Young people's voices during COVID-19: Adolescents in urban slums and low-income settlements in Dhaka during COVID-19

Maheen Sultan & **Farhana Alam**

Research Team Members

- Sabina Faiz Rashid (Principal Investigator)
- Maheen Sultan (Co-Principal Investigator)
- Silvia Guglielmi
- AKM Mazharul Islam
- Farhana Alam
- Taslima Aktar
- Mehedi Hasan Anik
- Saklain Al Mamun
- Samira Ahmed Raha
- Sajib Rana
- Alvira Farheen Ria
- Prantik Roy

Structure of the presentation

1. Objectives
2. Methodology
3. Adolescent knowledge about COVID-19
4. Education in the time of COVID-19
5. Adolescent coping strategies and resilience
   - Economic hardships during and after lockdown and coping
   - Psychosocial well-being during and after lockdown and coping
6. Intra-household relations and violence*
7. Adolescent Perceptions of the Community & Government*
8. Conclusions and policy implications

COVID-19 Situation in Bangladesh

- **26th** position globally with **469,423** cases *(John Hopkins University, 3 Dec 2020)*
- **6,748** deaths with **1.43%** death rate; overall infection rate was **16.72%** of total tests *(3 Dec 2020)*
- **State-sanctioned shutdown** from 26 Mar to 31 May
- All **educational institutions closed** *(17 Mar 2020)*, HSC and equivalent **exams postponed, then cancelled** by Ministry of Education *(7 Oct 2020)*
- Total study time declined from **10 hours to 2 hours** *(COVID-19, Schooling and Learning Survey 2020)*
- **Most did not get external support**; those who did, support was far from income loss *(PPRC-BIGD Survey 2020)*
- Per capita food expenditure decreased by **21%** in rural and **27%** in urban slums (Apr vs Feb). House rent and utilities an urban burden *(PPRC-BIGD Survey 2020)*

Objective of Research

Adolescents from low income settlements of Dhaka city going through physical, emotional and cognitive transitions, are particularly vulnerable during the pandemic

Rapid qualitative research study to understand the impact of the pandemic and country-wide lockdown on the lived realities of adolescent boys and girls, living in slums and low-income settlements in Dhaka

Sharing emerging findings in real time

Methodology

Qualitative study to explore the impacts of the COVID-19 on urban slum adolescents

Phone interviews conducted with mobile phone recharge provided to respondents

Purposive sampling with basic criteria - age, sex, marital status, physically challenged condition, working status & school drop-out

2 Peri-urban slums (Community A & C) and **1 low-income settlement** (Community B) located in Dhaka

Sample

Research population:

- Adolescents who lived in selected **urban slums and low income settlements** of Dhaka city and participants of **previous GAGE baseline project** (Conducted in 2018-19)

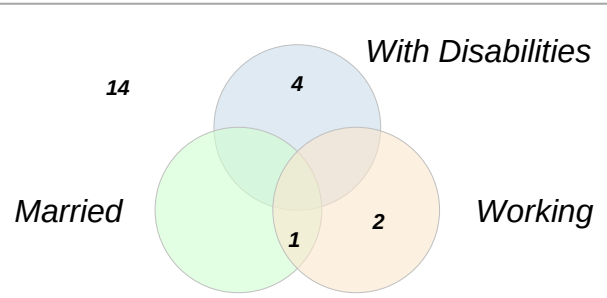
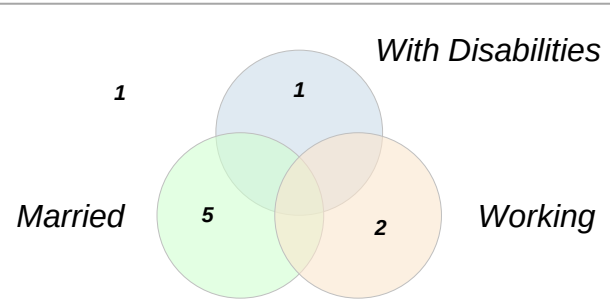
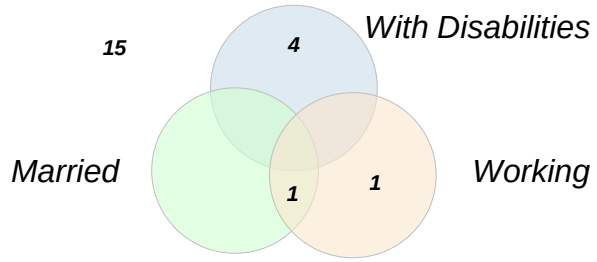
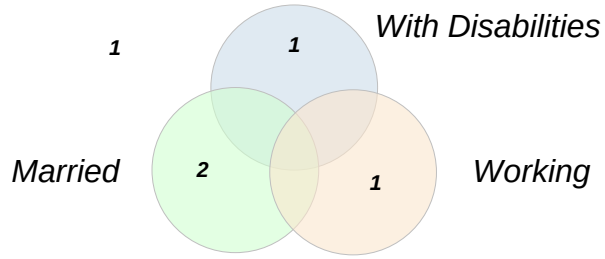
Age Group:

- The previous GAGE baseline project consisted of **10-12 year olds**, and **15-17 year olds**
- Now, when we revisited this sample 2 years later, the age group consisted of **12-14 year olds** and **17-19 year olds**

Sample size:

- **30 adolescents** and 3 KIIs in **round 1** and **26 adolescents** and 4 KIIs in **round 2**
- The ratio for boys and girls in the sample is **1:2**

Demographic Information of the Respondents

Number of the respondents (IDIs)		
	In School (Total = 21)	**Out of School (Total = 9)**
Round 1 Total = 30		
Round 2 Total = 26	**In School (Total = 21)**	**In School (Total = 5)**
		

Number of the respondents (KII)			
	Gov	**Non Gov**	
Round 1	1	**Education**	**NGO**
		2	0
Round 2	1	**Education**	**NGO**
		0	3

Tailor girl in Dhaka, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE/2019

Knowledge about COVID-19

What do young people know?

Although all the adolescents interviewed were aware of the coronavirus, knowledge and perceptions on self-quarantine and precautionary measures to follow varied by their age and information sources.

The **younger cohort respondents were aware** of the coronavirus, disease symptoms and preventive measures but **they lacked detailed information**.

On average, **older adolescents were able to provide more information** about how the virus spreads and its specific symptoms.

Some adolescents also discussed the **stigma and fear** that prevails in the community regarding COVID-19

The people in our area are panicking. If someone has a slight fever, no one goes near them. Everyone stays in fear. (Female, 17)

Access to Safety Measures

Family members **follow necessary safety measures** such as washing hands, wearing masks and maintaining social distance.

Masks and soap were **easily available and affordable** and most were using cloth masks which could be washed and reused.

Some noted that many people in their area **do not abide by social distancing rules** as instructed by the government.

Even when I go to the lane in front of my house I wear a mask. I do not feel comfortable wearing gloves. I just wear a mask, but I don't like wearing it either. But I have to wear a mask. (Female, 18)

We live in Block 5 which has a small bazar (market), that's why it is crowded all the time. The risk of getting infected is very high here but many people are careless. Already seven people have been infected, but no one seems to take serious steps to be protected. (Male, 17)

Sources of Information on COVID-19

Television

Announcement through loudspeakers

I just saw that they are canvassing on a rickshaw. Some people also circulated posters and leaflets to create awareness, giving out soap and telling people to wash their hands. (Female, 14)

Parents, school teachers and wider community

Facebook and YouTube

I heard [from unknown source] that Allah also forgave all the Christian, Hindu and Buddhist people of China, because they have started offering namaz (prayer) in the mosque. (Female, 17)

Young adolescent boy in Dhaka, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE/2019

Education in the time of COVID-19

Studying at home during lockdown

Studying at home by themselves is **far more challenging than studying at school** with support from teachers, as they no longer have access to the much needed guidance, instructions and notes from experienced instructors

I don't understand math but I can not directly talk to my teacher about that problem. If my school was open, I could ask my teacher for help. Sometimes I call my teacher to solve the problems which I face while studying. (Female, 14)

A few respondents got **help from their mothers, siblings and family members** to study. Some took help from **guide books and digital content**

We have a guide book which I am following for my studies. I have difficulties studying at home with math, science and English. (Male, 14)

Most respondents reported **not following a fixed study routine**. Additional free time coupled with a lack of routine and homework caused adolescents to become **distracted**. Compared to pre-pandemic school days, they mentioned being **less engaged with their studies** now

I didn't follow a routine. As it is my study, I just read whatever I think I need to read. (Male, 18)

It is hard for me to concentrate on my studies at home. I spend my time on the mobile, talking to friends or watching TV. (Male, 17)

Studying at home after lockdown

At the end of the academic year and **after Government's decision of not taking annual exams** (evaluation to be made based on assignments) studying at home was less reported. However, few respondents shared their concern regarding HSC pass on basis of SSC results, referring to this as **"auto pass"**

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? (Female, 19)

Some better off students started to take tuitions from **home tutors** after lockdown

Mam (private tutor) comes in the morning, She teaches me at that time. She gives me something to learn. At the beginning of the lockdown, she went home and couldn't come back. But after lifting of lockdown, my parents got in touch with her and I started take lessons at home. (Male, 18)

Modalities used in distance learning

Following online video classes on Facebook, Zoom authorized by their educational institutions

Online TV classes

Help from teachers by personal phone call and social media communication (e.g. Messenger)

Following internet video contents suggested by their teachers

Limitations and challenges in study from home

Adolescents from low-income families **lack educated family members** who can help in their study

Online classes are **not interactive enough** compared to traditional classes

Lack of previous experience and training of the teachers hampering the teaching quality of the online/TV classes

You need an educated elder brother or sister to study at home. Or either one of your parents has to be educated. Among us, there is nobody who is educated. (Female, 17)

Less access to online class due to financial constraints, lack of information on educational platforms, weak internet connection, and use of shared devices

Lack of space and privacy for studying

TV classes only available **up to SSC level**

Gender differences

- **Girls** more likely to help with **household chores**
- **Boys** have greater **access to mobile devices and internet** to get help with studies

10-year-old boy selling balloons in Dhaka, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE/2019

Adolescent coping strategies and resilience

Economic Hardship During Lockdown

Family **economic condition getting worse** as the pandemic continues to persist.

Working adolescents are also **losing their jobs**. Five adolescents among 30 interviewed are directly affected by the lockdown as they had to stop working and stay at home.

Majority of the respondents spoke of worries related to the **uncertainty of income** of their family.

Married female adolescents were worried about paying for rent, electricity and other costs for **both their in-laws and natal family**.

Before this lockdown my father could work and I also used to give tuition to school children. But now we cannot go to work and we have no money. This situation makes me feel worried. (Female, 19,

Coping with Economic Hardship

Different coping strategies for loss of income due to work stopping and businesses being closed

Some of their family members **took loans** from people to survive and now they are **in debt**

We are managing somehow…however we can… I don't know so much…my brother took out something like a loan…but bearing that is becoming very problematic. (Female, 19)

Some of the adolescents' family **reduced their daily consumption** to cope with the financial crisis. They reduced their food consumptions and compromise with other necessities.

We manage food within our limited money. We bought lentils, ate mashed potatoes, vegetables and rice. (Female, 18)

Economic Hardship & Coping after Lockdown

Challenges

- Although a few mentioned that the economic situation improved after the opening up most spoke of **continued economic hardships**
- **Paying back the loans** that they took at the beginning of the lockdown is adding extra pressure.

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. (Female, 11)

- Working adolescents went back to work

Coping

- **Cutting down expenses, eating less** than before are ways of coping with the financial crisis even after the lockdown was lifted
- Few adolescents, mostly in-school female respondents considered starting work to support their families. However, **fewer jobs were available** for adolescents and their family members during the pandemic. Parents, of some female adolescents, **restricted their daughters from going to work**.

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. (Female, 17)

Psycho-social wellbeing during lock-down

Education related worries: Uncertain period of school closure and postponed exams are creating worries and anxiety among the school going respondents. National Board exam candidates are anxious

Our exams are coming up. What will I do? I can't get good results in this way, if the school is closed. We are poor. If I don't bring good results in the exam, I won't get a chance anywhere [e.g. college]. (Female, 17)

Social isolation: Lockdown has isolated adolescents from their friends, who they cannot spend time with

From the beginning of the lockdown I could not meet my friends. Sometimes I just talk with them over the phone. I feel really isolated. I cannot meet anyone. I cannot go to anyone's house. All these things make me feel really bad. I feel I am alone and isolated from society and my friends. (Female, 14)

Isolation compounded by **lack of digital connectivity**

Only my father has a phone, no one else. I don't use my father's phone. I can't use Facebook with this phone, because it is a button phone [feature phone]. (Female, 11)

Psycho-social well being during lock-down

- **Fear of COVID-19:** They are not only afraid of getting infected themselves, but are also afraid that their family will fall ill with the disease, which makes them even more stressed in this situation.

People are suffering. Many people are dying. All these things make me stressed. I just call Allah's name. My brothers and father are going outside for work. They can be infected at any time. What will happen with them I do not know. (Female, 17)

- Adolescents have also **adopted religious practices**, particularly praying, as a measure to combat the fear of the virus.

I never used to pray before, but now I do, 5 times a day. (Male, 14)

- Adolescents also mentioned that many people in their community started going to the mosque to pray out of fear. On the one hand, people are aware that **public gatherings increase the risk** of spreading the virus, but they are afraid that **not praying will be punished**.

The government has declared a ban on offering prayer in the mosque. I felt really bad after hearing this … If no one goes to offer prayers then Allah will bring down his wrath on the Earth even more. (Female, 17)

Coping with Psycho-social wellbeing during lockdown

- **Discussing their worries with parents** seemed to be a way of dealing with pandemic-induced stress for the adolescents in our sample, and parents play an important role in helping adolescents deal with the fear and the anxiety surrounding COVID-19.

Gender difference:

- **Female** adolescents seemed more inclined to **speak openly** with their parents
- **Boys** tend to **rely more on their friends** for support
- **Married female adolescents** are more likely to share their worries with their **husbands** but miss the sharing with own family

I always share everything with my parents. I told my mother about my stress and my mother told me that 'because of coronavirus schools are being closed. No one can do anything about this situation. Everything will be okay. You should study attentively at home. If you study heard then you will definitely pass the exam. (Female, 14)

Psycho-social wellbeing after lockdown

- Those without major exams didn't mention education related concerns in the second round. But **exam candidates** were especially worried.

SSC exam is very near. If school was open we could have learned many things. We could have answered well in the exams. Now we can't do that... and we can't participate in the exams (Test exams before final exams). (Male, 18)

- After lifting of the nation wide shut down they are **adapting to the new normal.**

No, now I don't feel [as bad] as before. Now I have become a bit habituated with it as it's been almost 6-7 months. (Female, 19)

Coping with Psycho-social well being after lockdown

- **Watching TV, and using mobile phone** are common strategies to cope with boredom and loneliness. But cost factor comes in

Now if I feel bored I stay alone or play mobile games with my friends. I like to play free fire games with my friends. (Male, 18)

- Moreover, due to lifting of lockdown respondents can **go out** as well.

At the beginning of the lockdown it was very boring. Couldn't go out. Now it's far better. We can go out. (Female, 19)

- However, **lack of services or facilities to cater to the psychosocial needs** of adolescents e.g. recreation or clubs

Gender difference in coping:

- Boys mentioned more about going out and meeting their friends to feel better but **limited mobility for girls**.
- Girls have to give a lot of explanations and they **can't simply go out and walk** on the streets unlike boys.

Adolescent girl with her children in Dhaka © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE/2019

Intra-household relations

Domestic Work Allocation

- School-going **female adolescents**' role as the '**helping hand**' for their mothers amplified
- But significant number of the **male adolescents** are **participating in household work**, most of whom have no other female members except their mothers in the household
- **Gender difference** in the **type of housework** done by the adolescents
- For **female** adolescents, household chores seems to be a way to **spend time**
- For **male** adolescents, housework **feels like an obligation**
- **No change** was found in the responsibilities of **married female adolescents** since they were already accustomed to house works from the beginning of their married life
- Few adolescents, both boys and girls, reported doing household chores and taking care of other family members despite their **reluctance and unwillingness.**

Girls have to do the household chores in the family. 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. (KII)

My mother asks me to help her with household chores, and [if I don't do] she scolds me. (Male, 18)

Intra Household Relations & Violence

- **Increase in household tension and arguments** during the pandemic compared to beginning of lockdown, especially between parents, most commonly because of monetary issues.

> *Certainly there has been a change in the behavior [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 behavioral changes like getting angry very easily or irritable mood. (Female, 19)*

- Adolescents affected by **financial stress** through their parents behavior and **overall negative atmosphere** in the household

> *"People are staying at home now. People who are working in the garments and other private organizations, lost their jobs and couldn't keep up with their family expenditure, that's why quarrel between family members are on the rise". (KII)*

- Increased display of **short-tempered and irritable behavior** among family members, most commonly fathers
- **Increased domestic violence** reported by some adolescents where mothers of the adolescents being abused and in some cases, adolescents are also physically and verbally abused.
- Exception: Improvement in household relationship reported by a few adolescents because of having more **free-time** to spend with family members

Early Marriage

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 [amid the pandemic]. So she arranged her marriage. [Female, 19)

- All adolescents are familiar with girls getting married at an early age due to financial crises in households caused by the pandemic. However, **younger girl adolescents** reported that parents always prefer education more than marriage, and that marriage is fully **dependent on the girl's will**.
- According to two of the adolescents, the factors behind early marriage includes the idea of **preserving the 'honor'** of the girls and their families.
- Awareness among **older adolescents** about the **minimum age** of marriage for girls and the risks of early marriage
- For an adolescent girl, early marriage **may not be a bad option**

Marriage cannot be forced. It is possible if it is desired. (Female, 13)

The community I live in is a slum area. A lot of boys gather here and harm the girls, they dishonor girls a lot, that's why girls in this community are married off earlier. (Female, 17)

If my parents can't afford my expenses, [...] I will eventually have to live a tough life, so it's better to get married so that I can live a bit happily. (Female, 17)

Adolescent girl at a recycling plant in Dhaka, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE/2019

Adolescent Perceptions of the Community & Government

Community Relationships

- Deterioration of community relationships because of the ongoing coronavirus crisis: **increase of fighting and quarrelling**

Distance has increased among people, not necessarily conflict, but distance has increased. Love and care for each other has become less than before. (Female, 19)

- **Stigma** of corona

There were some areas where people were behaving badly with the corona patient and their family. Being a corona patient is not his/her fault and his/her family members were not even suffering from corona. Even then some people behave badly with them. Those family had to go through mental pressure at that time. (KII)

- **Increased criminal activities** in the community (e.g. theft, robbery, snatching) leading to increased insecurity and conflicts among the people
- Adolescents report community member's tolerance and support towards the **vulnerable groups** (e.g. disabled, extreme poor)

Adolescent's View on Government's Responses

Government tried enough by making many programs and projects to help poor people. But some political leaders didn't provide them to the people who actually need it and people who are poor. (Male, 17)

- Most of the adolescents held **positive views** regarding the government's decisions and responses
- Adolescents held the **local government and non-government bodies** working at grassroots level **responsible for the mismanagement and corruption**
- Few adolescents expressed **dissatisfaction** about the government's decision of sanctioning **automatic-promotion**

The government takes decision of giving auto-pass to the HSC candidates. I don't think it's a good decision. It is not the way of judging real talent. There is no value of this certificate. (Female, 19)

- In the second round of interviews, **little to no traces of help or support** in response to the pandemic crisis **from the government or NGO bodies** were found from the interviews with the adolescents.
- Lack of **specific initiatives** for adolescents involvement or **well-being**

An adolescent selling fruit in Dhaka, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE 2019

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Conclusions

- Adolescents are a **good source of information** for families and communities on health issues such as precautionary measures for pandemics
- **Uncertainty regarding education** as a major source of worry for their academic future as well as entry into the labor market
- **Importance of social relations** in community, schools and family for adolescent wellbeing and development
- **Disadvantages in access to internet and mobile devices** will set back **adolescents in low-income areas** in attaining educational outcomes
- **Gender differences** in how COVID-19 has affected boys and girls education, domestic burdens, mobility and future risks and potentials
- **Socio-economic differences** between families in the low-income settlements affected nutrition, indebtedness, continuing of education, access to devices and internet
- **Older adolescents** were found to have **more voice and autonomy** in terms of whether they would work, be allowed to leave the house and what role they would play in the family and the community.

What are key priorities for **young people in this context?**

- Establish a **recovery plan** to address the **educational gaps** created by the pandemic while maintaining learning continuity at feasible levels. Strategies, materials and training for distance education for **low-income community adolescents** should be reviewed and developed
- **Digital connectivity** is important for information; education; and entertainment. There is also the need to take into account **gendered differences** in access and use. A priority is to **reduce internet and data costs** to facilitate greater access to information, education and entertainment to positively impact adolescents' psychosocial well-being
- Raise **awareness** on the impact of the pandemic on **adolescent mental health** and scale up available services
- Provide **recreation facilities** for adolescents and initiatives to involve adolescents as **volunteers**
- The Government, NGOs and other relevant stakeholders should take into account the future risks and challenges which are arising from the present COVID situation:
  - risks of **increased school drop outs and early marriage** especially for girls of poor families because of increased poverty, lack of employment and overall future uncertainty.
  - risk of increased incidences of **child labor** among boys and girls but perhaps more specially among young boys

Contact Us

WEBSITE
www.gage.odi.org
www.bigd.bracu.ac.bd
www.sph.bracu.ac.bd

FACEBOOK
GenderandAdolescence
BIGDBRACUniversity
BRACJPGSPH

TWITTER
@GAGE_programme
@JamesPGrant
@BIGD_BRACU

EMAIL
- Maheen Sultan, Senior Fellow Practice, BIGD and GAGE Bangladesh Research Uptake and Impact Coordinator: maheen.sultan@bracu.ac.bd
- Farhana Alam, Assistant Director, BRAC James P. Grant School of Public Health: farhana.alam@bracu.ac.bd

About GAGE:

- Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year (2015-2024) mixed-methods longitudinal research programme focused on what works to support adolescent girls' and boys' capabilities in the second decade of life and beyond.
- We are following the lives of 18,000 adolescents in six focal countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

brac institute of governance & development
BRAC JAMES P GRANT SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
BRAC UNIVERSITY
Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
gage GENDER & ADOLESCENCE: GLOBAL EVIDENCE