sectors of the country including education. The world saw that the pandemic has affected 185 countries² of the world by the period of March 2020. Because of the hit of the pandemic situations, majority of the countries had to momentarily shut down its educational institutions such as schools, colleges and universities. The prolonged shut down of the schools and universities has affected the educational system as a whole. The influence of this shut down and closures of the educational institutions will leave a deep effect among the nations wherein the education as a sector is handling the situations of high dropout rate among its students. This epidemic situation, has called for re-evaluation of our educational system, which demands for a comprehensive and inclusive education system. The situations have also laid down its long-term effect on the social institutions as well, which is a cause for social inequalities. The lockdowns and closures of schools have resulted in increase in dropout rates of girls. According to the Plan India's Executive Director in his interview with the Hindustan Times, published on 13th June ,2020 "The lockdown is burdening girls with household chores and sibling care," Additionally it was stated that increase in dropout rates of girls from schools will also leads to increase in social problems like early marriages and child labor.

Explicitly, focusing on the educational status of Muslim girls, many earlier researches done in this context have portrayed the lower educational status among Muslim girls. Hasan and Menon³ in their research volume, titled, "Unequal Citizens: A study of Muslim Women in India", the highlights the major problems impacting the lives of Indian Muslim women, the authors says that the Muslim community is of the belief that educating a girl child in the family will not be beneficial to the family. Additionally, the authors write parental attitude among Muslims is a responsible factor, for not sending their daughters for

education, as they are of the belief that it would be difficult for the parents to find a suitable marriage partner for the educated girl.

Recognizing the difficulties in the education of Muslims in India and suggest some recommendation so as to improve the educational status among Muslims, the study by Shazli and Asma⁴ points that Muslims in India lag behind in many aspects like education, employment and associate the lack of education as the responsible factor for backwardness among Muslim community. The significant researches⁵⁻⁹ done in this context, discloses that the cause of the educational backwardness among Muslim females is due to various sociocultural beliefs and practices, gender inequalities, teaching – learning process in schools. Amidst this situation of covid-19, wherein there is a rise of increase in the problems like poverty, unemployment among various families, which has hampered the educational progress of children within these families. On one hand, there is loss of family income for many families, many earning members of the family are searching new ways and means of earning their living, to satisfy the needs of themselves and their dependents, which ultimately has laid down its impact on the educational status of girls, specifically those from Muslim community, where education of girls is yet not considered as primary, In this pandemic situations , many girls have to compromise with their education, they are expected to participate in the household responsibilities and sibling care, because of the closure of schools and on the other hand the educational institutions are trying their best to retain students with the school, ensuring the students do not leave the schools because of financial constraints in the family, using digital platform for conducting online classes so as to keep the academic pace. The government through its policies have instructed the school authorities not to demand for fees from the parents.

The previous research as quoted above on the educational development of Muslim girls is demonstrating the issues such as lack of education and awareness among Muslims; the attitude of parents towards the education of their daughters; as the responsible factors for the lower educational position. Considering these situations, the contemporary paper looks in to the issues and challenges faced by the school authorities to continue their academic work through using digital technology on one hand, while on the other discusses the problems handled by the Muslim girls studying in higher secondary classes in the selected schools for the study.

Objectives of the study

- 1) To find out the measures adopted by the Muslim managed schools in recommencing the academic work for higher secondary classes in COVID times.
- 2) To understand the issues faced by Muslim girls in attending virtual classes.
- 3) To explore the challenges faced by the School authorities to conduct the online classes.

Size of the Sample

For Schools: Using stratified sampling method, the study was undertaken in 10 Muslim managed schools of Vadodara. Further explaining, total number of schools managed by Muslim trusts/ organizations or administrative bodies in Gujarat, the number of Muslim managed schools were stratified, further from the total number of schools, the number of Muslim managed schools with higher secondary section were stratified, which is diagrammatically explained in Figure-1.

For Muslim girls studying in Higher Secondary Classes:

Convenient sampling technique was used to identify the girls, from each school the sample size of 3 girls were chosen, hence in total 30 Muslim girls from 10 selected schools under the study were interviewed.

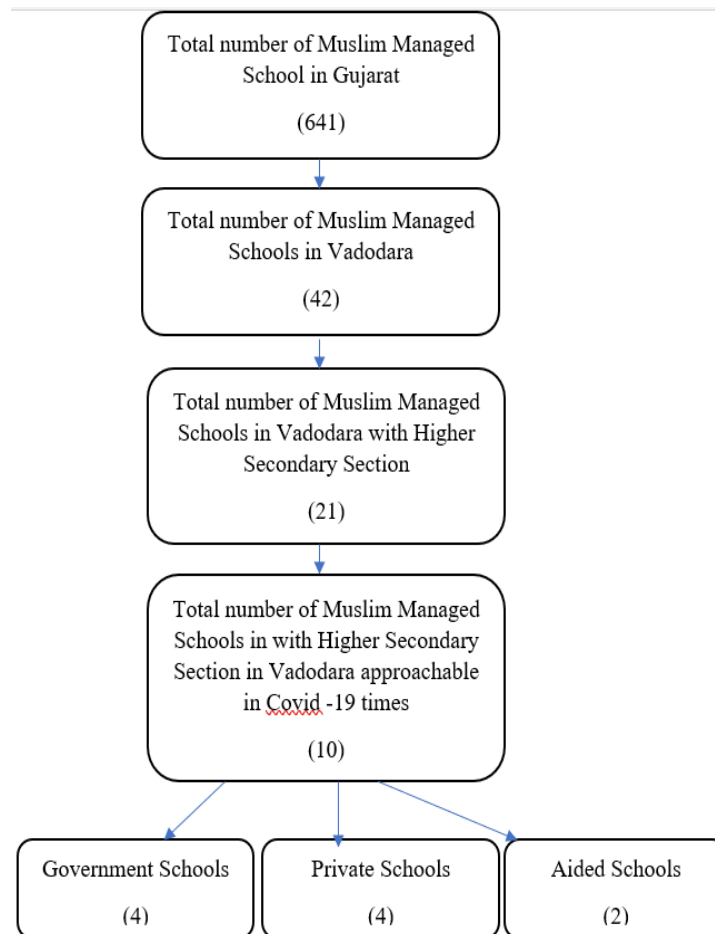


Figure 1: Showing the stratification of the sample

Data Collection tool and process

The researcher had telephonically contacted the head of the schools with prior appointment and informing them about the purpose of data collection, using an unstructured interview schedule with open ended questions. Similarly, the responses from the Muslim girls were also telephonically steered, with their prior consent through convenient sampling.

Duration of the Study:

The collection of information and documenting the case studies were undertaken during the period of March 2020 onwards.

Ethics followed in conducting a research

- 1) The data shared by the respondents are documented as narrated by them,
- 2) Confidentiality of the respondents is preserved by not citing their names in the case studies.
- 3) Confidentiality of the respondents is preserved by not naming the schools

- 4) Respondents were well informed in advance about the purpose of collecting the data.
- 5) Respondents were interviewed taking prior appointments.

School- A

School A, which is a government school situated in a sub-urban locality towards the East direction of the Vadodara city. The schools cater to the student population both boys and girls, belonging to the lower- and middle-income group families from the surrounding localities and other parts of the city as well. Initially the school planned to conduct the classes using the Google Meet application, however, the mode was not feasible.

Challenges faced by schools in conducting virtual classes

The problems that the school teachers faced was lack of smartphones with the students and also the unavailability and non affordability of internet facilities. It was reported that there is only one smart phone in the family and the phone is usually with the father. Since the phone is not at home, the students could not participate in the scheduled online classes. To overcome this issue, the teachers began to record their videos and started sending it to the students of their classes on the What's App group. So, the children can download the videos sent by their teachers and study, whenever the phones are accessible to them at home. The school authorities had a difficult time in the initial phase, as the teachers were not acquainted with the online teaching methods, hence it was a difficult time for teachers also to learn and conduct online teaching classes.

Participation of Muslim girls in virtual classes

Particularly focusing on participation of girls in online classes, the teachers reported that only 20-30% girls participated in the online classes, as it was not feasible for girls to participate in the online google classes because of household chores and lack of availability of phones at home. On deriving Muslim girls' responses from the school, the girls said that they cannot have a separate phone hence they cannot attend the classes, if the phone is not available at home. Moreover, some girls also shared that they are not able to attend the classes, as they have to help their mothers in the household chores.

Thus, because of the lack of availability of the smart phones at home, due to lack of income of the parents to afford a distinct phone for the education of girls, and responsibility of the domestic work, girls were not regular in their virtual classes, which has affected their education.

The attendance and regularity of the Muslim girls remains an issue in the school, regardless of various facilitative measures from the school authorities.

School-B

School B located in the East direction of Vadodara city, which is a Gujarati medium school only for girls. The schools also have adopted the online teaching methods, wherein the classes are conducted by using Zoom application for standard XI to XII.

Challenges faced by schools in conducting virtual classes

The school lacks the Wi-Fi internet facilities in the school, and hence the teachers were using their own mobile data pack to conduct their own classes. It was stated that in the initial stage, training of the teachers on using zoom platform for conducting the classes was undertaken and then the teachers began to use the application for the teaching purpose.

Participation of Muslim girls in virtual classes

Participation of girls were described as 30-40% in the online class, stating the inaccessibility of the mobile phones. Some parents could not afford an additional mobile phone which can be kept at home for the online teaching learning. Some girls shared that they do not have a separate room in their house, wherein they can sit and attend their class- thus because of the surrounding disturbances, they were not attending the online classes. Thus, it can be inferred that in this school as well the academic performance of the Muslim girls was affected.

School -C

Towards the North direction of the city area, School C is conducting the online classes in adopting three different ways: a) Through What's App group b) Through Google Meet c) Through You Tube Videos.

Challenges faced by schools in conducting virtual classes

It was described that the teachers began by using Google Meet application, but the outcome was not productive as the participation of the students were minimal, as the student population comprises of lower- and middle-income group families, hence there was inaccessibility of phones with students both with boys and girls studying in the school. Dealing to resolve this issue, the school authorities instructed school teachers to make short videos and post them in the What's-app group, so created as per respective subjects.

Another alternative the schools were given the task of uploading the videos on the official YouTube channel, so that the children can download the videos as per their time and space.

The school authorities also suggested giving hard copy of the assignment as another alternative for those students who were unable to use any of the above alternative. Herein, children were called up of course- with strict instruction of not coming in groups and collect their assignment copies from their subject teachers.

The authorities also reported, that the expenses of the stationery and other related expenses are borne by the school authorities from the Zakat fund- The Fund that is collected by the Muslim trust/ organizations during the holy month of Ramzaan.

Participation of Muslim girls in virtual classes

With special focus on girl's participation, 36-40% of girl's participation was noted, the reasons shared was the responsibilities at the domestic front, sibling care as well as the inaccessibility to the smart phones/ technological gadgets at home. Since, majority of the student population were from the lower- and middle-income group families, the non affordability was also a contributing reason hampering the educational advancement of the Muslim girls in the school, irrespective of the tremendous effort put in by the school authorities- to an extent of reducing the burden of stationery expenses from the students and managing from the available funds.

School-D

Challenges faced by schools in conducting virtual classes

School D, a private school, towards the North direction in Vadodara city. The teachers of the school described that like other schools, the school also has initiated online teaching learning, but the school authorities started receiving complaints from the parents and the students. Students were not able to participate in the class, due to lack of facilities at their end. There were many complaints received from the parents, stating that they have more than two or three children studying and since all the classes are conducted online, parents are not able to afford the cost of new smart phone or even the internet connection as well. It was stated that the school is struggling with the online teaching methodologies and the teachers are also not satisfied with the approach adopted. About the participation of students, there was nearly 10-15% of students participating in the classes. After the detection Covid-19 cases, the school teachers were also hesitant to come to school and the school had declared work from home for teachers as well.

Participation of Muslim girls in virtual classes

On taking responses from girls, most of the girls shared that they have the younger siblings studying, and in order to help their younger siblings and to facilitate them in attending their own virtual classes, they had to forego their own class schedules. Some girls responded that because of the financial scarcity in the family, parents are not able to make internet facilities.

School- E

The School E caters to student population from middle and upper middle-income group families. It was specified that the school had initiated online classes from the month of April 2020. Along with the online classes, the teachers were also engaged in one- to one counselling to students of the school telephonically and through Zoom application. To ensure, the educational status of students, online meeting was conducted with parents.

Challenges faced by schools in conducting virtual classes

Like other schools, this school has also faced challenge wherein parents have complaint that they are not able to afford an android phone and the internet data for their children, as they have more than two to three children studying. Another challenge faced by the authorities that students living in joint families do not have a separate area for their online classes, and hence cannot purely concentrate in the classes.

Participation of Muslim girls in virtual classes

Particularly focusing on girl's participation, it was stated that 95% of the girls were having access to technological facilities and were able to use it conveniently. They shared that they were regular in attending their virtual classes and was very suitably able to handle the online classes. This shows that in this school, the Muslim girls were able to participate regularly in the online classes, whereas, some girls shared that the only problem that they face is lack of separate space for attending the online classes in their house.

School- F

The School F, situated in a sub-urban locality in the western part of the Vadodara city, also had initiated the academic classes through Zoom application.

Challenges faced by schools in conducting virtual classes

Deriving the response from this school also encountered similar problems of not having access to smartphones for children and hence the teachers, then adopted What's App option, where they recorded their videos and send it to all the students of their classes.

Participation of Muslim girls in virtual classes

This school had also witnessed less participation from the girls of about 5-10 %, as majority of the girls did not have access to mobile phones with them.

School- G

School G, in the west direction of Vadodara city, manages its online classes of secondary and higher secondary classes from standard IX to XII and send the PDF documents to the parents of the students of the primary classes.

Challenges faced by schools in conducting virtual classes

The school authorities have also received complaints from parents to not conduct online classes and to adopt some other mechanism. Parents are unable to afford the phones and the internet data packs for the children, as there are 2-3 children studying in the school. It is difficult for them to manage with the schedule of the online classes, especially in case of family with more than one child. Teachers were also trained for conducting classes, but for the trust it is also difficult to carry out the salary expenses of the teachers, as the school cannot ask for fees from the students.

Participation of Muslim girls in virtual classes

Participation of girls in online classes is less, because of domestic responsibilities as one reason, and in cases where there are younger siblings, and because of lack of access to technology by parents, the girls at the cost of missing their classes, help their younger siblings.

School- H**Challenges faced by schools in conducting virtual classes**

The School H, in the rural area of Vadodara city has not yet began with online classes as student's population are not having access to the smart phones and the teachers are also not acquainted with online teaching methods. The school distributes teaching pamphlets to the students and gradually some teachers send video recording through the What's App group to the students, yet they have not started with online teaching classes.

Participation of Muslim girls in virtual classes

On deriving the reviews, it was found that, since majority of the girls from the rural areas, there were internet connectivity issues. Hence the school did not conduct any online classes, but with the study materials distributed by the school and the girls pursued their studies.

School-I

School I, in rural locality of Vadodara, is managing its online classes during Covid- 19 period by sending videos through What's App group for the primary section, created separately for boys and girls according to their classes. For secondary classes, Google meet application is used by the teachers for conducting the online classes. For the Higher Secondary classes, YouTube is used and the link for the same is shared to the students through their What's App group.

Challenges faced by schools in conducting virtual classes

Irrespective of various mediums adopted for the different classes, it was narrated that the teachers and the management are also facing challenges as the students especially girls are not techno savvy and there is always a disturbance in classes as there is low internet connectivity in the village. There are also students whose parents cannot afford the electronic accessories; hence it is difficult for the authorities to meet with the individual differences. With specific emphasis on participation of students, it was stated students who have access to technological facilities, do participate in the classes and are able to utilize it effectively.

Participation of Muslim girls in virtual classes

On taking reviews of Muslim girls, pertaining to the participation of in virtual classes, majority of the girls shared that they were not able to attend the online classes as they do not have access to smart phones and there is always an internet connectivity issue in the village, hence the process of virtual classes was not having smooth process, resulting in less participation of Muslim girls.

School- J

The School J, in rural region of Vadodara city, also runs the online classes through What's App group and You tube for the higher secondary classes.

Challenges faced by schools in conducting virtual classes

Particularly for the challenges faced, it was stated that during the lockdown phase, there was no income for some families, and it was difficult for parents to afford the smartphones and the internet data packs. Thus, majority of children were not able to attend the online classes. The teachers also have taken up counselling facilities with the parents of the girl students studying in higher secondary classes, as the girls' participation is less due to increase in responsibilities at domestic front. But because of the non affordability of the parents, there was no consistency or scheduled followed in the virtual classes, the students were using government of Gujarat telecast on DD Girnar for studying various concepts.

Participation of Muslim girls in virtual classes

From the review, it was observed that majority of girls pursued their education from the telecast on DD Girnar and no online sessions were undertaken by the schools.

Comparative view of all the Schools Chosen for the Study

No	Type of School	Approach adopted	Challenges encountered
1	Government	Recording of videos by teachers and sharing on the What's App of children, so that they can watch the videos when phone is accessible	1) Lack of smartphones at home, phone is with parents and unaffordability of parents. 2) Because of the lack of availability of the smart phones at home, due to lack of income of the parents to afford a distinct phone for the education of girls, and responsibility of the domestic work, girls were not regular in their virtual classes, which has affected their education.
2	Government	Zoom application for secondary and Higher	Teachers were not trained for online teaching.

		Secondary classes	<p>30-40% girls participated in online classes.</p> <p>Inaccessibility of mobile phones with girls</p> <p>Lack of separate space for attending classes</p>
3	Government	<p>Through What's App</p> <p>Through Google Meet</p> <p>Uploading YouTube videos</p> <p>Hard copies of the assignments</p>	<p>36-40% girls participated in online classes.</p> <p>Inaccessibility and unaffordability of mobile phones</p>
4	Private	Online classes	<p>Parents complaint lack of mobile phones, as there are more than two children in the families and cannot afford to have new phone for the classes.</p> <p>Financial scarcity, sibling care and domestic responsibilities</p>
5	Private	Online classes	<p>Many complaints by parents for not being able to afford phone for each child in case of more than 2 children</p> <p>Girls living in joint families were not getting a</p>

			separate space for their online classes.
6	Private	Online classes	5-10% of girls' participation, majority of girls did not have access to the smart phones
7	Private	Online classes	Complaints by parents for not being able to afford phone for each child in case of more than 2 children. Participation of girls is less, to help their younger siblings in their online classes and missing their own.
8	Private	No online classes Distributing study materials	Lack of access of mobile phones.
9	Aided	What's App videos	Lack of mobile phones and low internet connectivity
10	Private	What's App videos	Lack of mobile phones at home. Participation of girls is limited due to domestic responsibilities.

Table 1: Comparative view of Schools under study

Findings of the Study:**Findings related to the Schools:**

- From the findings of the 10 schools of Vadodara city, chosen for the study, it can be said that all the schools, whether private or government has adopted different online teaching methodologies.
- Another applicable finding that the paper suggests that some of the schools were not properly well equipped with the technological facilities- hence the teachers had to use their own internet plans to conduct the virtual classes, this finding is in support with the study done by Islam and Midya¹⁰ explaining that meagre infrastructural amenities within the schools are accumulating lower academic performance of the students.
- Widely, the schools chosen for the study were facing the principal challenge that is lack of student's participation in virtual classes due to loss of income of parents wherein parents are not able to afford the android phones and the expenses of the internet data packs.
- The response derived from the school authorities show that the school authorities have tried various measures, for the continuation of the academics, yet are facing challenges in organizing and getting maximum students participation in virtual classes.
- The paper also suggests that there was only one private school, out of all the schools chosen for the study, which were able to fetch optimum participation in virtual classes from all students including girls and were able to manage efficiently their academics in online classes.
- The school authorities are also very much aware and are concerned about the girls studying in higher secondary classes, and hence, they have adopted counselling services for the parents and for the girls themselves so as to retain these girls in schools.

Findings related to Muslim girls of Higher Secondary Classes.

- The responses from the Muslim girls, show that in majority of the schools covered under the study, participation of girls in online classes is less, because of increase in responsibilities in household and sibling's care.

- The responses derived from the 30 Muslim girls studying in Higher Secondary classes indicates that the students are not having access to or are not able to utilize the online teaching methodologies, which is affecting their overall performance.
- From the reply of Muslim girls interviewed for the purpose of the study, it can be said that these girls were not satisfied with this entire process of virtual classes, as they are unable to concentrate during their classes, which has its impact in their subject clarity.

Conclusion

- The findings of the study reflect lesser participation of Muslim girls in the online classes due to reasons like reduce of family income because of prolonged lockdown and hence parents are not able to afford the digital platform for education. As noted in many cases, the number of children is more in the family and thus it becomes very difficult to manage the online classes as they cannot afford to have the gadgets to facilitate the children's education. In majority of the cases, it is also seen that the girls are more pressurized of managing the household chores at home and at the same time helping their younger siblings in their online classes, and thus they miss out their own classes.
- The previous researches undertaken in the area of education of Muslim girls points that the educational progress among the Muslim community is lower, the magnitude of which has seen to an increase level from the findings of the paper during this Covid-19 pandemic situations.
- Amidst this situation, it is very important to advocate as well as to do counselling to the parents pertaining to the girl child education by the teachers, the school authorities, the educationist from the community, so as to reduce the number of girl's dropout from the schools. Simultaneously the school authorities, the community activists, the educationist should identify and try to help such families by supporting them financially from the Zakat funds that they cater to in the holy month of Ramzaan, because keeping girls in schools is equally important as spreading awareness on health and hygiene and to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

Acknowledgement

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Annexure-I

Dear Sir/ Madam,

Request you to provide me with following details as the researcher is writing an academic paper on. Muslim Girl's Education in COVID-19 times: Few Case Studies from Vadodara. To assure you, all the information will be used only for the academic purpose only.

- 1) What measures are taken by the school authorities to support the education of girls studying in higher secondary classes during COVID-19?
- 2) What are the challenges faced to support education of girls studying in higher secondary classes during COVID-19?
- 3) Are these girls having access to the technological facilities? If yes, are they able to utilize these facilities?
- 4) Your Suggestions/ remarks/ observation that could be of help for the researcher. (You can also share few of your experience)