



# Supporting Adolescent Girls in the Time of COVID-19:

## Evidence and Policy for Bangladesh

Apr 8, 2021 | 8:00-9:30 EDT / 18:00-19:30 BST



# Reminders

- Please be reminded:
  - Remain on mute when not speaking.
  - Use the “raise your hand” feature to ask a question.
  - You can also submit questions in the chat- there are options for direct or group messages.
  - When speaking, please introduce yourself and your organization
  - You are welcome to keep your video on- please remember that you are on video if you choose this option.
  - The meeting will be recorded.

# Overview and Purpose

- COVID-19's disproportionate impact on women and girls globally is widening existing inequalities.
- Social policies are needed to mitigate these impacts, including helping girls and boys return to school and eventually succeed in the workforce.
- Policymakers need data and evidence to inform effective action to address these unprecedented challenges.
- Today's goals:
  - Share policy-relevant data directly with those who need it
  - Foster space for productive dialogue

# Agenda

|            |              |  |
|------------|--------------|--|
| 8:00- 8:05 | 18:00-18:05  | Welcome and Purpose, <b>Mohammad Ashraful Haque</b>  |
| 8:05- 8:15 | 18:05- 18:15 | <a href="#">Adolescence in the Time of COVID-19: Evidence from Bangladesh</a> , <b>Sarah Baird</b>   |
| 8:15-8:20  | 18:15-18:20  | Policy Discussant: <b>Tahsinah Ahmed</b>   |
| 8:20-8:35  | 18:20-18:35  | <a href="#">Early Effects of the COVID-19 Lockdown on Children &amp; The Threat to Female Adolescent Development from COVID-19</a> , <b>Zaki Wahhaj &amp; Momoe Makino</b> |
| 8:35-8:40  | 18:35-18:40  | Policy Discussant: <b>Sajeda Amin</b>  |
| 8:40-8:50  | 18:40-18:50  | <a href="#">Empowering Girls in Rural Bangladesh</a> , <b>Shahana Nazneen &amp; Kate Vyborny</b>   |
| 8:50-9:00  | 18:50-19:00  | Policy reflections, <b>Afzal Hossain Sarwar &amp; Rayhana Taslim</b>   |
| 9:00-9:25  | 19:00-19:25  | Q&A (participant questions), Moderator: <b>Maheen Sultan</b>   |
| 9:25-9:30  | 19:25-19:30  | Closing, <b>Mohammad Ashraful Haque</b>  |

# IPA's Approach



**Identify**  
issues



**Design  
or identify**  
solutions



**Evaluate**  
these  
solutions



**Incorporate  
Evidence**  
Into programs  
and policies



**Engage Policymakers and Champion the Use of Evidence**  
throughout the process

# IPA at a Glance



**22** Country Offices



**8** Program Areas



**700+** Partners



**600+** Researchers  
in our network



**850+** Evaluations to date  
in 51 countries



**18+** Years of generating  
evidence and moving  
evidence to policy



# IPA Bangladesh

- Country Office established in **2011**.
- Over **27 evaluations** conducted.
- Some of the main areas of focus include **SMEs, worker productivity, health and sanitation**.
- More recently, we have also focused on the **effects of COVID-19 on households and children's education** and on a study the **promotion of mask use** to prevent infections.

# Presenters

**Sarah Baird**



Associate Professor of Global Health and Economics, George Washington University

**Momoe Makino**



Research Fellow, Institute of Developing Economies;  
Visiting Research Fellow, GIRL Center, Population Council

**Shahana Nazneen**



Qualitative Researcher, Girls' Empowerment Project, Southern Bangladesh, IPA

# Presenters

**Kate Vyborny**



Research Associate,  
Duke University

**Zaki Wahhaj**



Reader in Economics,  
University of Kent

# Policy Discussants & Policy Reflections



**Tahsinah Ahmed**, Executive Director, UCEP Bangladesh



**MD Afzal Hossain Sarwar**, Policy Specialist (Educational Innovation), Aspire to Innovate (a2i) Program, ICT Division, Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology



**Rayhana Taslim**, Project Director, 9 Government Secondary Schools Project, Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, Ministry of Education



**Sajeda Amin**, Senior Associate, Population Council

# Host & Moderator

**Mohammad Ashraful  
("Ashraf") Haque**



Country Director,  
IPA Bangladesh

**Maheen Sultan**



GAGE Bangladesh Qualitative  
Research Co-Lead,  
BRAC University



## Adolescence in the Time of COVID-19 Evidence from Bangladesh

Sarah Baird, George Washington University  
[sbaird@gwu.edu](mailto:sbaird@gwu.edu)

\*Photo credit: Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE

# Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE):

A longitudinal research programme (2015-2024)

<https://www.gage.odi.org/>



We are following 20,000 adolescent girls and boys - the largest cohort of adolescents in the Global South

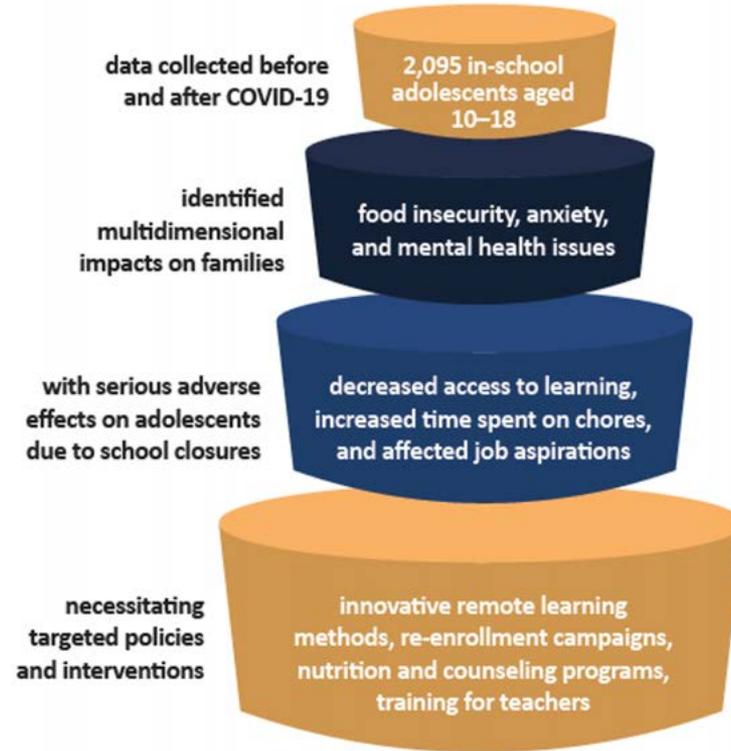
# COVID-19 and Adolescents

- Covid-19 has rapidly disrupted the lives of individuals across the globe.
  - Direct health effects = largely among elderly
  - BUT Virus will have multi-dimensional effects on young people
- Particular concern around impact of school closures and negative economic shocks.
- Our sample in Bangladesh:
  - ALL in school when COVID-19 lockdown.
  - 50% of households report losing employment permanently or temporarily due to COVID-19
  - 83% of households reporting some income loss
- Concern that impacts may be particularly acute for adolescent girls in LMICs

## COVID-19 and Adolescents

- Preliminary global evidence suggests that adolescents who were enrolled in school when the pandemic hit may now:
  - engage in paid work to supplement family income;
  - take on larger roles in the household, become pregnant, or face pressure to marry
  - all factors that will constrain school return when the schools reopen
- The expected gendered impact of school closures echoes previous evidence from crises (i) increased burden of care-work for women (ii) disruptions in access to sexual and reproductive health services (iii) and increases in domestic violence for women and girls
- COVID-19 pandemic threatens to undermine many of the recent gains in girls' education and to stunt further progress.

# Summary



April 8, 2021

# Sample

- **2,220** school adolescents from Chittagong and Sylhet in Bangladesh
- 12.8 years old on average, Grades 7 and 8
- 54% female
- Three rounds:
  - **Round One:** February and March 2020 through face- to-face interviews
  - **Round Two:** May and June 2020 through computer-assisted telephone interviewing
  - **Round Three:** February and March 2021 through computer-assisted telephone interviewing
- At R2, reached 2,156 of the Round One sample, a *97% recontact rate (focus)*

# Findings: Economic

83% percent of households report some income loss  
Some improvement observed between Round 2 and Round 3

## May/June 2020

- 50% of the sampled households reported losing employment permanently or temporarily due to COVID-19 in May 2020.
- 65% of households worried that they will not be able to meet basic household needs
- 42% of households not able to buy essential food items

## February/March 2021

- 60% of households that lost employment have returned to work
- 53% worried that they will not be able to meet basic household needs
- 75% of households not able to buy essential food items

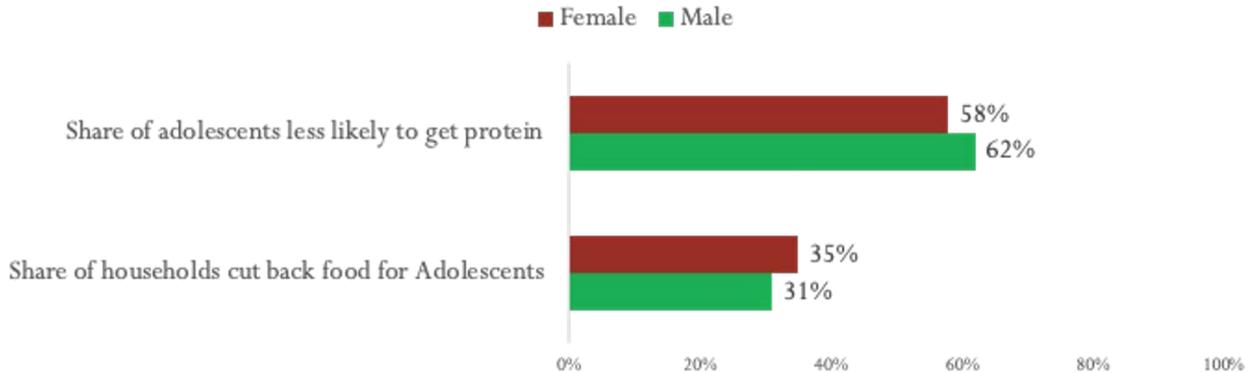
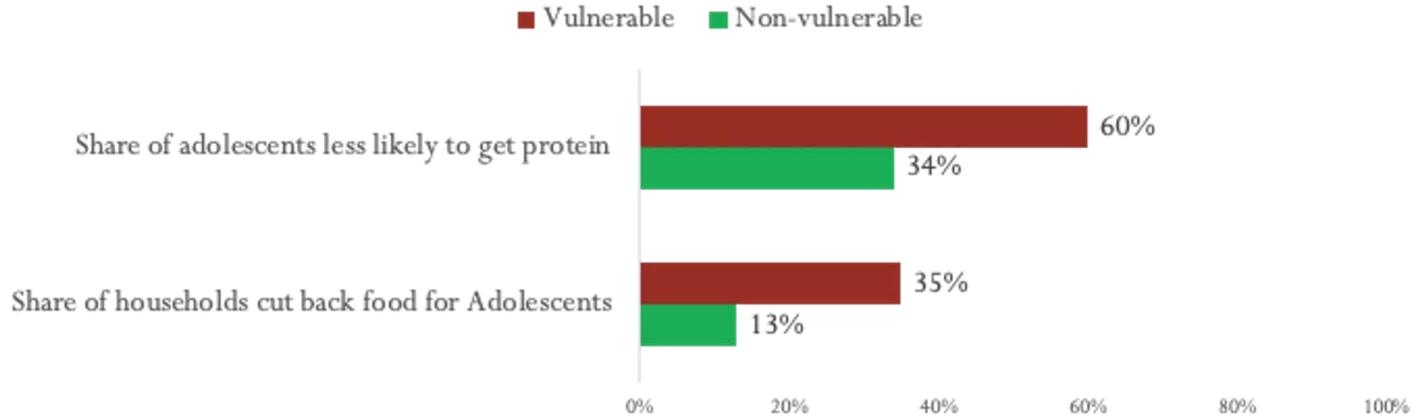
## Findings: Food Security

- 34% of households report cutting back food to adolescents in the household, compared to 13% at baseline
  - Small improvements as of March, with 24% of households reporting cutting back food
- 59% of adolescents report that their meals are less likely to contain protein.
- There is a strong reported reduction in dietary diversity, with most households (75 percent) reporting reductions in consumption of meat.

*“[My father] couldn’t bring rice because of the [earning loss during] lockdown. I would eat lentils. He would try to bring this and that, but [some days he couldn’t bring anything at all]. When he couldn’t bring it, we wouldn’t eat. When he would bring it, we’d eat then.”*

~13-year-old girl, Chittagong rural district

# Findings by Vulnerable and Gender



## Findings: Education

All adolescents report doing something to continue learning while schools are closed

**85%** spending time studying with own books

**22%** been in contact with a school-teacher

**9%** report using any media to support learning

(12% girls vs. 4% boys)

*‘We have a television in our home but not in my room. Can you always go to someone else’s room to watch television? That’s why I didn’t watch those TV classes. Besides... we lose electricity connection every time it is cloudy outside!’*

~14 year old girl

## Findings: Education

**50%** spending less time on education than before the lockdown

**94%** reporting increased time on household chores or childcare

no sig. dif. between boys and girls

**BUT** Girls were already spending 50% more time on chores than boys before the pandemic

## Findings: Education

I will be able to return to school

Girls: **91%**

Boys: **86%**

I will not be able to return to school

|   | May/June 2020 | February/March 2021 |
|---|---------------|---------------------|
| Girls                                     | 0.8%          | 4.1%                |
| Boys                                      | 3.6%          | 1.4%                |
| Mothers<br>(child will not be able to...) | 25%           | 16.5%               |

*“I’m wasting my time in this period just doing nothing .... by [helping my uncle in his grocery shop]  
I can learn about this work.”*

*- 13 year old boy from Sylhet  
April 8, 2021*

# Findings: Aspirations and Goals

- Job aspirations are high: 87% aspire to a professional job (e.g., teacher, government job, doctor, IT job) (Feb/March 2021)
  - 40% of adolescents identify financial constraints as a main challenge to achieving their aspirations
- 40% of adolescents have goals they would like to achieve within the next year, the majority of which are education related goals
  - Boys are more likely to have goals (48% compared to 34% of girls)

## Findings: Mental Health

- 80% of adolescents report that household stress increased since the onset of COVID-19
- 75% of adolescents reporting either that they are at least moderately scared about COVID-19 or worried about it

### **However:**

- Rates of moderate/severe depression are extremely low at about 1% both pre- and post-COVID-19
- Rates of moderate/severe anxiety are similar at 1.4% as of February/March 2021;
- But rates of at least mild anxiety are 9.9% for girls vs. 5.7% for boys

*“Boys go out, they always go out. But girls don't go out much.”*

-14-year-old girl from urban Sylhet

## 4 Insights:

1. Financial incentives / support is key
2. Printed material (+ engaging TV & phone content) are our best bet to minimize learning losses
3. Getting children back to school won't be easy:
  - a) Worry about boys too, customized approaches may be needed
  - b) Convince parents
4. Mental health and nutrition support could make a difference



Please feel free to contact me:

Sarah Baird: [sbaird@gwu.edu](mailto:sbaird@gwu.edu)

**THANK YOU!**

Policy Brief:

<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/976951605244702116/pdf/Adolescence-in-the-Time-of-COVID-19-Evidence-from-Bangladesh.pdf>

Podcast: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/world-bank-south-asia-region-gender-innovation-lab>

April 8, 2021

# Reflections on the Research

*Back to school, and from school to work*



**Tahsinah  
Ahmed**, Executive  
Director, UCEP  
Bangladesh

# The Threat to Female Adolescent Development from Covid-19

*Amrit Amirapu* , University of Kent  
*Niaz Asadullah* , University of Malaya  
*Zaki Wahhaj* , University of Kent

**IPA RECOVR Roundtable**  
***Supporting Adolescent Girls in the Time of COVID-19:***  
April 8, 2021

# Covid-19 and Adolescent Girls

In theory,

- Schools a safe space for adolescent girls
  - => school closures increase risk of early marriage
- Lockdowns => Limited State Capacity to Enforce Laws
- Return Migrants => Increased Demand for Brides
- Negative Shock => could delay/accelerate marriage<sup>1</sup>
- Increased Uncertainty => marriages to forge new social networks?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Corno, Hildebrandt and Voena (2020) <sup>2</sup>Rosenzweig and Start (1989)

## Study Samples

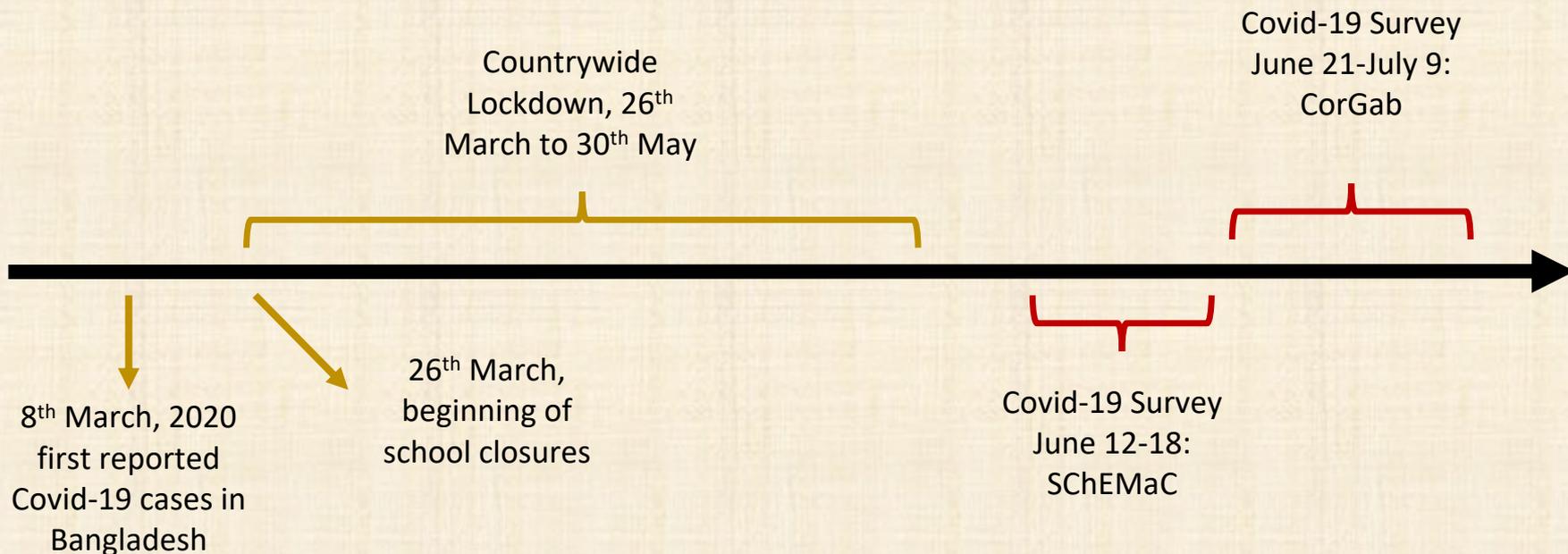
### Amirapu, Asadullah and Wahhaj (2020) – SChEMaC survey

- 536 women in **23 districts** of Bangladesh w/ 1+ unmarried daughters (9-24 yrs)
- drawn from a nationally representative sample in 2014
- re-interviewed in June+Nov 2018, May 2019, **June 2020**

### Makino, Shonchoy and Wahhaj (2021) – CorGab survey

- 3,243 households in **Gaibandha district** drawn from 2 projects with interventions targeting adolescent girls and young women
- at least 1 unmarried girl/woman in each household (13-29 yrs)
- Baselines in Oct 2019 & Feb 2020, re-interviewed in **June-July 2020**

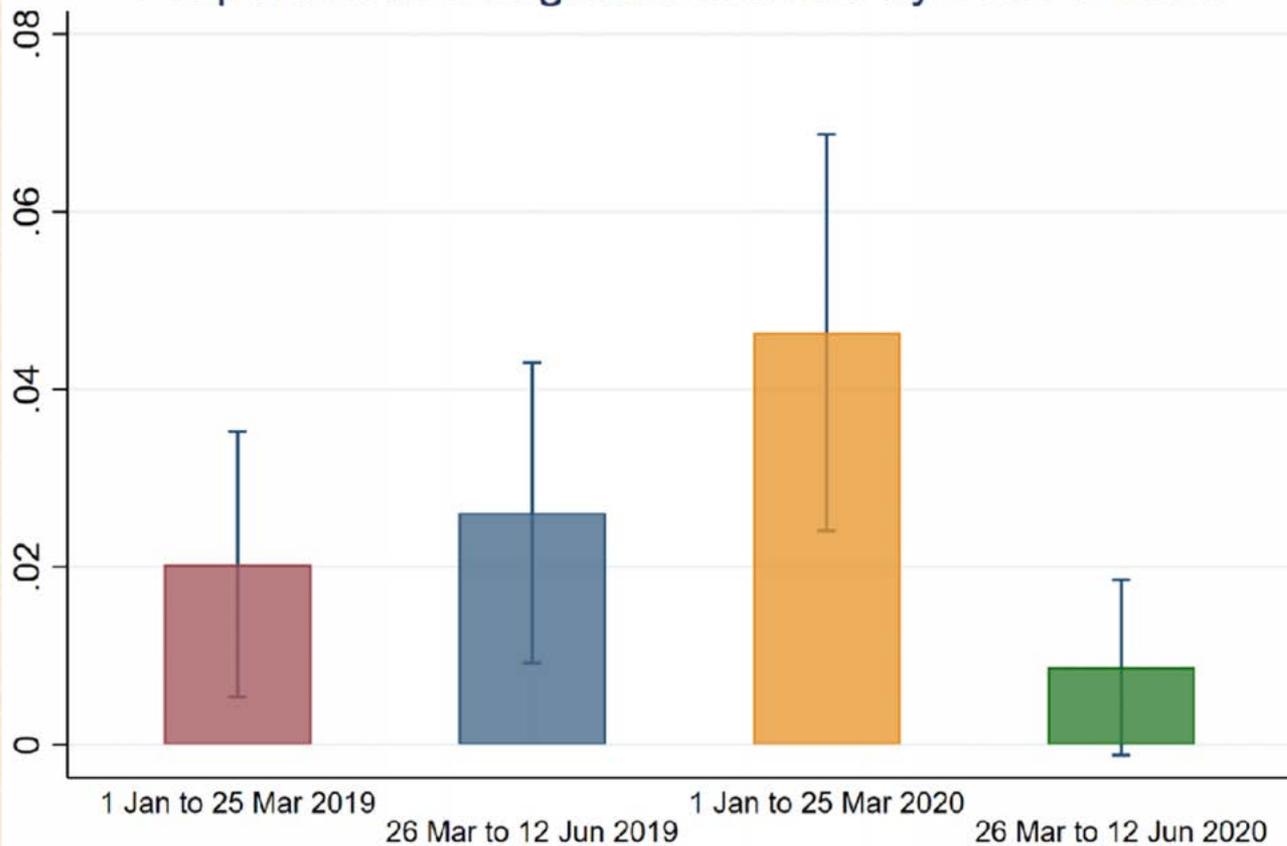
# Pandemic and Survey Timelines



## Key Takeaways from Covid-19 Surveys

- No evidence of spike in early marriages due to the pandemic up to July 2020
- But more marriage-related activities related to adolescent girls, e.g.
  - girls more likely to have outstanding marriage offers compared to same point previous year
  - households experiencing negative shock more likely to engage in marriage discussions
- No gender difference in probability of school continuation among school-aged children
  - But decreased study time and increased household chores, more severe in the case of girls
  - ... implies hard-earned gender parity in schooling is under threat
- Continued systematic data collection important to understand evolving patterns.
- Programmes to mitigate effects of the pandemic on children and adolescents need to take into account its gender dimensions.

## Proportion of Daughters Married by Time Period



Source: SChEMaC 2020; graph depicts mean values with 95% confidence intervals.

## Marriage Proposals and Refusals

- In June 2020, adolescent girls 15-19 had **twice as many marriage offers** waiting a response compared to the same point previous year.
  - => taking longer to respond to offers of marriage
- In case of refusals of marriage offers, one in six reported 'inability to pay the dowry' as the main reason for the refusal
  - dowry not a factor for refusals the previous year.

## Conclusion

- Survey in June 2020 shows a sharp decline in marriages among adolescent girls during the lockdown period.
    - Delayed response to marriage offers
    - Inability to pay dowry as a reason for refusing offers
    - Extended school closures, relaxation of social distancing
- ⇒ marriages may have increased subsequently

---

# Early Effects of the COVID-19 Lockdown on Children in Rural Bangladesh

Momoe Makino Makino<sup>†</sup>, Abu S. Shonchoy,<sup>‡</sup> Zaki Wahhaj<sup>§</sup>

<sup>†</sup>Population Council and Institute of Developing Economies, Japan

<sup>‡</sup>Florida International University, USA

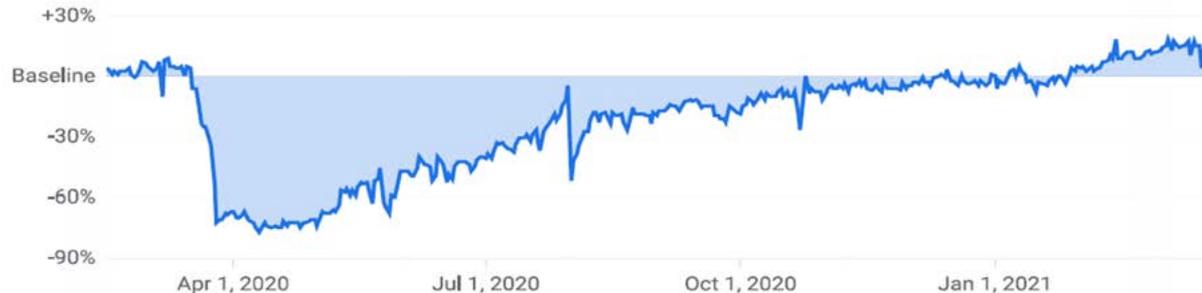
<sup>§</sup>University of Kent, UK

IPA RECOVR Roundtable

April 8, 2021

# COVID-19 in Bangladesh

- As of April 7, 2021, 652K cases, listed among the top 35 globally.
  - First case detected on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020
  - Countrywide lockdown (holiday) imposed on March 26<sup>th</sup>
  - Economy reopened on May 31<sup>st</sup>
  - Schools are still closed as of today (postponed till May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021)



This data reports aggregated, anonymized movement trends for places like restaurants, cafes, shopping centers, theme parks, museums, libraries, and movie theaters. Baseline time period is Jan 6 - Feb 3, 2020. [Learn more](#)

Updated 5 days ago · [About this data](#) · Source: [Google COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports](#)

**Figure 1. Mobility changes (recreational activities) in Bangladesh**

# Research question

- Impacts of the early policy responses to the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescents (aged 13-18)
- Three child-related outcomes:
  - Time use of children
  - Probability of children's school continuation
  - Incidence of child marriage and marriage related discussions.

# Rapid phone-base survey

- CorGab survey drawn from two projects (I and II), mentioned in Zaki's presentation
- Conducted from June 21 to July 9, 2020
- Attrition rates:
  - 7.8% in the survey I and
  - 8.6% in the survey II

**Table 1: Summary statistics of baseline surveys on households and all children aged 13-18**

---

|                        | N    | mean  | std.dev | min | max |
|------------------------|------|-------|---------|-----|-----|
| Head's age             | 3243 | 45.01 | 8.99    | 14  | 95  |
| Head's sex (male)      | 3243 | 0.902 | 0.297   | 0   | 1   |
| Head's marital status  | 3243 | 0.942 | 0.233   | 0   | 1   |
| Head's education       | 3243 | 3.518 | 4.389   | 0   | 15  |
| Child's age            | 4536 | 15.63 | 1.52    | 13  | 18  |
| Child's sex (male)     | 4536 | 0.203 | 0.403   | 0   | 1   |
| Child's marital status | 4536 | 0.040 | 0.197   | 0   | 1   |

---

Note. Education is a discrete variable: 1-10= class1-10 years, 11= SSC, 12= collage, 13=HSC, 14= BA/BSC/Fazil, 15= MA/MSC, and 0 otherwise.

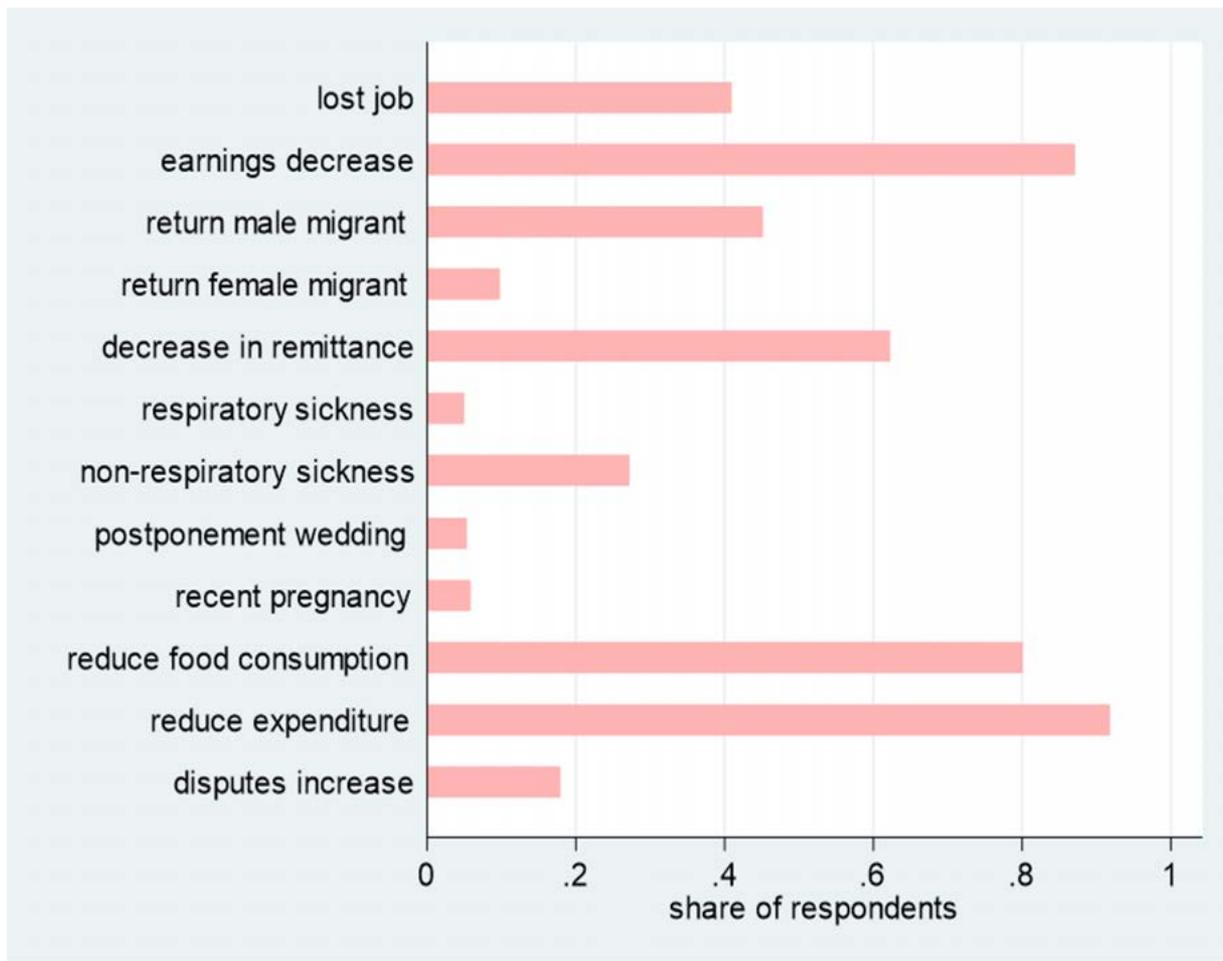


Figure 2. Impacts of lockdown on households

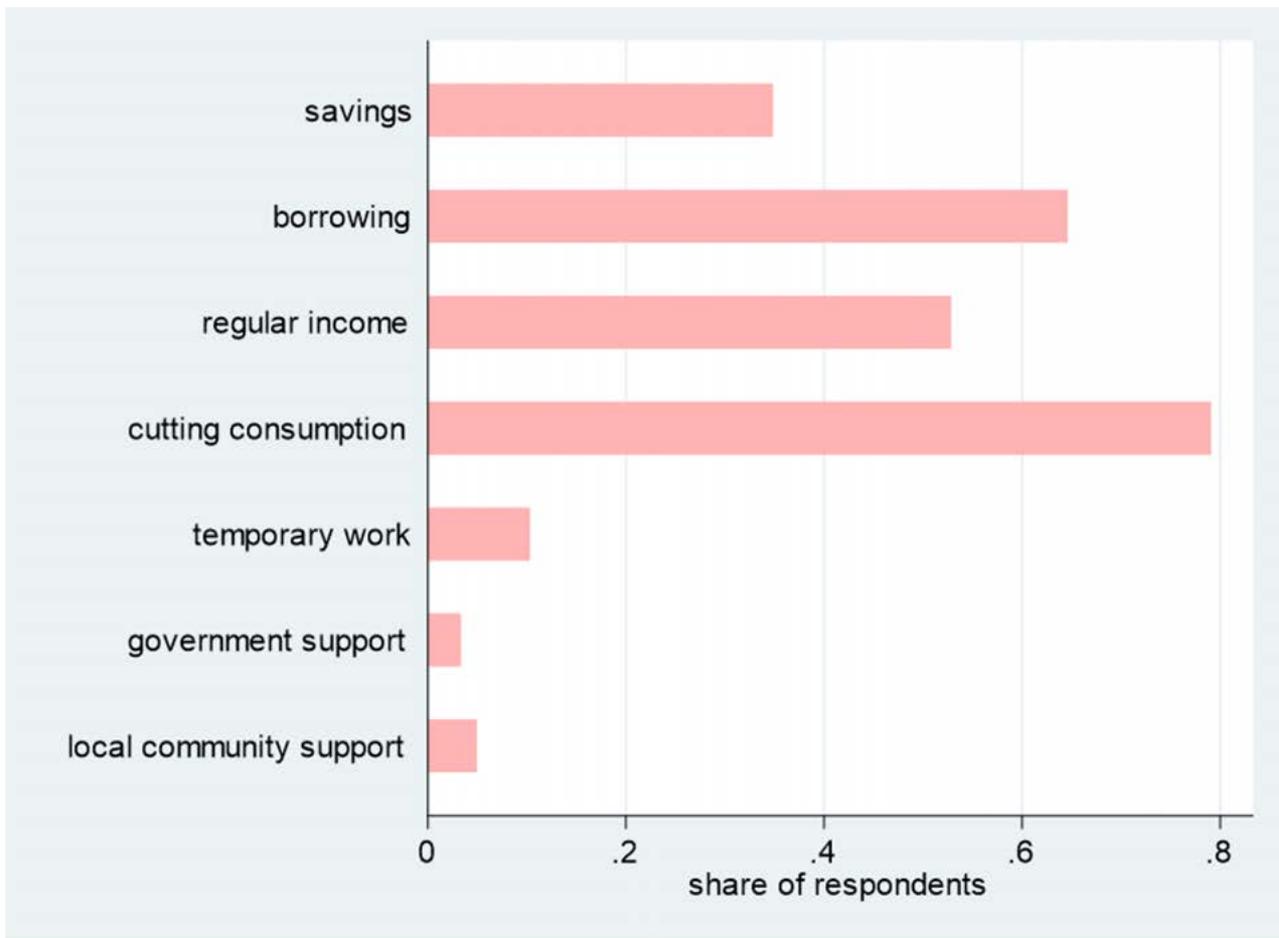


Figure 3. Coping strategies of households

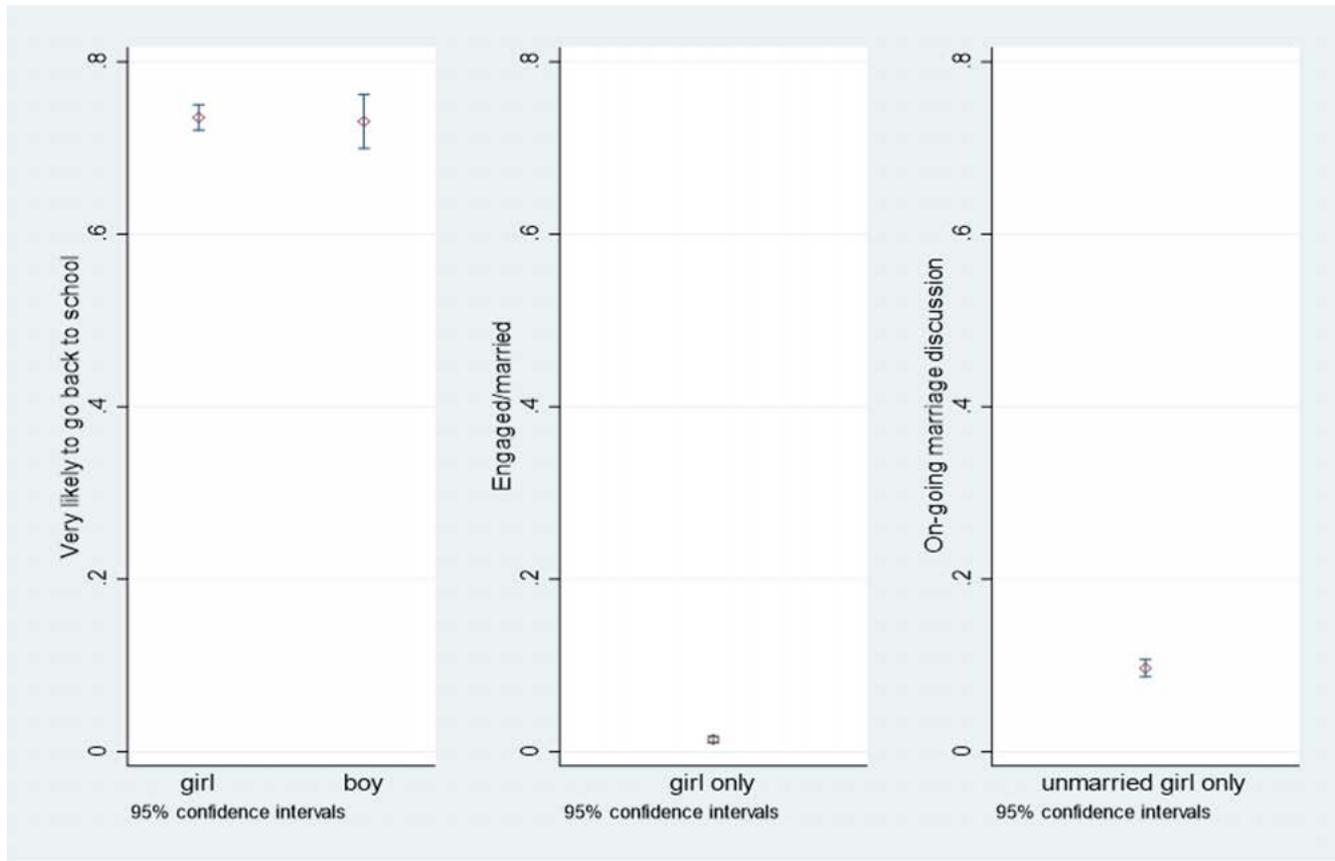


Figure 4. Children's probability of school continuation and marriage prospects

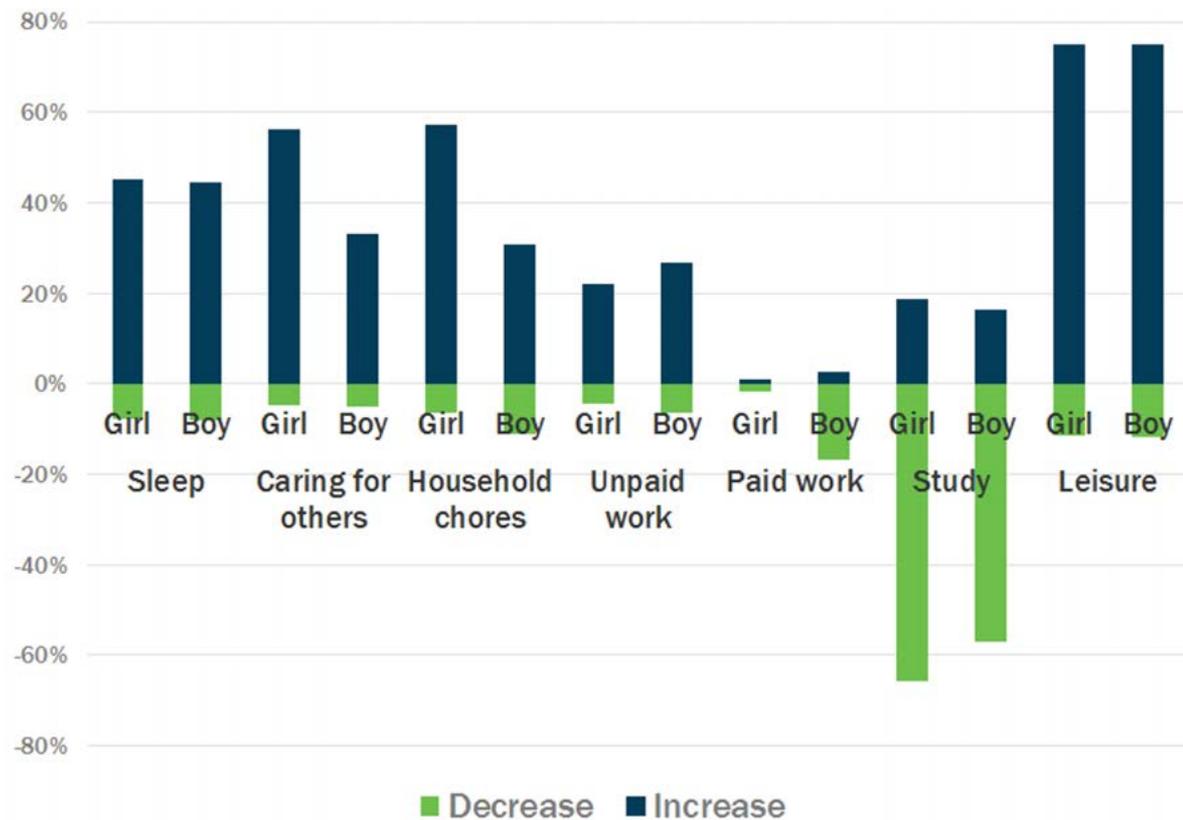


Figure 5. Change in time spent in various activities by children aged 13-18 after the lockdown

# Summary: Estimation results (child marriage)

- COVID-19 induced job loss has decreased the child marriage incidents however increased the marriage related discussions.
- Similar pattern is also observed on marriage outcomes for the health shock affected households.
- Decrease in remittances has also decreased the child marriage incidents.
  - Consistent with Corno et al. (2020). Dowry observing society delay marriage when affected by economic shocks.
  - Ceremony expenses.
  - Mobility restrictions.
  - Once mobility comes back, child marriage may increase.

# Summary: Estimation results (school continuation and time use)

- Health shock and job loss may lead to children dropping out of school, but female return migrant seems to encourage them to go back to school once school opens.
  - No significant difference between boys and girls concerning probability of their school continuation. Neither for those aged 16–18.
- Girls increased time spent on caring for others and household chores, and decreased time spent on study, relative to boys.

# Key takeaways

- No evidence of spike in early marriages due to the pandemic up to July 2020
- But more marriage-related activities related to adolescent girls, e.g.
  - households experiencing negative shock more likely to engage in marriage discussions
- No gender difference in probability of school continuation among school-aged children
  - But decreased study time and increased household chores, more severe in the case of of girls
  - ... implies hard-earned gender parity in schooling is under threat

# Key takeaways

- Continued systematic data collection important to understand evolving patterns.
- Programmes to mitigate effects of the pandemic on children and adolescents need to take into account its gender dimensions.

Thanks for listening.  
Questions and comments are welcome.

# Reflections on the Research

*Is COVID-19 bringing about more child marriage in Bangladesh?*



**Sajeda Amin,**  
Senior Associate,  
Population Council

# Money vs Power: The long-term impact of empowering young women

Shahana Nazneen and Kate Vyborny

with Nina Buchmann, Erica Field, Rachel Glennerster, and Xiao Yu Wang

April 2021

# This study

- Randomized control trial (RCT) designed to test the efficacy of two alternative programs, assigned at the community level:
  - Standard empowerment curriculum (BRAC, UNICEF)
  - Novel conditional stipend program; Unique feature: only conditionality is marriage age (no marriage below 18)
- Partners: Save the Children (USA and Bangladesh), and Nike Foundation
- Setting: Rural Barisal, Bangladesh
- Study took place 2007-2016; followup data collection planned 2021-2022 with BRAC JPG

# After school empowerment program run by girls (ages 10-19)



Peer education and homework club



Role playing and negotiation



Outdoor community activities



Financial literacy and saving

# Stipend to parents of unmarried girls aged 15-17

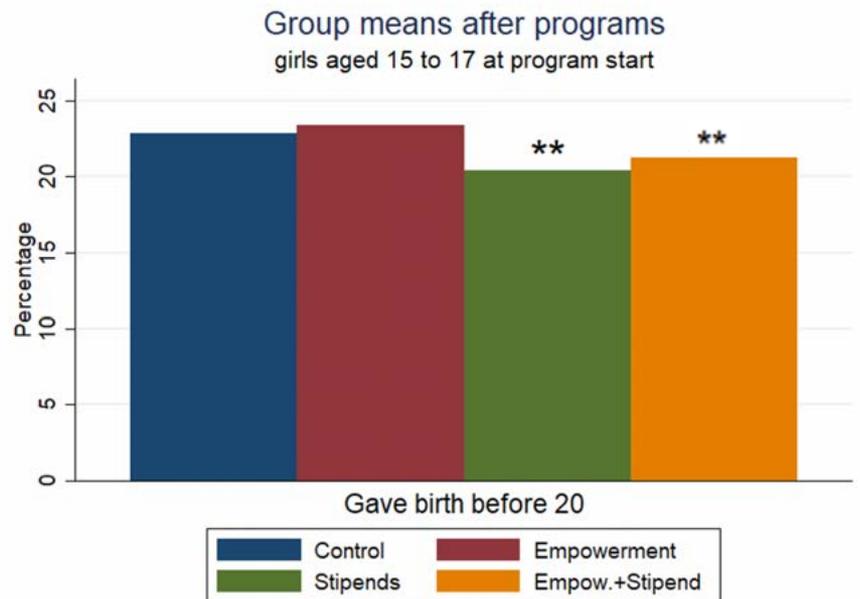
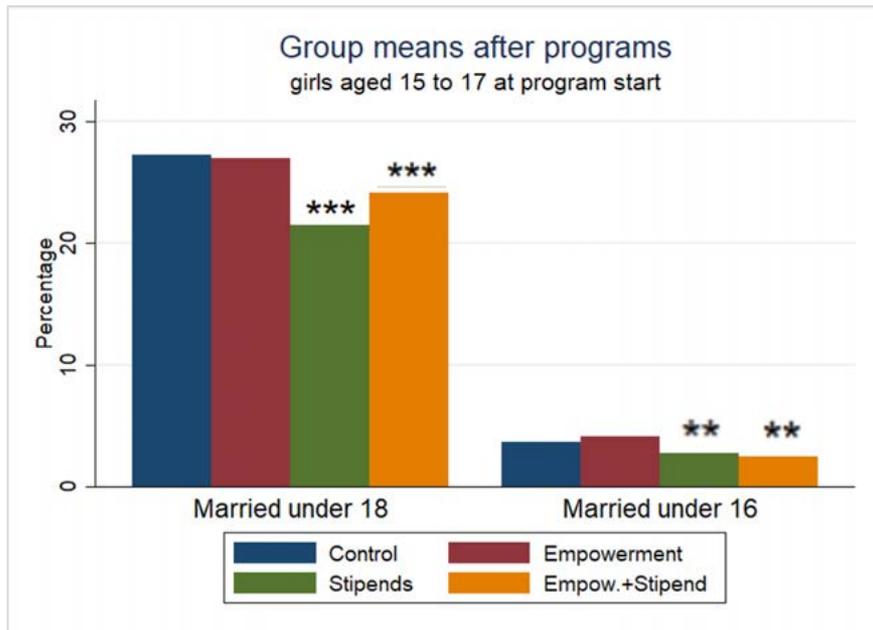


- 4 liters of cooking oil 3 times a year
- Conditional on remaining unmarried
- Worth \$16 a year
- Up to 2 years

# Interventions overview

- **Control (153 villages):** No intervention.
- **Empowerment (151 villages):** Community Mobilization + Social competency peer education + literacy/study support
- **Delayed Marriage package (77 villages):** Oil incentive only to unmarried girls.
- **Full package (77 villages):** Community Mobilization + Social competency peer education + literacy/study support + oil incentive to unmarried girls.

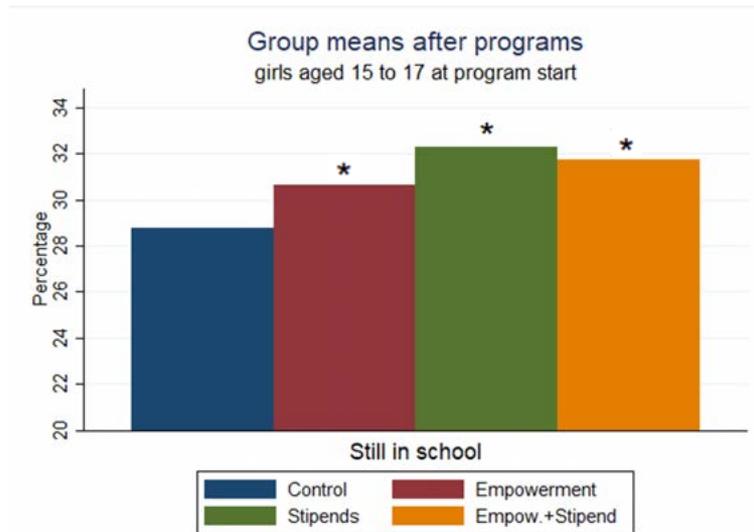
# Stipend program reduced child marriage and teenage childbearing



## Strong results in the census (n=15,711)

- Marriage under 18 is reduced by **21%** by the stipend program.
- Marriage under 16 is reduced by **28%** by the stipend program.
- Stipend reduced the likelihood of teenage childbearing by **11%** (n=15,379).
- No effect of the empowerment program.

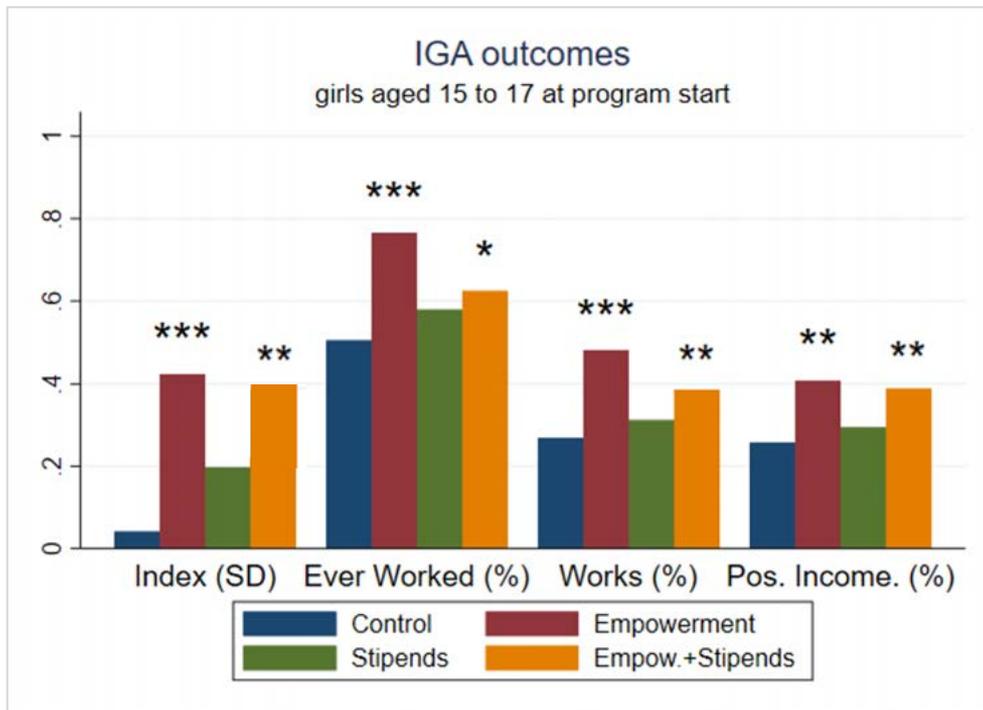
# Stipends and empowerment program improved education



**Large positive impact on school enrollment for girls aged 15-17 (n=10,800)**

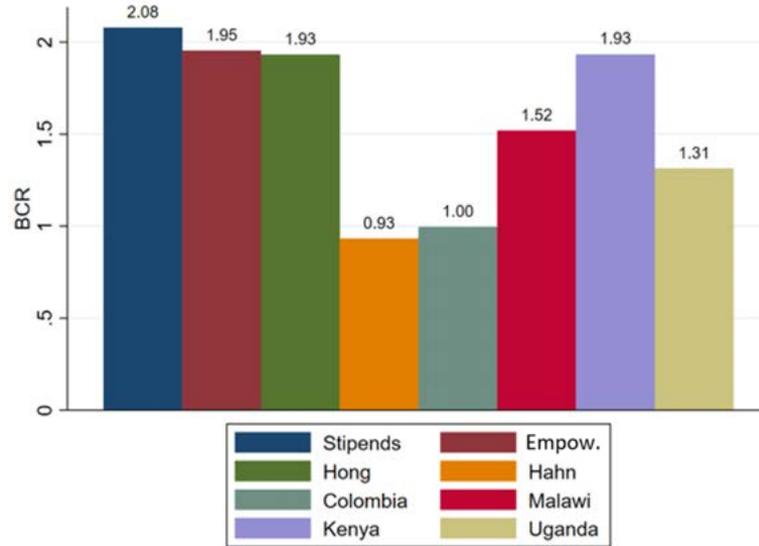
- Girls eligible for **stipend (empowerment)** were **13% (6%)** more likely to be in school at age 22-25.
- Girls eligible for **stipend (empowerment)** had completed **2.5 (2.0) months** of additional schooling.

# Empowerment program improved income generating activities



- Empowerment increases the IGA index by **0.4 SDs**.
- It increases the likelihood that a girl has ever worked by **52%** and that she is currently working by **79%**.
- A larger share of girls earning income among the two empowerment arms:
  - **41%** in empowerment
  - **39%** in empowerment+stipend.
- **No effect of the stipend treatment.**

# Highly cost-effective



Stipends and empowerment program are highly cost-effective

- **Benefit-to-cost-ratios of 2.08 for the stipend program and 1.95 for the empowerment program**

# Potential implications for COVID era

- Families decide about **daughters' education and marriage jointly**; return to school vs. dropout post COVID may be a key transition point
- We need to pay more attention to the **financial drivers of child marriage**, which may increase during COVID economic crisis
- Financial transfers conditional on **staying unmarried** (this study) or **staying in school** (other studies) are effective; consider using this as part of social protection / relief
- **Empowerment program increased women's earning**; this could contribute to economic resilience and help protect them and their families during the shock (plan to survey to assess this)

# Policy Reflections

## *The role of incentives: insights from before COVID-19*



**MD Afzal Hossain Sarwar**, Policy Specialist (Educational Innovation), Aspire to Innovate (a2i) Program, ICT Division, Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology



**Rayhana Taslim**, Project Director, 9 Government Secondary Schools Project, Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, Ministry of Education



Q&A



# Closing Remarks

We would like to hear about how the research discussed today may help you as you think about the issues covered, as well as any unanswered questions you would like to see researchers tackle in the future.

Please complete our short feedback survey here:  
<https://forms.gle/scLoG7ou6xPWNXbq5>.