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GIRL Center Research Brief

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GENDERED EFFECTS OF COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES: BANGLADESH CASE STUDY



BANGLADESH



INDIA



KENYA



PAKISTAN

AT A GLANCE

Bangladesh's education system met intensified challenges throughout the COVID-19 pandemic on top of the difficulties students have historically faced. A recent study on the impacts of COVID-19 school closures in rural communities in Bangladesh clarifies issues of remote learning access, management, and monitoring, as well as new strains on students' time use. It also reveals general impacts on mental and physical health, economic status, as well as gendered effects including child marriage. Based on evaluations of mitigation measures, recommendations for comprehensive policies, provision of technical, financial, and social support, and improvements in education systems emerged.

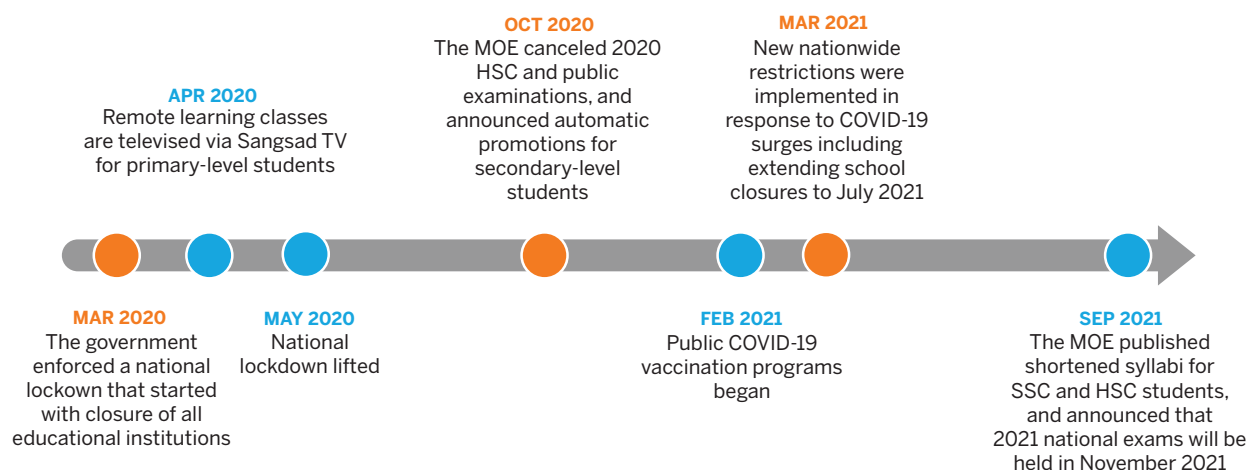
BACKGROUND

Population Council's GIRL Center was commissioned by UNESCO's Global Education's Gender Flagship to conduct a [global study](#) on the gendered impact of COVID-19 school closures, based on our review of published research and a large-scale survey of organizations focused on gender equality in education, as well as data from local communities in Bangladesh, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Mali and Pakistan.¹ Informed by this evidence, the study outlines three main pathways to adverse education, health and protection outcomes and widening gender inequalities: 1) pre-existing gender expectations, disparities and limitations, 2) gender restrictions and risks, and 3) loss of gender-specific protection. This brief summarizes the **Bangladesh** case study.

Education in Bangladesh Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic

- **School system:** Bangladesh's education system includes Bengali medium (public and private) and English medium (private) schools which are divided into three levels: primary (grades 1-5), secondary (grades 6-12), and tertiary. Madrasah education is also a major part of the education system.
- **Government Education Initiatives:** Government education initiatives include free textbooks, stipend schemes, mid-day meal programs, and supporting school infrastructure.
- **Student Population:** Bangladesh has a high primary enrollment rate (98%) with 18 million students enrolled at the primary level and 13 million at the secondary level.^{2,3} Two percent of primary-school age children are out of school, and approximately 3.2 million young people participate in child labor.^{4,5} However,

FIGURE 1. TIMELINE OF SCHOOL CLOSURES AND RE-OPENINGS IN BANGLADESH DURING COVID-19



dropout rates increase at the secondary level especially for girls (boys 33% and girls 42%).⁶ Evidence suggests that poverty, support in family income, parents education level, expenses of education, distance of school, quality of education, security concern for girls and child marriage are among main causes that drive school dropout in the secondary level.^{7,8,9}

- **Gender Equity in Education:** Early marriage is the most common impediment to girls' education.^{10,11} Approximately 52% of girls aged 20 to 24 married before turning 18. Among girls who dropped out of school at the secondary level, more than 60% discontinued schooling due to marriage.¹² Secondary dropout rate is higher for girls (42%) than boys (33%).

COVID-19 School Closures

By mid-March 2020, as part of a gradual COVID-19 lockdown, Bangladesh's Ministry of Education (MOE) closed all education institutions. The lockdown was lifted after two months, but schools remained closed as a public health necessity. The government initiated broadcasted lessons through national television channel 'Sangsad Bangladesh,' online platforms like YouTube and Facebook, and community radio for primary and secondary students. Bangladesh as had one of the longest school closures with schools not yet fully open for in

person learning as of November 2021.

Case Study

To study the gendered effects of these COVID-19 school closures in the rural communities of three districts in Bangladesh (Sherpur, Kushtia, and Chapainawabganj), a rapid mobile-phone survey was conducted with girls aged 12-19 who are enrolled in an ongoing project "Keeping Girls in Schools to Reduce Child Marriage in Rural Bangladesh."¹³ This study also separately conducted interviews with key-informants, including school-going boys and girls aged 10-19, parents, teachers, as well as national and sub-national level stakeholders, and program implementers.

GENDERED EFFECTS ON EDUCATION OUTCOMES AND BEYOND

Pre-existing Gender Expectations, Disparities and Limitations

- There was a visible **gender gap in device accessibility**, with lower access to devices for girls than boys, in part due to concern among parents regarding misuse of phones.
- **Gendered division of labor was prominent** during school closure, as girls were more engaged with household work while boys supported parents in income generating activities. Most boys and girls reported **significant decline in study time**, from an

average of 7-8 hours per day to 2 hours per day.

“Currently our family is going through a lot of hardship. My father’s earning is our only source of household income...Buying a smartphone for remote classes would be too much of him, I understand that, so I don’t want to put pressure on him.” (IDI-9, 14, Unmarried, Sherpur)

“I didn’t need to be involved in household work earlier but now as I’m sitting at home, I must take up household chores... I have to get involved in housework because I am a girl.” (IDI-2, Girl, 16, Unmarried, Sherpur)

Gender restrictions and risks

- **The risk of school dropout persists.** The proportion of girls not studying at all increased over time from 1% to 10%, and 1 in 10 girls did not intend of returning to school after reopening. This risk, largely dependent on household financial conditions, is observed for both boys and girls.

“No one from my in-law’s house will allow me to study further. Even my husband and his siblings don’t study anymore.” (IDI-4, Girl, 16, Married, Sherpur)

Loss of gender-specific protection

- **Few girls reported facing family tension and verbal abuse** in households due to lockdown, but not boys. Adolescent girls are more vulnerable to various forms of violence, with 87% reported having experienced teasing. Observations of violence in the community by girls increased from 3% to 12% over the course of the study. However, only about 3% of girls reported facing any verbal or physical abuse at home.
- **School closures have triggered the pre-existing preference for child marriage**, as respondents reported increases in child marriage occurring in the community, largely driven by loss of household income. By the end of the study period, 100% of respondents reported child marriages occurring in the community, and 23% of girls reported being married – a slight

increase from 20% pre-pandemic. Absence of a protective environment with protracted school closure contributed to this trend.

“Many parents are marrying off their daughters because of the uncertainties of life after coronavirus. Families are going through financial crisis and are unable to continue their daughter’s education. Moreover, now it costs less money to marry off a girl, so this is an added advantage.” (IDI-9, Girl, 14, Unmarried, Sherpur)

GENERAL EFFECTS ON EDUCATION OUTCOMES AND BEYOND

- Students faced **challenges in accessing remote learning**, especially those from poor, rural households. Whereas about half of the households have access to a television and 95% own mobile phones, only about 24% have a smartphone.^{15,16}
- Marginalized households in rural areas faced **difficulties in bearing added costs of remote learning** on top of preexisting challenges affording school fees and educational materials.
- Both teachers and students **lacked technical skills in implementing remote learning** via the internet and digital devices.
- Students reported **low participation in both televised and online classes**, finding classes not conducive for learning, in conflict with household work, or uninteresting. A separate study showed that only 39% of grade nine students attended televised classes and only 2% accessed online classes during school closures.
- Students indicated **challenges coping with a new pedagogy**, further compounded by the absence of interaction with peers and teachers as well as need-based teaching and learning.

“In the televised classes you are not able to do in person contact with teacher that even when you didn’t understand a lesson. The lessons move very fast in television or online classes, I can’t comprehend. But in schools,



Photo credit: UNICEF.

teachers don't move this fast, they deliver the lecture with time so that everyone can understand the lessons.” (IDI-10, Girl, 14, Unmarried, Kushtia)

- The **lack of regular and effective monitoring and follow-up** in the initial stages hampered effectiveness of remote learning, as well as lacking parents' awareness of remote learning.
- **School closure also continued to widen learning inequality.** Students from poorer families and those with lower competencies prior to closure are at greater risk of experiencing learning loss. Younger adolescents are also more at risk of learning loss and dropout. This also risks future learning competency, as students were auto-promoted to the next grade.
- **Private coaching or tutoring is considered the preferred alternative to schooling** over remote learning by many respondents. Yet, access to such private instruction is a **challenge for poor households.**
- **School closure is adversely affecting the psycho-social wellbeing of students.** Nearly 80% of girls expressed feeling depressed, while respondents did not report seeking

any type of support for mental health or violence. Adolescents, parents, and teachers shared the view that **reopening schools is of utmost importance for the wellbeing of students.** Similar findings were observed in interviews with boys regarding psycho-social wellbeing.

“When we are in school with our friends and peers around, we feel happy-go-lucky... But now there is nothing much to do, sometimes I get upset and bored.” (IDI-3, Girl, 16, Unmarried, Kushtia)

- **Many households experienced economic hardship** due to COVID-19, with nearly 70% of households reporting decreased income after the lockdown, through it recovered over time to 44%. Lower-income households are likely to be disproportionately impacted by poverty and income loss.
- There were **no direct links between school closure and nutrition**, as there are no school feeding programs in secondary education institutions. However, COVID-19 threatens to compound challenges for the food insecure and stunted children.

EVALUATION OF INTERVENTIONS

Key informants reflected on successes and gaps of mitigation efforts seeking to address the effects of school closures.

- **Existing digital divide restrict uniform access to remote learning** across the country, especially for students in rural and remote areas, who are experiencing financial insecurity, and those who are from marginalized communities including girls.
 - While national policy facilitated initiatives to integrate ICT into primary and secondary education, remote learning during the pandemic revealed that the country is **not yet fully digitalized and lacks adequate ICT support**.
 - There is **no comprehensive plan to recover** the learning loss through remedial education and to address risk of dropout among students living in **rural and marginalized communities**.
 - Organizations have tested **alternative remote learning models**, such as telephone-based learning sessions, community radio-based sessions, and group study, but require **coordination among stakeholders** for effective implementation across the country.
 - School closure and social isolation poses psycho-social impacts on the students, but **mental health support remains scarce**.
 - There were very few interventions that focused specifically on the gendered effects of the COVID-19 school closures.
- **Strengthen monitoring and evaluation of remote learning systems** at local and national levels.
 - **Prioritize utilization of ICT resources** already available in schools to ensure remote learning access for students.
 - **Provide needs-based financial support to students and teachers** to narrow the digital divide, such as provision of smartphones, laptops and internet connectivity at low cost.
 - **Initiate financial incentives, stimulus packages, and subsidized education for marginalized students** to bring them back to school.
 - **Introduce curriculum revisions and remedial education to address learning loss** during school closures, with proper assessment of previous learning.
 - **Provide adequate psycho-social support** for students' mental health and wellbeing.
 - **Prepare a comprehensive, participatory plan** with community representatives, parents, and school authorities to support the government in overcoming this national crisis.
 - **Apply a gendered lens** in responding to the effects of schools closures to address different experiences driven by gender.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT AND STAKEHOLDERS

- **Develop effective policies and comprehensive guidelines** with a blended approach for remote and in-person learning, considering the prevalence of COVID-19.

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