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## GIRL Center Research Brief

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# GENDERED EFFECTS OF COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES: PAKISTAN CASE STUDY



BANGLADESH



INDIA



KENYA



PAKISTAN

### AT A GLANCE

As schools closed and reopened throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, a study was conducted to assess the gendered impacts of COVID-19 school closures on adolescent girls and boys in three districts in the province of Punjab. Data as well as discussions and interviews with adolescents, teachers, and parents shed light on difficulties in accessing and adjusting to remote learning, learning loss, deterioration of behaviors and health, and other effects. Based on these findings and further reflections by stakeholders on the successes and gaps of mitigation measures, the case study proposes recommendations for improved teacher training, digital access, alternative learning options, and a gendered focus in interventions.

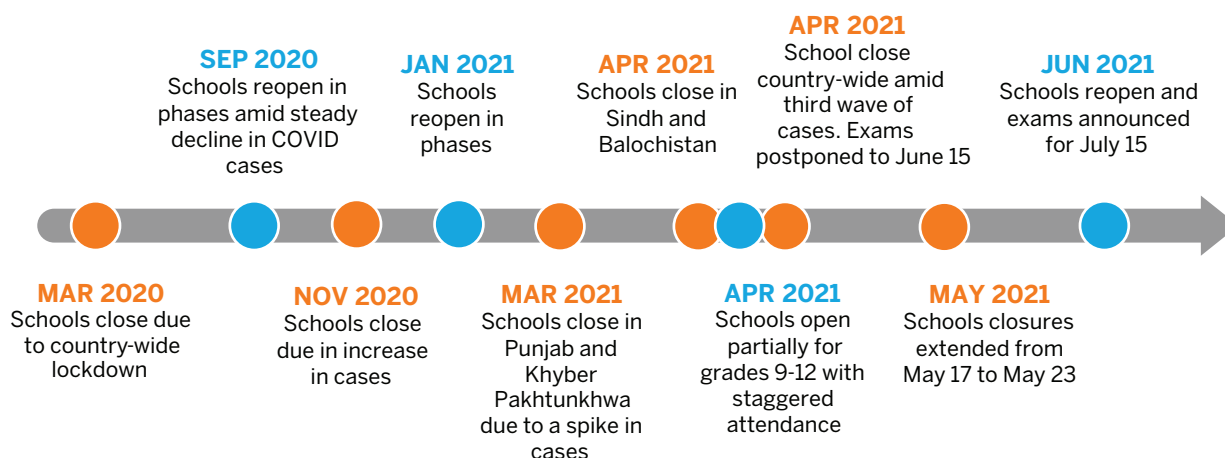
### BACKGROUND

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

### Education in Pakistan Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic

- **School system:** Public and private institutions are present across five levels – pre-primary (ages 2-4), primary (grades 1-5), middle (grades 6-8), secondary (grades 9-10), and higher secondary (grades 11-12). Secondary and higher secondary schools are also divided between Pakistan and British schooling systems.
- **Enrollment and retention:** Despite improvements in education indicators over the years, Pakistan has been facing a long-standing challenge to ensure all children attend, stay, and learn in school, as an estimated 22.8 million children aged 5-16 (44% of the age group) were out of school prior to the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Progress has also been hampered by insufficient budget allocations, poor implementation of policies, inadequate facilities, lack of teaching capability, outdated

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



curricula, poor examination systems, and high cost of education.<sup>3</sup>

- **Gender equity:** Boys outnumber girls in enrollment levels at all tiers of the education system. Social norms which prioritize the education of boys over girls due to the higher perceived returns from investment and their lack of security in public spaces exclude girls from educational opportunities. Lower income and rural residence further contribute to these challenges.<sup>4</sup>

### COVID-19 School Closures

School closures and re-openings in Pakistan mirrored the trajectory of the three waves of the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020. In 2020, exams were postponed and cancelled with students being advanced to the next grade based on their performance in the previous academic year. In 2021, it was announced that while students in grades 1 to 8 would be advanced again to the next grade without exams, local and British boards exams were to be held for grades 9 to 12. During the periods of school closure, online classes, television broadcasts of classes, and WhatsApp groups for teachers and students were among measures implemented for remote learning (Figure 2).

### Case Study

The case study examined the gendered impacts of COVID-19 school closures on education

outcomes and beyond for adolescent girls and boys aged 15-19 in three districts in Punjab province. The three districts reflect varying socioeconomic descriptors: Rawalpindi (urban and non-agricultural), Rahimyar Khan (rural and agricultural), and Gujrat (semi-urban and semi-agricultural). 30 In-depth interviews and 6 focus group discussions were conducted with adolescents, parents, and teachers, as well as 6 key informant interviews with stakeholders in education at the national and sub-national levels. Data collected from Program Monitoring and Implementation Unit (PMUI) of the Punjab Education Sector Reform Program (PESRP) and the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) was also used for the study.

## GENDERED EFFECTS ON EDUCATION OUTCOMES AND BEYOND

### Gender expectations, disparities and limitations

- **Digital access was the greatest barrier to remote learning**, disproportionately affecting girls from lower-income and rural areas. Only 31% of girls, all in urban areas, reported owning personal mobile phones, 93% of boys across the 3 districts own mobile phones. In the context of income constraints, family resources were directed preferentially towards boys.



Photo credit: UNICEF.

- Students **preferred to study with relatives**, more often female, to get help when possible, for both genders and across socioeconomic backgrounds. Others that could afford to do so **joined supplementary academies**. Some students in urban areas also reported utilizing **online resources** such as YouTube, with girls taking these measures more often than boys.
- While **girls were primarily occupied with household chores, boys spent more time outdoors** with friends than before the pandemic. Recreational activities became almost non-existent for girls.
- Adolescents in some areas reported involvement in **economic activities to supplement family income**, with boys more extensively engaged (in manual wage-labor or supporting father's work) than girls, due to cultural norms and restrictions on female mobility. Girls who did report working for an income were restricted to indoor activities, such as stitching or teaching tuition, in addition to supporting the household through housework.

#### Gender restrictions and risks

- In addition to the unaffordability of devices and poor internet connectivity,

**cultural norms regulated girls' access to technology** – out of parents' fear of heading to interaction with males outside the family. Restriction on the mobility of girls also challenged some girls in their ability to participate in group-studying with friends who had mobile phones, while boys did not report facing these constraints.

- Adolescents, especially girls, reported **mental stress from education disruption and learning loss**. The perceived long-term impacts on their academic careers and professional lives were noted as a source of stress by all the adolescents interviewed but most emphatically by girls.
- Girls also reported feeling isolated, bored and irritated due to the limited spaces open to them, including COVID-19 school closures as well as shopping malls, weddings, or meeting with relatives.
- Students, teachers, and parents expressed concern for the **deteriorating physical health** of adolescents, linked to worsened eyesight due to perceived excessive use of mobile phones and lack of physical exercise. Girls were especially impacted due to limited activities available to them, while boys reported increased time open for recreational activities and sports.

**FIGURE 2. SUCCESSES AND GAPS IN MEASURES UNDERTAKEN TO MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES**

| # | Intervention                          | Description   | Successes   | Gaps  |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| 1 | Online classes                        | Except for low-cost private schools, <b>all private schools set up online classes.</b>          | Students <b>did not need other remote learning interventions.</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Access issues</b> for poorer students and girls, especially mobile phones.</li> <li>• <b>Internet connectivity and affordability</b> of data packages posed further barriers to access.</li> <li>• Classes were <b>disengaging and unclear.</b></li> </ul>  |
| 2 | Teleschool                            | <b>8 AM-6 PM TV program</b> by MoFEPT and private partners airing video lessons.                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launched <b>within 2 months of first school closures.</b></li> <li>• <b>Widespread awareness.</b></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Not integrated formally</b> in school structure.</li> <li>• <b>English instruction</b> created a barrier for those studying in a different language.</li> <li>• <b>Electricity shortfalls</b> prevented children in poorer and rural localities.</li> <li>• <b>Gender norms restricting girls' access to television</b> posed difficulties in poorer and rural localities.</li> </ul> |
| 3 | WhatsApp groups and physical homework | Ministry recommended that <b>teachers make WhatsApp groups with students and their parents.</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabled <b>alternative student engagement</b> where digital solutions were not available.</li> </ul>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success depended on <b>teacher motivation.</b></li> <li>• Many were <b>not able to utilize this facility.</b> Teachers did not make WhatsApp groups, were made several months after the first school closures, or faced connectivity issues.</li> <li>• <b>Not sufficiently publicized.</b></li> </ul>   |

- Girls were excited to be able to meet friends again, highlighting schools as the primary avenue for girls to engage in recreation and socialization, across socioeconomic backgrounds.

### Loss of gender-specific protection

- Parents and teachers perceived **adolescent boys were increasingly disruptive and ill-mannered** at home and at school when schools reopened, and girls echoed these observations noting that boys and male siblings had gotten ruder and began misbehaving toward their parents.
- Some reported **adolescent boys increasingly teasing or harassing girls**, linked to changes in time use among boys during school closures. The gender gap in safe access to public spaces and educational facilities is likely to have widened further

in this context. Some parents expressed reluctance to send their daughters to study anywhere outside their immediate localities of residence because of the perceived deterioration in their physical safety.

- No respondents reported directly experiencing pressures related to early marriage, and only a few mentioned knowing people with this experience.

### GENERAL EFFECTS

- Some rural and lower-income respondents mentioned facing **food insecurity and nutritional deficiencies**, due to COVID related unemployment but unrelated to school closures and unlinked with gender.
- Adolescents emphasized **deterioration of numeracy skills, difficulties completing**

the yearly syllabus, and long-term effects of compounding learning loss. While girls were more vocal about COVID-19's impact on education, girls, boys, and parents agreed on the adverse impact on education being the greatest loss incurred by the pandemic.

- **Difficulty in affording school expenses for lower-income families** interfered with both boys' and girls' ability to return to school after periods of closure. Teachers also reported encouraging parents to continue sending children to school as students were dropping out due to financial pressure.
- **Challenges in returning to school for students** included unavailability of uniforms and textbooks, fear of contracting COVID-19, following protocol at school, difficulties coping with coursework and syllabus, and more.

## REFLECTIONS ON SUCCESSES AND GAPS IN MITIGATING EFFECTS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES

In Figure 2, stakeholders reflected on 3 measures undertaken to mitigate the effects of school closures with their perspectives on success and gaps against each mitigation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Implement teacher training programs** to improve online lectures, including for use of educational technology and mobile applications, increased teacher-student interaction, and inclusion of recreational activities in weekly schedules.
- **Improve access to remote learning** for students with limited digital access through the provision of low-cost cellular technology or student data packages, as well as better network coverage and internet connectivity. Establish School Management Committees (SMCs) as a platform to facilitate coordination among students, teachers, and parents.

- **Provide alternatives to virtual classrooms**, mainly socially distanced in-person learning such as community teaching groups and centers under the responsibility of SMCs.
- **Ensure a gender focus in all interventions** to decrease widening gender gaps in digital access and education outcomes. This includes, but is not limited to, gender sensitization programs, teacher trainings, community teaching groups, online programs to increase digital access for girls, and mechanisms to check adolescent boys' behaviors and protect the safety of girls.

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The Girl Innovation, Research, and Learning (GIRL) Center is a global research center that generates, synthesizes, and translates evidence to transform the lives of adolescent girls. Through rigorous research about what works — and what doesn't — we can better direct limited resources to support evidence-based solutions that improve girls' lives.

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