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FINDINGS

The primary objective of the study was to examine the socio-economic status and determinants of secondary school dropout among Muslim students in North-East Delhi. Specifically, it aimed to analyse the various reasons for dropping out, evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and estimate the loss of potential earnings due to early dropout from school. This study was based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected by direct interviews of dropped-out students in North-East district of Delhi through a well-structured questionnaire using the Multi-Stage Systemic Random Sampling technique. The questionnaire contained a total of four sections and 105 questions. Section 1 deals with Socio-Economic status of dropped out students and Section 2 deals with Reasons that leads to Muslims Students dropped out from school. Section 3 deals with Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on dropout and their related reasons and Section 4 deals with Current economic condition of the respondents and challenges faced by them. A five-point Likert scale was used to collect reasons for dropping out among Muslims. Ranging from lowest to highest, where 1= Not at all, 2= Slightly, 3= Moderately, 4 = Very, 5 = Extremely. The samples of 466 dropped out responded from 18 schools of Delhi during the months of May to December 2023. The data has been analysed in Stata and SPSS by using different statistical tools like, descriptive statistics, logistic regression, chi-square test, Mann-Witney U test, etc. In addition, the principal component analysis (PCA) was used for data reduction and to identify underlying variables measured by the observed factors. The reliability and internal consistency of the questionnaire were checked through Cronbach's Alpha. Apart from that, we used a similar kind of methodology of the World Bank (2011) for estimating lifetime forgone earnings of dropped out students.

The main finding was that the majority of school dropouts were female, primarily from the OBC category and economically weaker backgrounds. The highest dropout rate almost 50% was reported in grade 9, at the age of 15, the point where secondary education begins. Most students had attended government and Hindi-medium schools. While these students received an average scholarship of only ₹1,833 annually, they had to spend around ₹27,427 per year on education, indicating that government aid was grossly insufficient. Beside this, the finding of logistic regression revealed that **gender, social group, type of family, birth order, age, long distance, parental education, income, and employment** were important **determinants** that significantly impact secondary school Muslim dropout in North-East Delhi.

The study revealed that the primary reasons for dropping out among Muslims at secondary school were *lack of awareness regarding the importance of education, low family income, lack of interest in studies, poor academic performance, and peer group effects*. Additionally, the most important reasons among Muslim males were *earning better income through self-*

employment, lack of interest in studies, and engagement in economic activities whereas engaged in household chores, females were encouraged to imagine their future as centred towards the house, due to safety and securities issues, sibling care responsibilities, lack of sanitary facility and dirty girls toilets were the main reasons among Muslim females who dropped out from the secondary school. A total of 41% dropped out due to the ritual of purdah in their family whereas 21% of them dropped out because of early marriage. The result of the rank analysis revealed that individual reasons were the foremost cause of dropping out among Muslims than economic and socio-cultural reasons were second and third caused of dropping out among Muslims at secondary level of education in Delhi.

The prominent finding of third objective revealed that, 66% of respondents dropped out due to covid-19 pandemic whereas 34% due to reasons other than pandemic. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis is overwhelmingly on females as compared to males in terms of majority of females (78%) dropping out of secondary school due to this pandemic. A Chi-square test was performed to examine the association between socio-demographic variables including gender and social group with dropouts due to the COVID-19 crisis. There was a statistically significant difference between males and females who dropped out due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests a significant relationship between social class and dropout due to COVID-19. It was observed that, on average, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is more on dropout respondents who belong to OBC categories as compared to general category dropout respondents. The findings of the research indicated that the main reasons leading to the high dropout among Muslim students due to the COVID-19 epidemic were *loss of parental income due to disruption of economic activities, conventional classes shifted towards online classes, lack of access to internet facilities, huge learning loss, lack of digital skills and smartphone.* The primary reasons for Muslim males dropping out during pandemic were the *loss of parents' income followed by huge learning loss in online classes due to internet connectivity issues and migration to their home places.* Conversely, for Muslim females were *more burden of household chores, faced a gender digital divide in terms of they could not getting an equal chance to attend online classes as compared to their brothers, early and forced marriage in the time of COVID-19 crisis.*

The study indicated that ,out of the total dropped out respondents above 50% of them were working and those who were working most of them (70%) were males whereas (30%) of them were females. Most of them work as daily wagers and casual labour. They started work on average at the age of 16 years due to no legal compulsion after the age of 14 years. Average *loss of potential earnings of Muslim respondents* who dropped out of secondary school would be around *33 lakh rupees in their entire working lifetime.* However, for male dropped out respondents this loss will be nearly 35 lakh rupees while for female earning loss would be 28 lakh rupees in their whole working life span. However, the cost of secondary school dropout in terms of loss of potential earning would be larger for those respondents who dropped out in grade 9 on average *3.5 million rupees in contrast to 2.9 million rupees* for those who dropped out in grade 12. Lastly, the majority of dropped out respondents encountered challenges after dropping out of secondary school with regards to dropout leads to a negative impact on their future life because of lower earnings and unemployment issues. More than 60% dropped out respondents faced problems in household management in terms of due to a lack of decision-making ability and dependence on their family members or spouse increased their emotional distress.