

## Mapping girls' route from school to work

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ASER 2023 included a section on young people's access to and use of digital technology. This part of the survey included both self-reported questions on ownership and use of smartphones, as well as actual tasks that sampled youth were asked to do using a smartphone.

There were five such tasks in all. Among these, one asked the youth to use Google Maps to figure out how long it would take to get from their current location to the district bus stand on a two- or four-wheeler.

Among all the youth who were given the digital tasks, fewer than 4 of every 10 were able to answer this one correctly (37%) – by far the poorest performance on any of these tasks. Moreover, this statistic hides enormous gender differences. Almost half of the males who were asked this question could use the app to figure out how long it would take to get to the district bus stand (49%). Only half that proportion – 25% of girls and young women – could do so.

The gender disparity gets worse. Not all youth in the ASER 2023 sample were administered these digital tasks. As part of the survey process, we asked youth whether they could bring a smartphone – their own, a family member's, or a neighbour's – to do these tasks. During the process of piloting the tools, we noted that using a familiar phone provided an added level of comfort and allowed youth to focus on the task at hand rather than on the device. Hence, only those youth who were able to bring a smartphone were asked to do the digital tasks. Overall, more than two thirds of the sample could do so. But when we examine the proportion of males and females who were able to access a smartphone for the short time that it took to attempt these tasks, the gap is considerable – 73% of sampled males could do so, versus 62% of the females. If we assume that the youth who could not bring a smartphone had low access to the technology, and were therefore unlikely to have solved this question correctly, this means that of the sample overall, 36% males and just 16% females in the 14-18 age group were able to use Google Maps to figure out the time it would take to reach the district bus stand.

On the other hand, when we examine other sections of the ASER 2023 findings, a very different conclusion emerges. For example, the data shows that across the 28 districts that the survey reached this year, just 13.2% of sampled youth are currently not enrolled in any educational institution – decrease from the first ASER Beyond Basics in 2017, which found that 14.4% of youth in this age group were not enrolled.<sup>2</sup> Even more remarkable is the fact that the gender gap in enrollment is continuing to narrow. Close to universal enrollment levels have been observed for younger children for some years now, but older children – especially girls and young women – have been more of a challenge. ASER 2017 found 16% of 14-18-year-old females out of school as compared to 11.9% males – a gap of 4.1 percentage points. This year, that gap has narrowed to just 0.2 percentage points.

Even more promising is the fact that most girls and young women in this age group expressed the desire to stay within the education system and complete at least undergraduate level studies if not more. In fact, these data show that more females in this age group aspire to continue to higher levels of education than their male counterparts. In other words, girls are staying in school longer and wanting to continue studying even longer.

These are very welcome trends. But they reflect a conundrum. Girls are staying in school longer, but this does not imply that they are gaining the knowledge, skills, or confidence needed to successfully negotiate their lives as adults. Other than basic reading proficiency, sampled males outperformed sampled females on every single assessment task. Returning to the question of the Google Maps task, what accounts for this enormous gender gap in outcomes?



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<sup>2</sup> Although ASER 2023 did not go back to the same districts covered in 2017, it covers all states and uses the same criteria for district selection. While estimates from the two rounds are not directly comparable, they do provide a reasonable idea of changes at the national level.

We examine three dimensions of the answer to this question: familiarity with the technology, familiarity with the type of task being posed, and self confidence in attempting tasks that may be difficult or unfamiliar.

## Familiarity with smartphones

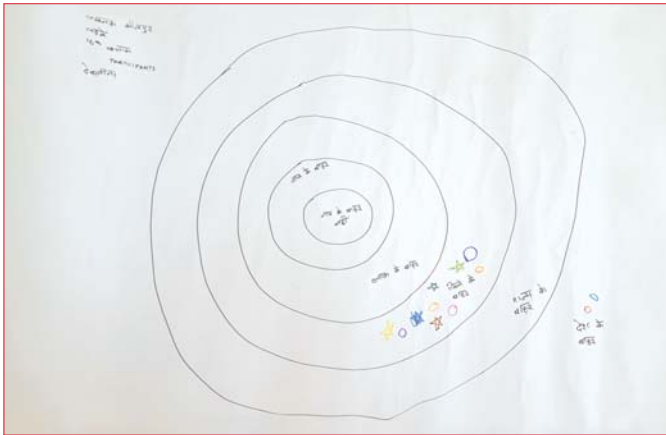
Looking first at familiarity with smartphones, at first glance it appears that youth of both sexes have the necessary exposure to the technology. As many as 95% males and 90% females reported knowing how to use a smartphone – a gap of just 5 percentage points between the two. However, what it means to “know how to use a smartphone” looks very different across males and females. For example, males were more than twice as likely to own their own smartphone than females, and therefore were likely spending far more time using the device and using it for a wider variety of tasks. This conjecture is born out in the ASER data on smartphone use: while reasonably similar proportions of male and female youth reported having used a smartphone for education related tasks and for social media during the preceding week, males were twice as likely as females to have ever used a smartphone to access online services such as paying a bill or booking a ticket (38% males vs 19% females had ever done so). Owning one’s own smartphone also enables the possibility of its unsupervised use for tasks unrelated to work or education, and again, the survey data supports this conclusion: males were far more likely than females to use a smartphone for entertainment (for example, 69% males vs 46% females reported played games on a smartphone in the week preceding the survey). In other words, although the overall penetration of smartphone technology in rural India has grown enormously in recent years, these results show clearly that girls and young women have far less access to it than their male counterparts.

## Familiarity with the type of task to be undertaken

The preceding discussion points to males’ greater access to, control over, and independent use of smartphones in ways that form part of the pattern of overall social and family control over youth of each sex, particularly once they reach puberty. There is ample evidence that families “protect” older girls and young women, keeping them “safe” until they get married. Many clear examples of this emerged from the in-depth qualitative focus group discussions that we had with small groups of girls and boys studying in rural secondary and higher secondary classes in three districts (Dhamtari in Chhattisgarh, Sitapur in Uttar Pradesh, and Solan in Himachal Pradesh). To get to know these young people a little better, early in each discussion we would ask them to tell us about themselves. Among other things, we asked how far they had travelled outside their village. Each group would chart the furthest participants had travelled as a series of concentric circles, beginning with those who had not gone outside their village, expanding in the next circle to those who had been to another location within the same block, to a different block, district, state, and so on. As these young people marked the furthest location they had reached on the chart, we talked about why they had gone there, who they had gone with, and what they remembered doing or seeing or experiencing during the trip. This exercise served two purposes. First, we wanted to understand a little more about these young people’s exposure to other people, places, and ways of living and thinking. Second, their comments gave us a sense of the extent to which they had agency, interpreted here as the ability to define a goal – for example, go for a day trip to the nearest city with a group of friends – and act towards achieving it.

In every class we spoke to groups of girls and boys separately, and one of the earliest patterns that emerged from these discussions was that in just about every group, boys had travelled further afield than girls. The difference was not only in terms of how far they had travelled, but also with regard to decision-making about the trip. Boys’ travel was often more intentional: they were going to specific places with a clear individual purpose in mind, not just to accompany members of the family. Girls, on the other hand, tended to have travelled much less and when they did it was usually to accompany family members, typically to visit relatives, go shopping, or visit a religious site. For example, here are extracts from two FGDs with students in Std X in the same school in Sitapur, one each with boys and girls.





Facilitator (F): Other than Lucknow, where have you been to?

P (Participant): I have been to Gorakhpur. Beyond that, Shivnagar

F: What did you find different there?

P: It was nice, I ate chinese food

F: You went to Gorakhpur to eat chinese

P: No ma'am, to cook

F: Who do you work with?

P: My brother.

F: How long did you work there?

P: I went on 9th, came back on 12th

F: Ok, so you went to work and came back. Did you make money?

P: Yes

F: Have you spent it?

P: Yes, I had to buy books for school.



Facilitator (F): And the rest of you? What is the most different place you have been to?

Participant 1 (P1): Nowhere

F: Have you been outside your village?

P1: I don't go anywhere outside the village. I just come to school.

F: You have never been outside your village?

P1: No

F: What about you?

P2: No ma'am, nowhere

P3: Haven't you been to [location name]?

\*Everyone laughs\*

F: What is that?

P3: It's the nearby bazaar

F: Have you been there?

P6: Yes

F: Then that counts as someplace different. It is different from the village.

These excerpts of much longer conversations are two small illustrations of the very different levels of exposure and agency that males and females in this age group have with respect to every aspect of travel: whether to travel, where to go and for how long, what the purpose of the trip is, and so on. With most girls entirely dependent on family members (or, occasionally, on school trips) for expeditions outside their home villages, planning of travel logistics – what mode of transport to use, how long the trip will take, where to book tickets, and so on – involves a set of tasks that are usually done by the men in the family, and may therefore be hard for girls to even conceptualise, let alone implement. In this sense, the idea that such planning can be aided by the use of apps on a smartphone is even more remote.

## The confidence to attempt something new

Girls' inability to conceive of traveling alone comes through clearly in one of the FGDs with Std XII girls in Solan. It is worth noting that of the 3 districts where we conducted FGDs, Solan was the one where the girls we met appeared to have the greatest independence and autonomy.

F: So is it generally the case that girls are not allowed or is it specific to your home?

P1: It is not allowed.

P2: Some girls are allowed.

P3: It is not so ma'am, family members are scared also that how will she manage alone.

P1: We don't know about the new place also, where we have to go and all. If we know the place then it is not a problem.

P3: Once we learn they will send us.

F: What are they scared of when sending you?

P3: That she is alone, how will she go...

P1: What if the bus breaks down.

P3: What if she gets lost halfway.

F: And if you ask them that you want to go to Chandigarh with friends, then?

All: No.

The expectation that girls should conform to social and family expectations and refrain from independent action clearly structures the lives and thoughts of many of them. How then can young women develop curiosity, critical thinking, and the courage to take risks? In the ASER 2017 report I wrote an article ('No Response') on the fact that sampled females were not only doing worse on every single assessment item than sampled males, they were also refusing to even attempt the questions far more often than their male counterparts. In that article I used the example of Rita, a young woman I met during ASER fieldwork in Gujarat, whose attitude screamed an absolute rejection of all things academic – even though she herself had completed eight years of schooling – and who refused to even engage with the tasks, let alone try to do them.

It is unfortunate that six years later, ASER 2023 data shows exactly the same pattern. On every single one of the 17 assessment tasks spanning applied arithmetic, applied reading, financial calculations, and digital tasks, far more females failed to attempt the task than males. Averaged across all these tasks, the no-response rate was 8.7% among males and 13.3% among females. By far the highest no-response rate was for the Google Maps task (which was given only to youth who could bring a smartphone for the assessment): fully 55% of the females to whom it was administered refused to even attempt the task, as compared to 32% of the males. They did not even try to figure it out.

ASER 2023 survey data is not designed to answer the question of what causes the substantial misalignment between young women's desire to study further in the face of their extremely low levels of skills, abilities, and agency. What comes next after school was a topic that was explored in some depth during the focus group discussions. These conversations with girls currently enrolled in Std X, XI, and XII suggested that in many cases they were not expecting or preparing to enter the work force in the sense of going outside of their homes to seek employment elsewhere. While they did often express a work aspiration, both in the survey as well as in these longer, less structured conversations, these seemed to reflect what they would aspire to do in some kind of ideal world rather than in real life, where their lives are tightly bound by house work, and their freedom to explore outside of the confines of the home is severely constrained by social expectations for appropriate behaviour. In all 3 districts, across 33 separate FGDs with girls, very few pushed back against the expectation that taking care of domestic chores was and would always be their first priority. Each one of them did these chores before and after school – and indeed the ASER survey data shows a 20 percentage point difference between the proportion of girls and boys doing domestic chores every day (the survey included daily shopping for the household as part of household work, and did not capture the amount of time spent on these chores – otherwise the gender gap would likely have been greater still).

However, conversations with girls during the FGDs showed that there were huge differences across locations in how girls envisioned their future, which often reflected differences in home contexts. For example, the girls in Solan came from relatively educated families. Many had parents who had completed higher secondary or college level studies. Their mothers often had at least as much education if not more than their fathers. Even though most of their mothers were homemakers, some girls did have mothers who worked outside the home as cooks, tailors, or in offices. Their fathers worked in agriculture, or in trades such as plumber and carpenter. These girls talked freely about their intention to work after they completed their studies: their parents expected them to stand on their own feet and earn a living. They each had multiple aspirations, and spoke unhesitatingly of becoming singers or dancers, models or fashion designers, in addition to the more common teachers and doctors. But even in Solan, girls tended to speak of these jobs as being in addition to taking care of their homes, not instead of it. In Dhamtari, mothers' levels of education were lower and fewer worked outside the home; these girls' plans to go out to work were also scarcer and less varied. In Sitapur, where parental education levels were low and all the girls' mothers were homemakers, such plans were virtually non-existent.

Many factors influence young people's decision to join the labour force after completing their studies. As the examples above show, role models at home make an enormous difference. Obviously the nature of the jobs available, their location, and the benefits they offer all affect these decisions, and derive from the larger economic landscape of each region. But schools, too, have a vital role to play. For girls in many parts of the country, teachers are often the only role models available. What our interactions with young people in the focus group discussions made clear to us is that schools rarely provide any sort of roadmap to help young people navigate the transition between school and work. There are many ways in which these pathways can be developed, many of which are envisaged in the National Education Policy (2020). These include providing exposure to different work options via courses on vocational subjects, organising exposure visits and visits from specialists across a range of employment options, and facilitating internships, among others. But perhaps most important is the need to encourage girls' own sense of agency. A good first step may be to invite them to express their opinions about where they want to go and help them think through different ways of getting there.