

# Listening to young people's voices under covid-19

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## Revisiting the impact of covid-19 on adolescents in urban slums in Dhaka, Bangladesh: Round 2

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### Introduction

Since March 2020, Bangladesh's overall epidemiological context has been one of high infection and low mortality, even though there was a fear of higher mortality at the beginning of the covid-19 outbreak. As of 25 February 2021, the country has recorded 544,544 covid-19 cases and 8,379 deaths (Johns Hopkins University, 2021). Our findings show that adolescents living in urban low-income settlements have faced the loss of access to education, mental health challenges and financial crisis. Between April and December 2020, we undertook rapid qualitative research in two phases to explore the impact of the covid-19 pandemic and country-wide lockdown on the lived realities of adolescent boys and girls living



in slums and low-income settlements in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This study explores how adolescents and their families experienced the lockdown and income loss, what their coping strategies were, how they dealt with – and continue to deal with – school closures and distance learning, how intra-household relations and community relationships were affected, and how respondents perceived the government's response to the pandemic.

This research is part of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme, a nine-year, mixed-methods longitudinal research and evaluation programme following the lives of 20,000 adolescents in six low- and middle-income countries. GAGE, the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) and the BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (BRAC JPGSPH) partnered to carry out rapid-response research in Dhaka, in order to gain an understanding of vulnerable adolescents' lives in crisis. Emerging findings have been and continue to be shared in real time with programmers and policy makers, in order to render adolescent vulnerabilities more visible and their needs and capabilities more pronounced.

## Background

Although there were concerns that Dhaka's 20 slums would become virus hubs due to their high population density, open sewage systems, crowded family living conditions and economic vulnerability, no reliable data can be found to determine whether covid-19 has affected low-income settlements more than other areas (Mollah and Islam, 2020; Zaman and Hossain, forthcoming).

The government's response has been characterised by prolonged school closures (as of February 2021 schools remain shut), mobility and transport restrictions, and limitations on religious gatherings. Despite the high infection rate, Bangladesh has not witnessed a long-term nationwide lockdown, other than the prolonged closure of educational institutions. To provide assistance to the population, the government has expanded social protection programmes, distributed stimulus packages and supplied relief to the vulnerable categories of the population (Bacil and Soyer, 2020).

Although overall the economy has not been affected as badly as expected, Asian Development Bank estimates that the growth rate decreased from 7% to 5.2% (ADB, 2020), poverty levels have increased – especially in rural areas – and a category of 'new poor' is emerging (Rahman et al., 2020). The South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM) found that the percentage of households below the poverty line had increased from 21.6% in 2018 to 42% by the end of 2020 (Raihan and Bidisha, 2021). The survey found that the proportion of the population classed as extreme poor increased to 28.5% in 2020 compared to 8.4% in 2018. There was a three-fold increase in both urban and rural areas, from 6.1% to 19% in urban areas and 11.2% to 33.2% in rural areas. The extreme poor reduced their expenditure on non-food items by 63% and on food by 30%, and spending on education was reduced across all income categories (Raihan and Bidisha, 2021).

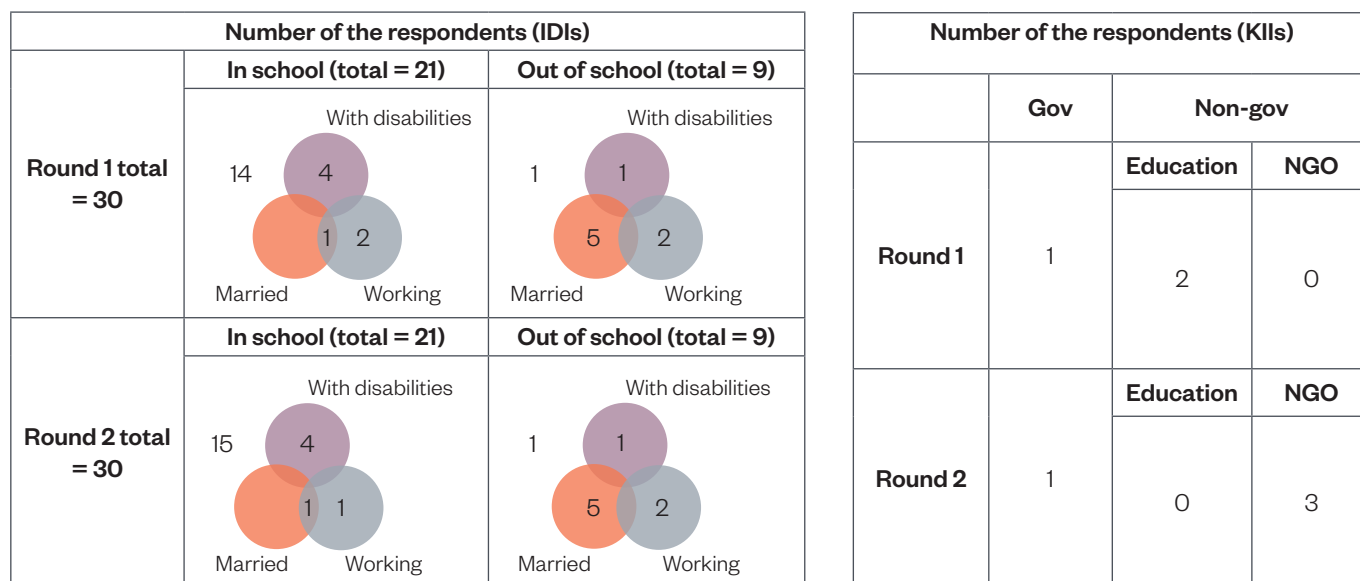
Education has been adversely affected during the covid-19 pandemic, with schools having been closed since 17 March 2020. An ongoing longitudinal survey conducted by GAGE on 780 adolescent boys and girls from the same sites in Dhaka as those of our study shows that only 15% of students reported that their formal school was providing any support during closures, and just 23% of students had had contact with a teacher in the last seven days (Oakley et al., 2020). A survey conducted on 5,193 students by BIGD shows that total study time has declined from 10 hours per day to just two hours (Asadullah et al., 2020). Another survey done in December 2020 for the Education Watch Report 2020–21 found 69.5% of the students did not participate in distance learning and 57.9% said they could not join the classes because they lacked access to electronic devices to do so (Alamgir, 2021). GAGE's ongoing longitudinal survey also found that 91% students want to return to school when the pandemic ends and schools reopen, and only 4% students were worried about dropping out of school as a result of the pandemic crisis (Oakley et al., 2020).

## Methodology

This brief is part of a cross-country series designed to share emerging findings in real time from qualitative interviews with adolescents in the context of covid-19. The young people involved are part of GAGE's longitudinal research sample. This report includes findings from 30 in-depth interviews with adolescents (20 female and 10 male) – eight adolescents from the younger cohort (aged 12–15) and 22 adolescents from the older cohort (aged 16–19) – in three sites, including two peri-urban slum areas and one low-income settlement in Dhaka. Four key informant interviews were also conducted with education, public health and social services experts to understand the measures taken by the government and NGOs in response to the ongoing pandemic.

Data collection was carried out in two phases: the first round of interviews was carried out between April and May 2020 during the nationwide lockdown, and the second round of interviews took place after the relaxation of the restrictions, between September and December 2020. This policy brief presents findings from the interviews that were done during the second round of data collection; please see the earlier [brief](#) for findings from the first round. Most of the respondents for the second round were also part of the first round of data collection. In the first round of data collection, interviewees were from three urban slum sites (two peri-urban sites and one low-income settlement, referred to as Communities A, B and C here). However, in the second round of data collection, 11 of these respondents declined to participate or were unavailable by phone, so researchers included four new respondents from the above-mentioned three urban slum sites and seven new respondents of similar demography from another low-income settlement in Dhaka (referred to as Community D). Respondents were contacted by phone, and interviews were done following a semi-structured questionnaire.

**Figure 1: Demographic information about respondents**



## Findings

### Education in the time of covid-19

This section lays out the findings on adolescents' engagement with distance learning. It reveals the extent to which adolescents have adapted to various modalities of distance learning and the challenges they face in pursuing education.

#### Learning continuity and progression

The persistence of school closures continues to affect school-going adolescents in our sample. In-school adolescents find studying at home by themselves more challenging than studying at school with support from teachers, as they lack guidance and feedback from experienced instructors. As explained by a 14-year-old girl in Community B, *'I don't understand maths but I cannot call my teacher for that problem. But if my school was open then I could tell my teacher about my problems and he would help me to solve them.'* A few respondents stated that their mothers, siblings and other family members were helping them to study, and some adolescents also sought clarification in textbooks and digital content. While this was widely observed in the data collection in April, the second round of interviews conducted later in the year reveal a change in adolescents' attitudes to schooling. It appears that the government's decision to abolish exams in 2020 (to replace them with evaluations of students' learning based on home assignments, which have become known as 'auto-passes') has caused students to lose their motivation to study. An 18-year-old adolescent girl from Community C said, *'I heard the exam will not happen, we will get an auto-pass, this is why I am very stressed and confused. I had good preparation until the lockdown started, now I am not able to focus and study like I used to.'* Moreover, some adolescents who had already taken their Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations shared their concern regarding the government's decision to base the passing of the Higher Secondary Certificate exams (HSC) on SSC results. Compared



▮ Parents asked them to find a job [to support the family financially], so they did that. ... I don't think they will come back [to school]. Maybe this is the end of their education.

(An 18-year-old male adolescent from Community B)

to the first round of interviews conducted during the early days of school closures, adolescents reported reduced study hours at home and were not following any regular study routines.

As the educational effects of the pandemic are prolonged and the absence from school is extended, it is possible that not all enrolled adolescents will return to school or college. As an 18-year-old adolescent boy from Community B shared, *'Adolescents don't have studies right now, what else they can do! Parents asked them to find a job [to support the family financially], so they did that. ... I don't think they will come back [to school]. Maybe this is the end of their education.'*

### Obstacles to distance learning

Financial constraints on the adolescents' households were found to be the most common obstacles to attending online classes for distance learning. As one 19-year-old adolescent girl from Community B said, *'The ones who are rich, only they can properly afford these classes. For example, I am not confident or sure if I can always attend these online classes because it is costly.'* Furthermore, some adolescents mentioned their struggles to afford private tuition or coaching classes due to the financial crisis brought about by the pandemic. Another 19-year-old girl from Community B explained how it is difficult for her to pay the fees for university admission coaching classes, *'I called some coaching [centres for information]. Many coaching [centres] demand 10,000 to 16,000 [taka]. But this is a very high sum for me. It is not possible for me to pay such an amount at this moment.'*

Those who are able to afford external support for learning reported seeking help from textbooks published by private coaching centres, and some better-off students began to engage home tutors once the lockdown was lifted. An 18-year-old male respondent from Community B said, *'Mam [private tutor] comes in the morning. ... [she] helps me to complete my lessons. Whenever I sit alone reading, lots of doubts keep coming in my mind. I couldn't share those with anyone. There were online classes, but I couldn't ask my teachers properly about my doubts. So because of Mam, now I can clear up my doubts directly.'*

In addition to the financial constraints associated with distance learning, other challenges included (1) an inability to communicate with teachers; (2) the lack of resources (e.g. not having any smartphones in the household, a single phone being shared by multiple siblings, poor internet connections and costly internet subscriptions); (3) not having a private space in the household for studying; (4) the structural and technical problems of TV classes (e.g. poor audio and video quality); (5) the absence of classes broadcast for college/HSC-level students; and (6) the timing of the TV classes clashing



## ■ Those who do not have smartphones and use button phones [feature phones], how will they do classes online?

(A 17-year-old girl from Community B)

with other household use of the TV. A 17-year-old girl from Community B stated, *'The biggest problem in lower-middle income families like ours is they may not have a TV in their house to access the classes ... or some families have only one phone in their house, and there are even some people who do not own a phone at all. Those who do not have smartphones and use button phones [feature phones], how will they do classes online?'*

To mitigate the costs associated with learning, two in-school older adolescent boys described how they had taken on paid work during the pandemic but soon had to quit as the workload for their studies increased. One, a 17-year-old adolescent boy from Community C, said, *'My teacher told me to quit the job and concentrate on my studies. So I quit the job and continued my studies again.'*

Our qualitative findings showed how household chores represent another obstacle to distance learning, particularly for adolescent girls. Compared to boys, school-going female respondents face more frequent interruptions during their study time, as they are expected to do household chores. As a 17-year-old adolescent girl from Community C explained, *'There are some situations when I have to stop reading and go for household chores, then there is no more reading for that time.'*

### Digital technology and distance learning

If and when they study, adolescents follow various distance-learning modalities. They mentioned following online classes on Facebook and Zoom authorised by their educational institutions, government-authorised classes broadcast on TV, and receiving help from their teachers through personal phone calls and social media communication (e.g. Messenger). Adolescents also reported browsing Google and following educational videos on various online platforms. As a 19-year-old adolescent boy from Community A said, *'I am watching videos of 10 Minute School (an online educational platform) and Kishor Batayan (online educational platform). I understand something from my online class, something from these videos.'*

All the in-school adolescents mentioned using one or two social networks and/or online teaching platforms (e.g. Facebook Live, WhatsApp, Messenger, Zoom and IMO) for distance learning. The government TV classes are not as widely followed due to inherent structural and technical problems, such as no direct student-teacher interaction and poor audio and video quality.

Respondents also described their difficulties in accessing digital content for distance learning. Many of the adolescents and key informants identified a poor internet connection as the main barrier to digital connectivity. Some adolescents also struggled to purchase internet data because they did not have the funds, as explained by an 18-year-old boy from Community B, *'Sometimes the net connection was very poor. The Wi-Fi connection wasn't working. And sometimes I didn't have money to buy internet data.'*

Our findings suggest that boys have greater access to mobile devices and the internet for study purposes than girls, and girls told us that this was hampering their learning. An 11-year-old girl from Community C said, *'Only my father has a phone, no one else. I don't use my father's phone much. I don't even have their [my friends'] numbers. I don't use Facebook using this phone, because it is a button phone, so Facebook cannot be used in it.'*

Except for a few older and married adolescents, none of the female adolescents surveyed had mobile phones of their own and were obliged to use their parents' or siblings' (mostly brothers') phones to attend online classes. Even though most of the male adolescents did not own mobile phones either, they were more readily given access to parental mobile phones compared to their female counterparts. One of the reasons behind this might be parents' fear of their daughters getting involved in romantic relationships or making contact with men outside of their family through mobile phones. As a ward councillor from Community A explained, *'Guardians are giving less opportunity to girls for using mobile phones. They don't want girls to be addicted to bad habits like talking or communicating with boys.'*

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## Adolescent coping strategies and resilience

In this section, we analyse how adolescents are coping with their changing economic circumstances, and examine how the pandemic continues to affect their psychosocial well-being.

### Economic hardship after lockdown

Compared to our findings from the first round of interviews during the nationwide lockdown, most of the adolescents' earning family members were found to have resumed work and had gradually begun to stabilise the financial condition of

## ► I want to contribute to the family financially but who will give me work? If I had a job I would work, while keeping track of my studies.

(A 17-year old female adolescent from Community B)

their households. However, families continue to feel the impact of the lockdown that lasted for several months and many now find themselves in debt. As one 11-year-old girl from Community C said, *'Even a few days ago my parents had a fight because we are in a lot of debt, then they took out a loan again. The situation worsened after the virus came, and my father couldn't work properly, so he started to take loans.'*

In order to cope with economic hardship, adolescents and their families were still reducing their daily food consumption and limiting expenditure on other necessities such as clothes. An 18-year-old boy from Community B said, *'We are facing financial problems. My father can't go to his job. Our tenants are not paying their house bills regularly, suppose there is a shortage in food... can't eat whatever we want... then can't buy dresses as we were doing in the past.... Now we have to limit our costs.'*

Working adolescents told us that they had gone back to work after the lockdown was lifted. A few adolescents, mostly in-school female respondents, had considered starting work to support their families, yet had faced job shortages. A 17-year-old girl from Community B who is in school said, *'I want to contribute to the family financially but who will give me work? If I had a job I would work, while keeping track of my studies. Like, now I am staying at home all the time other than one or two hours.'* However, the parents of some female adolescents prevented their daughters from going out to work. Another 17-year-old girl from Community B stated, *'No matter how bad the [financial] condition is of the family, my father always says that, "You mustn't go anywhere alone. If you want to work then do whatever you can from the home, learn to do housework, but if you want to do outdoor work then you have to go outdoors, and it's not safe for you to go out alone.'"*

A few adolescents whose family members had tried to change their professions said that that is not feasible at the moment, since the job market is shrinking and there are no new job opportunities.

## Psychosocial well-being after lockdown

The majority of the respondents from the second round of interviews shared their experiences of the lockdown and described its negative repercussions on their mental health. Many felt bored and lonely during that period, a sentiment crystallised in this statement from an 18-year-old boy in Community B, *'I have been going through a lot of changes. Before this, I used to be happy, had interest in doing so many things, but now I don't feel that interest.'*

During the early days of the lockdown, a handful of the in-school respondents reported their happiness about the school closures – imagining time spent idly doing leisure activities instead of studying – but as the closures persisted, they grew tired of staying at home. One 17-year-old girl from Community C said that she was happy at first as she could stop studying for a while and be away from teachers who scolded them, while a 17-year-old boy from Community C said that he enjoyed the initial days of the lockdown very much since he could spend more time with his family than before. But, as time passed, they started to get nervous about their preparations for exams and began to miss their friends. Some of the respondents also described their boredom when watching TV and going on the internet. An 11-year-old girl from Community C said, *'Now I don't feel good to play games every day anymore. Now I just feel like going to school.'*

While in the first round of interviews most of the school-going adolescents reported being worried and confused about their examinations, in the second round of data collection only four adolescents, who are national board examination candidates, mentioned this as a concern. Among this group, there was a fear that their degrees would be seen as less valuable in the job market or for future studies, as both employers and higher education authorities would think that their degrees were granted through the 'auto-pass' rather than on the basis of their examination results.

While school closures continue to be a source of stress and worry for adolescents, the lifting of mobility restrictions and the resumption of economic activities had positively affected adolescent well-being. A 19-year-old girl told us, *'Now I don't feel [as bad] as before. Now I have become a bit habituated with it as it's been almost six to seven months.'*

Boys were more likely to mention going out and meeting their friends to feel better, as this 16-year-old boy from Community A said: *'I'm spending my time outside.... We sing songs by playing my guitar, then a new park opens in our*

## ► I have been going through a lot of changes. Before this, I used to be happy, had interest in doing so many things, but now I don't feel that interest.

(A 18-year-old boy in Community B)



Basically at this age... there is no help or activities.... Mostly people with financial crises or the head of the family get the help ... and the head of the family is facing the main problems. That is why the government and other organisations are trying to help the family head, not the adolescents.

(A ward councillor)

*area, there is a nice place there, we go for a walk there, it's inside our area, we are spending our time inside our area, don't go to any other places.'* Most of the adolescents, both male and female, reported that boys can go out and meet their friends anytime without any problems, whereas girls have to account for their movements and are not allowed to simply leave their homes and stroll along the streets. Parents tend to restrict the mobility of their daughters and ask them not to stay out for too long. A 19-year-old girl from Community C complained, *'Restrictions have increased, like, you can't leave the house. You can't walk with people. You can't go to the market. You can't go here, you can't go there. You have to stay at home all day.'*

Notwithstanding the resumption of economic activities, increased mobility – for boys – to socialise outside the home, and adolescents' adaptation to their 'new normal', the pandemic is nonetheless impacting adolescents' lives. Key informants mentioned that there are no services available to help adolescents cope with this situation, and no adolescent-specific interventions. Most government and NGO programmes target family and household welfare. A ward councillor explained that adolescents are overlooked: *'Basically at this age... there is no help or activities.... Mostly people with financial crises or the head of the family get the help... adolescents aren't getting any help... this is happening because they are a part of the family... and the head of the family is facing the main problems. That is why the government and other organisations are trying to help the family head, not the adolescents.'*

## Impact of digital connectivity on adolescents

Besides studying during the pandemic, adolescents have gained a lot of idle time at home which they largely spend watching TV, listening to music on mobile phones or the radio, browsing the internet and connecting with their peers through social media. Younger adolescents were found to use their parents' mobile phones with limited access to the internet, whereas the adolescents who owned personal mobile phones were all older adolescents who therefore had more access to the internet and social media. A 20-year-old female respondent from Community A girl described her attachment to the internet and how it allows her to connect with friends and get information on covid-19, *'Personally, I am addicted to mobile and TV. These are the only two mediums to pass time now. I watch YouTube, use Facebook and talk to my friends. Also, there's a lot of precautionary [information] on Facebook regarding coronavirus, then there's a lot of news shown; so I am getting to know these and becoming aware.'*

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## Intra-household relations

As the covid-19 pandemic continues to unfold, it has become apparent that intra-household relationships have been subjected to changes as well. This section outlines the key findings on how the relationship dynamics between adolescents and members of their household have evolved during this period.

### Domestic work allocation

In keeping with socio-cultural norms that dictate household chores are solely women's responsibility, our data found that female members of the household were doing most of the housework. Unlike the male adolescents, all the female respondents stated that domestic work is an integral part of their daily routine. For almost all of the school-going female adolescents, the closure of schools during the pandemic had solidified their role as their mothers' 'helping hand' in chores. A large number of female adolescents mentioned that they had started learning how to cook and manage more household work during this time.

One key informant emphasised, *'Girls have to do the household chores in the family. Now in this situation, they are not going to school. So they have to contribute more in household chores. If she was not in the house in a normal situation, others would do her work but now it is a pressure to them to help in all the household chores.'* As married girls were already responsible for domestic chores since the time of their marriage, they reported no change in their responsibilities. One

► As the girls will go to their in-laws, family members create pressure on them to learn the household chores perfectly. Boys do not have that pressure.

(A 17-year-old adolescent from Community D)

17-year-old adolescent from Community D explained how girls are trained to manage the household even before they are married, *'As the girls will go to their in-laws, family members create pressure on them to learn the household chores perfectly. Boys do not have that pressure.'*

Although traditionally boys are not expected to do household chores, a number of the adolescent boys also mentioned doing housework tasks such as helping their mothers, washing clothes, buying groceries from the bazaar, cutting vegetables and taking care of younger siblings. However, this could be because most of them lived in families where their mothers were the only female members of the household, so they had to step in and support.

The female respondents were more likely to consider domestic work a good way to pass the time during the lockdown, whereas most male respondents viewed it as an obligation. One 18-year-old adolescent boy from Community B shared, *'My mother asks me to help her with household chores. [If I don't] she scolds me.'* Moreover, there seems to be a common perception that the older men of the household, particularly the male breadwinners such as fathers or husbands, work hard outside all day and hence could not be expected to do household chores. As an 18-year-old married adolescent girl from Community A explained, defending her husband, *'My husband? See, he came back from work and took a shower and left his pants here and the bucket somewhere else. He's like this. He doesn't do any work when he gets back. He works all day, right?'*

### Intra-household relations and violence

Our findings revealed that tension and arguments in the household have escalated over the course of the pandemic, with monetary issues being the most common cause.

*'People are staying at home now. People who are working in the garments and other private organisations, lost their jobs and couldn't keep up with their family expenditure, that's why quarrels between family members are on the rise,'* stated a government service provider from Community A in a key informant interview.

A significant number of adolescents have acknowledged behavioural changes among their family members and most of them have associated it with the financial crisis in the household. As one 20-year-old girl explained, *'Certainly, there has been a change in the behaviour of my family members, because when a person doesn't have money or can't work as before, he becomes depressed. They become mentally unstable, leading them to have behavioural changes like getting angry very easily or being in an irritable mood.'*

Most of the adolescents also described a negative atmosphere in their households that was affecting their family relationships and communication. The adolescents told us that their fathers were irritable and behaved angrily most of





My dad doesn't want to understand that during the lockdown every single person is at home, and that's why we're consuming more food. Our stomachs don't understand that we have less [money].

(A 17-year-old girl from Community C)

the time. A 17-year-old girl from Community C related the tensions in her family: *'My dad gets paid on a weekly basis. He has a lot of arguments with my mom about monetary issues. Apparently he'll ask for an account of expenses at the end of the day. But my dad doesn't want to understand that during the lockdown every single person is at home, and that's why we're consuming more food. Our stomachs don't understand that we have less [money].'* Moreover, a ward councillor from Community A expressed his concern for school-going adolescents who are now staying at home with their families, *'They (adolescents) should be going to school, college. However, now they have to spend their time at home, this is why they are facing some difficulties, especially with their families. Sometimes they are having disagreements with them [parents].'*

Some respondents reported increased domestic violence in their households. Not only are the mothers of the adolescents being beaten, but, in some cases, adolescents themselves are also the victims of physical and verbal abuse. In the case of an 11-year-old girl from Community C, her father's income has dropped significantly and therefore he is always angry, *'My father doesn't behave nicely with my mother. Yes, they quarrel sometimes regarding money issues. It has increased because of the virus. The other day, my sister and I got into a fight, then she started shouting. That's why they [parents] got angry. So then what my father did is, he grabbed me and punched me four to five times, then he slapped me a lot.'*

A 20-year-old girl from Community A reported that her father had begun using drugs as he was out of work during the pandemic, and that this had caused tension and unrest in her family, *'In this time of corona, my father has got no work, which is why he also got addicted to a drug. So now my family is very annoyed. No, no, this wasn't the case before corona came. It never happened when work and everything was all right. But in this present time of corona, father doesn't have work, so boredom has come while sitting idle in leisure time, this boredom has led him to go to those places of drugs.'*

### Box 1: The life of a married urban slum adolescent girl during covid-19

Ritu (fictional name) is a married adolescent girl living in one of Dhaka's urban slums in Community B. She studied up to Grade 5, but before she could be admitted to Grade 6, she was married off. She was only 12 years old when she had to drop out of school and get married to a man who was 23 or 24 years old. Soon after marriage, she became pregnant and then there was no way for her to continue her studies.

Ritu is now the mother of a two-year-old boy and is very concerned about his education and upbringing. She lives with her husband, son and grandmother in a rented house. The building she resides in houses 14 families, who share just two latrines. While her husband works in a garment factory and her grandmother works as a domestic helper, she stays at home looking after her son and managing the household. She has no friends or peers, not even any close neighbours to share her thoughts and feelings with.

During the nationwide lockdown, both her husband and her grandmother lost their jobs. To cope, they had to cut down their expenses and daily food consumption: *'We managed. We ate mashed potato. And vegetables, legumes, lentils, bharta [a simple dish of mashed vegetables or items like potato or chilli]. Before [the lockdown], things were going well. We were eating. But right now we have less money at hand. That's why we do everything in a reduced manner. Or else it will be a problem, and there's a baby in the house.'* They could not pay their house rent for months and her husband had to take loan from his friends to cover the household expenses. During the lockdown, she used to do all the domestic work by herself with no help from her grandmother or husband, *'At that time (lockdown) naturally housework increased, since everyone was at home, household chores increased. But I did all that. He [my husband] never did [any household chores] and now since his office is open he leaves the house in the morning and comes back at 8-10 in the night.'*

In her free time, she watches TV and reads the Quran. Once the lockdown was lifted their household financial situation started to improve.

Ritu has plans to move back to her village within the next two or three years. She wants to raise her son in the village as she believes her son will not get proper education in urban Dhaka, *'It will take one or two years [to move to the village]. My child is growing up too. I have to ensure his good education. If we stay here (in Dhaka), children will not become good persons.'* She wants to learn tailoring work so that she can financially contribute to the family once they move. Ritu is now counting the days until she and her family can live the life she aspires to.

## ► Our relationship improved because my husband didn't understand the value of money before, but now he does.

(A 18-year-old married girl from Community B)

However, in some cases, relationships between household members have improved. Two respondents described a more harmonious relationship between family members, and revealed that the reason was because the male members had started taking more financial responsibility during the pandemic. As an 18-year-old married girl from Community B stated, *'Our relationship improved because my husband didn't understand the value of money before, but now he does. He understands that if he spends money on something, he could have used it for something else.'* Another respondent told us that he was spending more time with his family now that his school is closed, hence their relationship had improved.

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## Adolescent perceptions of the community and government

Finally, this section explores adolescents' perceptions of their community and the government's response.

### Community relationships

The various difficulties associated with the pandemic seem to have led to a deterioration of community relations. In the first round of interviews, interviewees reported that law enforcement services were using violence to impose effective lockdown. In the second round, police violence was not reported; instead fighting and quarrelling within communities appeared to be on the rise. *'Distance has increased among people, not necessarily conflict, but distance has increased. Love and care for each other has become less than before,'* as stated by a 20-year-old girl in Community A. It was a common perception that while disputes within the community had decreased as now people avoid crowds, there was less shared concern. An 18-year-old boy from Community C said, *'Before this happened [quarrel, yelling] because people used to get together, but now they fear corona, so they don't. When there wasn't any corona a lot of people came from a lot of places, gathered and got involved in quarrels.'*

Most adolescents stated that criminal activities like robbery and theft have increased in their communities. An 18-year-old boy from Community B thought that this was due to roads being less crowded than before. He said, *'Yes... snatching*

### Box 2: Child marriage

Over the next five years, 1.8 to 2.5 million girls are expected to be at risk of child marriage as a result of the socio-economic crisis brought on by the pandemic. The greatest number of these girls is expected to be in South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, which is among the top-10 countries in the world for rates of child marriage (UNICEF, 2020). The risk factors for child marriage that covid-19 has exacerbated include: the closure of schools, household income instability and food insecurity, and reduced access to sexual and reproductive health services (Save the Children, 2020).

To discuss child marriage via virtual interviews, we approached the subject with the help of an illustrative vignette, whereby adolescents responded to fictional characters in a story rather than discussing their own lives. This tool revealed that most of the adolescents were familiar with the idea of girls getting married at a young age due to financial crises in households caused by the pandemic. A 19-year-old girl from Community A told us, *'My best friend had to get married because of financial issues. Her parents were separated and her mother was facing difficulties to maintain the family. So she arranged her marriage.'*

Our data found that child marriage is seen as a way of preserving the 'honour' of girls and their families, as stated by a 17-year-old boy from Community A, *'There are adolescents who get into more than one relationship at a time. Elders see them together. Then parents get their daughter married to save their honour.'* A few adolescents, mostly female, reported that parents tended to marry their daughters off at an early age out of fear that their daughters could begin romantic relationships or be subjected to sexual harassment; both of which could harm the girl's image in the community. *'The community I live in is a slum area. A lot of boys gather here. The boys harm the girls, they insult girls a lot, that's why girls in this community are married off earlier,'* explained a 17-year-old girl from Community C.

Although almost all the adolescent respondents were aware of the minimum legal age of marriage for girls and the risks of child marriage, one 17-year-old female respondent from Community C argued that it is better to get married at an early age instead of living a tough life in poverty and being a burden on parents. Talking about the character presented in the vignette, she explained: *'If I were in Ayesha's [the protagonist's] place, I would have abided by my parents' decision. I would have understood that we are in poverty, my parents can't afford my expenses, so that's why I would be better off after marriage.... It's better to get married so that I can live more happily.'*

► A lot of boys gather here. The boys harm the girls, they insult girls a lot, that's why girls in this community are married off earlier.

(A 17-year-old girl from Community C)

*and theft occur in our community. Some of them are doing this before and some are starting during this period. Recently I witnessed a snatching. It happened in front of me. Two boys with a motorcycle came and snatched a woman's phone from her hand. It happened in the evening! I think they are doing this because roads are empty nowadays.'*

There is no consensus on whether substance abuse has increased or decreased during the pandemic. Most adolescents mentioned that substance abuse in their respective communities had decreased during the pandemic period, following a decline in social gatherings or 'adda' on the streets and at tea stalls. However, a 17-year-old girl from Community B reported a rise in substance abuse among adolescents in the community because of increased pressures on households and from peers. An 18-year-old boy from Community B confirmed this: 'Yes, many of them use substances when they feel bored... in my friend circle as well.... They are using substances like Ganja, Baba [Yaba]... and continuously they are smoking cigarettes.'

### Adolescents' view of the government response

Although most of the respondents viewed the government response to the pandemic positively, they criticised local government and NGOs working at grassroots level for the mismanagement and corruption in executing tasks mandated by the central government. Almost all the adolescents said that they had received no help or support in response to the pandemic from the government bodies in their community; the government only provided aid during the first few days of the lockdown, and no support is being provided anymore. A few mentioned receiving aid (e.g. food, protective kits) from NGOs or local voluntary groups. One adolescent even reported incidences of corruption and bribery in the aid distribution, as described by an 18-year-old girl from Community B, 'You have to give 200/300 taka as tips. They give a bit of rice and lentils. They give rice and lentil and submit our names. Then later they ask for 200 taka.... Whereas they are not doing anything difficult. They are only submitting the names, that's all. Even those papers we have to photocopy.... But I didn't get the food.'

The school-going adolescents had mixed opinions about the government's new initiative of introducing weekly take-home assignments for students up to Grade 10 instead of taking in-class examinations to find out the areas where they have to improve. Some respondents thought that this open-book write-up had no impact on their learning and others thought that it would improve their writing skills.

Few adolescents expressed dissatisfaction about the government's decision to promote all students from Grades 1 to 5 without traditional final examinations and based instead on their performance during the remote-learning period. One of the respondents said that the government's decision to automatically promote students had led some students to become more relaxed about their studies. A few older respondents also shared their concern regarding the government decision to base HSC results on SSC results, referring to this as 'auto-pass', since they fear it will have implications for their future job prospects. A 19-year-old girl from Community A said, 'Now there is auto-pass everywhere – there is no value in auto-pass. Again I have to study for "varsity" admission, I don't have guidance for that either. I am tense about that.... Even in the job field, whom will they give the job to? Those who have an auto-pass or those who passed by working hard?'

## Conclusion

Findings from the follow-up phone interviews with 30 adolescents residing in urban slums of Dhaka, conducted five months after the first round of interviews, reveal their current situation and experiences in real-time and how they have evolved over the course of the covid-19 pandemic. This follow-up study has delved further into the impacts of the pandemic on the lives of these adolescents that were first discussed in the previous study, along with some new findings.

Although the lockdown was lifted and restrictions were minimal, the effect on livelihoods and everyday lives has been significant. Families living in low-income settlements are still struggling to regain their financial stability and repay their debts; which in turn has resulted in an escalation in familial conflict and domestic violence. Even within the sample of adolescents studied we could see that the socio-economic differences between families in these settlements affected nutrition, indebtedness, continuing of education, and access to devices and the internet. As various studies have shown, distance learning introduced to compensate for school closures has been challenging. Our findings show that it is even more difficult for poorer families in underprivileged neighbourhoods of the city. Another dimension of the discrimination



is between young girls and boys, with girls being even more disadvantaged in terms of access to devices and internet and also having the time to devote to studies.

Amid the chaos and crisis, both at the community and household levels, the overall uncertainty about the future is taking a toll on adolescents' mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. The importance of social relations in communities, schools and families for adolescent well-being and development came out clearly. There are clear gender differences in how covid-19 has affected boys' and girls' education, domestic burdens, mobility and future risks and potential. While boys are able to go out to meet their friends and relax, this option is extremely limited for girls. Again, whereas housework is seen as a useful skill for girls to develop and has increased for them, it is seen as an annoying obligation for boys and minimally carried out.

Another important difference that emerged among the adolescents was in terms of age differences where older adolescents were found to have more voice and autonomy regarding whether they would work, be allowed to leave the house and what role they would play in the family and the community.

## Key policy priorities for adolescents

Through our findings and the discussion above some key priorities for adolescents for policy and programmatic response have emerged and we propose the following actions.

1. **Develop strategies, material and training for remote education of low-income-community adolescents, and improve digital connectivity by reducing the cost of data.** This is vital to ensure that the differences in access and use of online resources across socio-economic groups and genders do not increase existing class and gender divides.
2. **Increase awareness of the effects of the pandemic on adolescent psychosocial well-being among programmers and policy makers, and provide opportunities for adolescents to volunteer in their communities and access recreational facilities.** Our findings clearly show the importance of social relations in communities, schools and families for adolescents' mental well-being, and initiatives to promote these must be put in place.
3. **Address the risks identified by the research of potential increases in school dropout, child labour and child marriage following the covid-19 crisis as a matter of urgency.** Increased poverty and overall uncertainty about the future may put more pressure on parents to abandon their children's education in favour of employment or, particularly in the case of girls from poor families, marriage. Concerted action at various levels by multiple actors must be taken before these risks become a reality. For example, at the community level, girls should be encouraged to continue their studies to help strengthen their voice and agency and enable them to resist child marriage.

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