

Research Summary

The Long School Closure and Child Marriage

Covid-19 that originated in Wuhan, China in December 2019 has made an unprecedented impact all over the world. However, based on previous research and studies, it has been seen that the impact is disproportionately higher on the poor in developing countries. The impact of covid-19 on the poor can be seen in the three dimensions. First, infection-related vulnerabilities such as health impacts due to a congested and unhygienic environment; insufficient treatment in an inadequate medical system; Second, lockdown-driven vulnerabilities such as job loss; return migration; suspension of remittances; and third, school closure related vulnerabilities i.e., learning loss; school discontinuation risk; child marriage for girls.

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, the Bangladesh government announced the closures of schools in mid-March 2020. 78 weeks later, experiencing one of the longest coronavirus shutdowns in the world, all schools and colleges are reopening in phases that began on September 12, 2021. Various studies have been conducted to understand the scope and scale of the long-term impact of the long school closure on the country's millions of children in terms of learning loss, deterioration of mental health, increasing child labor, and child marriage. Poverty, family stress and tension, and violence against children and women have increased. Social and economic inequalities and educational disparities have widened from the pre-pandemic level.

UNESCO has rightly called the learning loss caused by the Covid-19 pandemic "a generational catastrophe." Noted educationist Professor Manzoor Ahmed of Brac University thinks that the present generation who lost almost two school years may not only grow up with irrecoverable education deficits but also their adult life and performance can be affected. Furthermore, it, in turn, may have an adverse impact even on the next generation (Ahmed, August 10, 2021).

To minimize learning loss, the Bangladesh government took a number of initiatives including distance education initiatives such as TV programs and online lessons. However, evidence from surveys and expert opinion suggests that these initiatives have not benefited the large majority of children because of connectivity and device problems (Ahmed, August 10, 2021).

In a 2021 discussion paper, Momoe Makino of the Institute of Developing Economies, IDE-JETRO, Abu Shonchoy of Florida International University, and Zaki Wahhaj of the University of Kent have also studied how school closures potentially affected children through multiple pathways. For their study, the Gaibandha district in the Rangpur division in northern Bangladesh was chosen because this is one of the most poverty-stricken regions of the country with a poverty rate 22% points higher than the rest of the country (World Bank 2019). The study of Makino, Shonchoy, and Wahhaj (2021) predicts that one possible consequence of school closures is school discontinuation and dropout, especially among secondary school students. In the Gaibandha district, primary and secondary completion rates in education are 24% and 11% respectively compared to the national average rates of 33% and 13%, respectively. They anticipate that school closures during an entire academic year can exacerbate these existing regional gaps in educational outcomes.

Another potential consequence of school closures in the region is to increase the rate of female early marriage. According to Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2017, marriage below the age of 18

for women and 21 for men is prohibited. In practice, the minimum age threshold is frequently ignored and rarely enforced.

To explore the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown and school closures on rural families and their children, Makino, Shonchoy, and Wahhaj (2021) conducted a structured telephone-based survey called “COVID-19 Rural Household Survey in Gaibandha, Bangladesh” (referred to as the “CorGaB” survey hereafter) in late June and early July 2020. The CorGaB survey respondents previously participated in baseline surveys in two different research projects in Gaibandha conducted by MOMODa Foundation, a research-oriented development organization in Bangladesh that aims at creating a society with reduced poverty and inequality.

Both baseline surveys were initiated and completed before the COVID-19 induced lockdown. The first project sample includes all households in 240 targeted communities with unmarried girls aged 13–17. The survey was conducted from February 10 to March 20, 2020, and its sample size is 2,568 households. The households in the second project were randomly chosen from all eligible households in 164 targeted communities having at least one unmarried female member aged 15–29. The baseline survey was conducted from October 3 to November 30, 2019, and its sample size is 1,524 households. All the respondents in the two baseline surveys were targeted for interviews in the CorGaB survey. The phone-based CorGaB survey was conducted during the period June 21 to July 9, 2020.

Makino, Shonchoy, and Wahhaj (2021) found that among children enrolled in school before the lockdown and unmarried, about three in four are, according to the respondent, very likely to return to school when the school closure ends, with no significant difference in probability between girls and boys (74% and 73% respectively). Among girls, 7% are already engaged or married and, on average, this engagement/marriage took place 1.2 years before the survey.

For unmarried girls, the survey included a question on whether there were any ongoing discussions within the household or family about her marriage during or immediately after the end of the lockdown. Such discussions were reported for 10% of the unmarried girls in the sample. The lockdown made it difficult to have large gatherings that are common to wedding celebrations in the South Asian region. The survey finds that 5.5% of the sample households reported postponing a wedding during the lockdown. In this context, marriage intentions – as captured by the question on marriage discussions – may serve as a better measure of child marriage risk than the incidence of actual marriages during the lockdown.

As expected, a regression analysis by Makino, Shonchoy, and Wahhaj (2021) finds that the likelihood of marriage/engagement and marriage-related discussions is higher for older girls. In particular, the study finds that the estimated probability of marriage-related discussions during the lockdown increases steadily with the age of the girl. All estimated coefficients for girls aged 15 and older are highly significant. In any case, the finding that certain types of adverse shocks tend to increase marriage-related discussions suggests that any lull in early marriages during the lockdown period may be temporary and that a relaxation of lockdown rules or improvement in the households’ economic situation may lead to a rise in early marriages.

Thus, the findings of the study offer a cautionary tale regarding the potential long-term effects of the pandemic for girls in developing countries like Bangladesh that highlights the urgent need for policymakers to take appropriate countermeasures to preserve recent achievements in education and child rights, including gender parity in education and increase in the age at marriage. It is to

be noted here that the study is continuing, and more rounds of data are being collected to shed more light on this important issue.

References

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