

The Gendered Impact of COVID-19 on Adolescents' Education and School-to-Work Transitions in Bangladesh



The extended closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic is having a negative impact on adolescents. As part of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) study, researchers conducted a panel survey (one round pre-pandemic, and two rounds during) among 2,000 students in Bangladesh to understand the differentiated impact of the pandemic on male and female adolescents. Female adolescents reported less support for education and access to learning materials, and more household and care responsibilities. They also reported a decline in their ambitions to pursue higher education.

Policy Issue

Education globally is being negatively affected by extended school and market closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This impact has been exacerbated in many places by limited access to the Internet for remote training and learning.^[1] In many contexts, boys have better access to virtual communication and digital technologies than girls, who also have more domestic and care responsibilities.^[2] These gender asymmetries are likely to widen already-existing gender gaps in skill attainment and human development.

Youth in Bangladesh, who already struggle to access the labor market due to limited skills and poor quality education, are among the most negatively affected globally by the covid-19 pandemic due to the length of absence from in-person schooling from March 2020 to September 2021, resulting in loss of learning, jobs, and income in the short term that has implications for long-term human capital development. Policymakers are particularly concerned this will lead to higher rates of school dropout, reduced learning, increased income disparities, and lower future earnings.^[3] This research aims to highlight the short-run impacts of the pandemic on continued learning and school-to-work transitions of adolescents in Bangladesh, highlighting differential effects by gender, school type, location, and wealth.

Evaluation Context

The Government of Bangladesh first announced a country-wide lockdown and school closures due to

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the COVID-19 pandemic beginning March 17, 2020, after eight confirmed cases. In December 2020, there was hope for reopening markets and schools, as infection rates were decreasing. However, due to a surge of COVID-19 cases in the spring, school closures remain in place. On July 1, 2021, Bangladesh instituted another round of country-wide lockdowns, which remained in effect until August 11, 2021. Bangladesh is one of the countries most affected by COVID-19 with 1.3 million cases and more than 23,000 deaths, as of August 2021.^[4]

[The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence \(GAGE\) study](#) follows 20,000 girls and boys in low- and middle-income countries to understand what works to enhance adolescent capabilities and empowerment. It consists of surveys and other mixed methods approaches conducted over a period of nine years (2015-2024) among youth in Africa (Ethiopia and Rwanda), Asia (Bangladesh and Nepal), and the Middle East (Jordan and Lebanon). As part of the GAGE study, the South Asia Gender Innovation Lab (SAR GIL) at the World Bank and the [Innovations for Poverty Action Women's Work, Entrepreneurship, and Skilling Initiative \(WWES\)](#) support ongoing surveys in Bangladesh to understand the differentiated impact of the pandemic among male and female adolescents.

Details of the Intervention

Note: This study is not a randomized controlled trial

In Bangladesh, researchers conducted a three rounds survey among 2,000 adolescents in 7th and 8th grade to assess the impact of COVID-19 on continued learning, school-to-work transitions, and human capital development more broadly. The surveys included questions on education and learning, time allocation, aspirations, paid work, and economic empowerment.

The first round was collected in-person before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in February to March 2020 among adolescents in government and semi-private (Monthly Pay Order (MPO)) schools. The second and third rounds of data collection (COVID-R1 and COVID-R2, respectively) took place virtually, via phone interviews, from May to June 2020 and February to March 2021.

Results and Policy Lessons

Adolescents attending government schools were more likely to receive learning support from schools compared to those attending MPO schools (50 percent vs 36 percent). Adolescents initially learned mainly through self-study (81 percent). As school closures extended, learning support from schools increased (from 10.4 percent in COVID-R1 to 35.9 percent COVID-R2 from MPO schools and from 13.7 percent to 50.2 percent from government schools). Consequently, self-study reports fell to 54 percent on average (COVID-R2), and learning through school-based assignments increased from 5 percent in COVID-R1 to 23 percent in COVID-R2.

There is a gender disparity in receiving learning support from schools and families, potentially widening skill gaps between male and female adolescents. Girls reported receiving less online support than boys (57 percent vs 84 percent in COVID-R2) and more assignments than boys (41 percent vs 23 percent in COVID-R2). Likewise, boys were more likely than girls to have access to mobile learning apps (10 percent vs 4 percent), television or radio time for learning (33 percent vs 21 percent),

and books or learning materials to use at home (43 percent vs 38 percent). Moreover, boys reported that their families reduce chores for them to study more frequently than girls (44 percent vs 39 percent).

There are learning gaps between rural and urban areas, and households with different purchasing powers, which could perpetuate and exacerbate future inequalities. Adolescents from better-off households are most likely to continue learning through online resources than adolescents from vulnerable households (13 percent vs 7 percent in COVID-R2). Adolescents from urban households are also more likely than adolescents from rural households to be learning through online resources and TV programs (23 percent vs 11 percent). In COVID-R2 Adolescents in urban areas (45.6 percent compared to 32.4% of adolescents in rural areas) and in better-off households (44.1 percent compared to 34.9 percent of worse-off households) are also more likely to receive learning support from formal schools during school closure.

There is a drop in adolescent girls' ambitions for college education, which could affect future investments in skills development.^[5] While aspirations for professional careers have remained high through the pandemic at above 90 percent, aspirations to attain at least some university education have decreased (from 86 percent to 83 percent in R1 and 74 percent in R2). Moreover, while boys' and girls' aspirations for university education were nearly equal prior to the pandemic (85 percent for girls vs 87 percent for boys), girls' aspirations have decreased more than boys'. Only 70 percent of girls aspire to university education as of March 2021, compared to 80 percent of boys.

Adolescents, particularly boys, are increasingly identifying financial constraints as a challenge to achieving their educational and career goals, pointing to the economic toll of the COVID 19 pandemic. Among adolescents who reported facing some form of challenge to their educational goals, 71 percent of boys and 57 percent of girls said that these challenges have increased due to COVID-19. Similarly the proportion of adolescents naming financial constraints to attaining their career aspirations increased from 28.1 percent in COVID-R1 to 40.5 percent in COVID-R2. Although a higher proportion of girls reported that financial constraints were a primary challenge to aspirations in COVID-R1 (30.6 percent of girls vs. 24.4 percent of boys), the proportion of boys reporting financial constraints nearly doubled in COVID-R2 (increasing to 41.5 percent) and surpassed the proportion of girls reporting this challenge (33.9 percent).

Involvement in paid work, especially among girls, is low, and there is very little engagement in other skill-building activities. Overall, 1.4 percent of adolescents reported having been working during COVID-19 (COVID-R2), with boys twice as likely to be working as girls (2 percent vs 1.1 percent). This is consistent with reports of time use, where boys reported spending more time on productive activities than girls (78 minutes vs 54 minutes). Girls, on the other hand, report spending more time doing unskilled domestic work (102 minutes vs 90 minutes) and care responsibilities (66 minutes vs 54 minutes). Participation in other forms of skill-building was low, with only 1.7 percent of adolescents reporting to be involved in skills courses, internships, or apprenticeships (COVID-R2).

These findings highlight the challenges that adolescents in Bangladesh are facing to continue learning

while schools are closed. The results show that girls and more vulnerable adolescents are experiencing higher learning losses which, without a targeted policy response, could result in deepening pre-existing inequalities.

Sources

^[1] _ Tabassum et al. 2021.

^[2] _ Ibid.

^[3] _ World Bank, 2021; ILO 2020.

^[4] _ Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/bangladesh>

^[5] _ Dalton et al.2016; Genicot y Ray 2017.