# Adolescent Girls' Vulnerabilities and Transitions in the Context of COVID-19

BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University

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## The team

- Taslima Aktar, Research Associate BIGD
- Saklain Al-Mamun, Research Associate BIGD
- Iffat Jahan Antara, Research Associate BIGD
- Md Raied Arman, Senior Research Associate BIGD
- Kabita Chowdhury, Senior Programme Associate BIGD
- Md Rakib Hossain, Research Associate BIGD
- Lopita Huq, Research Fellow BIGD
- Farhana Kabir, Research Associate BIGD
- Md Zahirul Islam, Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh
- Mahir Labib, Trainee Research Associate BIGD
- Shravasti Roy Nath, Research Associate BIGD
- Maliha Noshin, Research Associate BIGD
- Nuha Annoor Pabony, Research Associate BIGD
- Khandker Wahedur Rahman, Visiting Research Fellow BIGD
- Maheen Sultan, Senior Fellow of Practice BIGD

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# List of acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| ADB | Asian Development Bank |
| ADR | Alternative dispute resolution |
| ANC | Antenatal Care |
| ASI/SI | Associate Sub Inspector/ Sub Inspector |
| BANBEIS | Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics |
| BBS | Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics |
| BDHS | Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey |
| BDT | Bangladeshi Taka |
| BIGD | BRAC Institute of Governance and Development |
| BLA | Bangladesh Labour Act |
| BNFE | Bureau of Non-Formal Education |
| CAPO | Children's Affairs Police Officer |
| CDC | Child Development Centres |
| CLMM | Cumulative Link Mixed Models |
| CMRA | Child Marriage Restraint Act |
| DIFE | Department of Factory Inspection and Establishments |
| DLAC | District Legal AID Committee |
| DSS | Department of Social Services |
| DV | Domestic Violence |
| EIG | Education for Income Generation |
| FCDO | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office |
| FGD | Focus Group Discussion |
| FSSSP | Female Secondary School Stipend Program |
| GIZ | Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit |
| HIES | Household Income and Expenditure Survey |
| HSC | Higher Secondary Certificate |

| | |
|---|---|
| IDI | In-Depth Interview |
| IGA | Income-generating activities |
| ILO | International Labour Organisation |
| MJF | Manusher Jonno Foundation |
| MOLE | Ministry of Labour and Employment |
| NCLWC | National Child Labour Welfare Council |
| NGO | Non-government Organisation |
| NLASO | National Legal Aid Services Organization. |
| NSNDA | Nari o Shishu Nirjaton Domon Ain (Suppression of Violence against Women and Children Act) |
| OC | Officer in Charge |
| PKSF | Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation |
| PPRC | Power and Partcipation Research Centre |
| ROSC | Reaching Out of School Children |
| SANEM | South Asian Network on Economic Modeling |
| SDG | Sustainable Development Goal |
| SRH | Sexual and Reproductive Health |
| SSC | Secondary School Certificate |
| STEM | Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics |
| TNO | Thana Nirbahi Officer |
| UNCRC | United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| UNO | Upazila Nirbahi Oficer |
| UP | Union Parisad |
| VAW | Violence Against Women |
| WFCL | Worst Forms of Child Labour |
| WHO | World Health Organisation |

# Executive summary

The study aimed to see how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Bangladesh's rural and peri-urban families; the strategies made to allocate reduced resources and the impact of these decisions on adolescent capabilities. Notable decisions revolved around adolescents' education, work, and marriage. Viewed through the framework of access to justice, it has been seen that many injustices and barriers women face in claiming justice can be averted with greater investment in their capabilities during their adolescence. This study looked at a possible increase in girls' risk and vulnerabilities as compared to boys, support mechanisms accessed, and choices made by both parents and adolescents because of the economic shocks.

This research, focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on the capabilities related to the life trajectories of adolescents, particularly girls was conducted by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), was commissioned by the Rule of Law Programme, implemented by GIZ Bangladesh and supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). This is a significant piece of research reflecting the urgency of the time. Germany, for its part, has been proud to support this work, in a year when it celebrates 50 years of partnership with Bangladesh.

The research questions sought to explore (1) adolescents' vulnerability to risks, particularly violence, through analysing household decision-making strategies that determine the trajectories of their lives; (2) adolescent girls' assessment of life transitions and vulnerabilities; and (3) adolescents' knowledge of and access to support that can help identify, negotiate, and seek recourse for the vulnerabilities and risks they face in life.

The study used both qualitative and quantitative research methods. A total of 2758 households were surveyed and 3,139 adolescents were interviewed in 26 upazilas of Gaibandha, Narail, and Cumilla districts representing the north, south-west, and eastern parts of Bangladesh. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 adolescent girls and 12 boys, along with six focus group discussions with parents and 15 key informant interviews with school teachers, district education officers, probation officers, district judges, union parishad members, and law enforcement representatives.

# Major study findings

## Reduction in household income

There was a significant reduction in household income during COVID-19 across all districts, but recovery has been slowest in Gaibandha, the poorest district in our sample. Female-headed households faced a higher drop in income than male-headed households. Livelihoods such as

daily wage work, transport work, and small businesses were affected immediately and the prolonged effect on these forms of livelihood led to a reduction in food consumption.

## Lower access to education among girls

With school closures, the only access to education was through television or mobile phones. During the lockdown, boys were more likely to be bought mobile phones to continue online education. This is despite teachers, parents, and the respondents themselves believing that boys mostly spend their time playing online games or browsing social media. Girls' access to mobile phones was restricted because it was seen primarily as a conduit for romance. Parents have considered mobile phone use to be unsuitable for girls as they think their daughters' romantic relationships will cause them to lose their reputation in the community. Mobile phones were also needed to find answers to assignments, which the girls often had to access by paying their friends who had phones. While the number of hours studied per day by adolescents decreased during the lockdown, the number has been increasing since the COVID impact lessened.

While COVID-19 did not significantly affect drop-outs rates, there was around a 3% increase in both out-of-school adolescent boys and girls. School closure negatively impacted adolescents' educational aspirations. At least 35% of the dropouts mentioned that COVID-19 had led to an unwillingness to study further, and another 16% said they could no longer afford it. Boys talked about changes in educational aspirations regarding changed personal ambitions, while girls talked about how far they may be allowed to study. Parents were acutely worried about boys returning to school, especially those who started income-earning work.

## Type of work differed by gender and age

Very few adolescents in the sample were involved in income-generating activities during pre-COVID-19 times. Adolescent boys (12%), and particularly older male adolescents (15-18 years) were more likely to be engaged in paid work than girls (5%). Most working adolescents were engaged in domestic animal husbandry, agricultural and non-agricultural wage work, handicrafts, and providing private tuition, depending on local availability. Adolescents worked more days and longer hours during the lockdown and post-lockdown periods. Their earnings were also found to be the highest when parents' incomes had decreased and later it was reduced when schools reopened. Their average monthly income peaked at BDT 2,268 from June 2020 to March 2021 and decreased to BDT 1,521 in September 2021. The least number of adolescent employment was observed in Cumilla during this period, the wealthiest district in the sample.

For girls, there was an increase in housework and care work, although they did not view these as work. Although some interview respondents mentioned a desire to do paid work, the unavailability of opportunities nearby and the risks and stigma of working far away or at night were mentioned as obstacles. Parents promoted work by adolescent boys as they thought it would keep them out of trouble as school was closed and would also contribute to household

income. But teachers worried that once boys start working and get a feeling of earning their own money, they may not want to go back to school. A major reason for migration out of the village for boys was for work, which was not always safe or legal.

## An increase in the rate of early marriage is not evident

While the prevalence of early marriage is much higher among girls than boys, our data show little variation in the rate of early marriage due to COVID-19 and that the rate was declining throughout 2020-21 compared to 2018-19. The average age at marriage during these two periods rose to 17.25 years in 2020-21 from 16.71 years in 2018-19. That is, COVID-19 did not seem to have forced marriage at earlier ages than usual. However, it should be kept in mind that the number of observations of married adolescents in the survey was quite small.

Parents were first asked the reason for their decision to marry off their daughter and then, whether the decision was influenced by COVID-19. While 50% of the parents said they would have married her off in any case, the other half stated it was moderately or highly influenced by COVID-19. So COVID-19 did act as a force of compulsion for some households.

Early marriage was the most significant reason for dropping out of school for girls. Uncertainty of educational future due to school closures; fear of romance, sexual relations outside marriage and elopement, and insecurity due to the presence of idle young men, prompted dropping out of school and getting married. It was not a significant reason for adolescent boys.

Most adolescents did not want to get married but ultimately chose to listen to their parent's wishes. They mentioned that the loss of family reputation was a major deterrent to accessing formal help to prevent the underage marriage. With marriage, adolescent girls reported additional household responsibilities, unwanted early pregnancy, post-pregnancy-related health issues, the continuation and discontinuation of education, and some reported domestic violence. Parents mentioned UP members helped falsify age certificates, although UP members themselves focused on the social pressure they faced to do so.

## Social activities decreased and psychosocial well-being reduced

While social activities decreased because of lockdowns and school closures, male adolescents now had increased access to online gaming and social media usage. Boys generally were not restricted to their homes except during strict lockdowns. Girls, however, were discouraged from leaving the house without a valid reason, such as school or tuition, due to social stigma. Adolescent boys and girls both mentioned increased sleep deprivation, loneliness, irritation, and hopelessness during the lockdown. None of the adolescents knew of any relevant helplines or psycho-social services. Adolescents mentioned that sharing their problems with their parents had increased due to COVID-19, but they were happy now that schools had reopened and they could talk to their peers instead.

## Young adolescent boys faced more violence but girls faced more sexual harassment

Overall, about 26% of adolescents faced some form of violence, but younger adolescents (12-14 years) suffered more from all types of violence. Male adolescents reported facing overall more violence both by family members and outsiders than females. More, but very few, adolescent girls (2%) reported sexual harassment than boys (1%). During COVID 19 physical abuse at home reduced for adolescent boys and rose for adolescent girls, although verbal abuse rose for both. Girls were more likely to be home and bear the brunt of increased violence among family members spurred on by the lockdown. Physical abuse by outsiders was much more visible for adolescent boys. Violence was perpetrated by peers or older males. Very few adolescents took any formal recourse against violence. While both girls and boys prefer sharing with their family members, girls are much more likely to share with their friends than boys. Adolescents also faced a new and heightened level of risk to cybercrime and cyber-harassment during this period due to increased access to mobile phones and the internet.

## Concerns around children in conflict with the law

Due to the stigma attached to drugs, trafficking, and crime - adolescents and communities were unwilling to admit this happened in their areas. However, key informants expressed grave concern about the perceived rise in drug use and drug trafficking and in the role of adolescents, particularly young boys, in drug sales and in petty theft to fund their substance use disorders. Key informants also mentioned the rise in *Kishore* (Teenager) gangs leading to greater conflict among male adolescents in Narail and Cumilla. Some key informants believed that underprivileged and poor adolescents were generally involved or “used” in crimes related to illegal drugs and theft, whereas adolescents from rich families were involved in the assault, gang culture, and even murder. Concerning human trafficking, key informants identified Satkhira, Jashore, and Narail as three hotspots for girl trafficking. The Narail District Judge of the NSNDA Tribunal and *Shishu Adalat* (juvenile court) and the Narail Probation Officer were both of the impression that trafficking has increased during the COVID-19 period.

## Access to justice and other support

Adolescents were first asked about various regulations such as legal age at marriage, the impact of child marriage, laws around child labour, and its impact. Adolescent knowledge on these issues is encouraging although only a few correctly knew the legal age of marriage for boys. Girls were more likely to know the various negative impacts of child marriage.

Adolescents were then asked about various justice-providing institutions and services. Adolescents were aware of local government and available services, but most had not used them. They were also aware of the various helplines which they learned from their textbooks. Local *matabbars* (community leaders) or school teachers were their preferred mediators. While

some adolescents felt they would not be taken seriously by formal officials, others mentioned that local villagers might take offence if they spoke to outsiders first. They seem to value community relationships more than the law, with the risk of resolving criminal complaints at the community level without recourse to the law. Most adolescents believed that the possibility of getting justice was not impacted by COVID-19. Those who felt that the possibility declined, believed it was because of the closure of the institutions.

## Conclusions

Regarding the risks and vulnerabilities faced by adolescent girls due to the COVID-19 pandemic, security considerations and perceived reputational risks proved more important than poverty for early marriage and withdrawal from school. Security considerations, and not simply poverty were also important in parental decisions to put boys to work in the context of school closure. Some of the choices made by parents and female adolescents, which led to greater vulnerability included the choice of early marriage, which led to increased risks for reproductive health complications and domestic violence. The decision to migrate elsewhere looking for work by underage boys led to them going through informal and unsafe channels, and the kind of work they were going into was not safe either. COVID-19 also led to increased phone and internet access for adolescents, especially boys, although parents and adolescents, again mainly boys, had very little knowledge of cyberbullying, harassment, or cybercrimes.

## Recommendations

1. Addressing vulnerabilities to make adolescent lives safe and secure: This would include “anti-fragile” and equal access to education, vocational education, and technology; safe and age-appropriate working conditions; prevention of early marriage; strengthening school support in preventing early marriage and capacity building to counter cybercrime and harassment; recognizing and treating psychosocial wellbeing.

2. Strengthening responsive and adolescent-friendly support mechanisms: This would include greater awareness and availability of emergency information and legal support online; training on child-friendly behaviour to service providing institutions; treatment of any court where a case involves children as Shishu Adalat; amending the CMRA to stop criminalizing consensual elopement as criminal activity; maintaining confidentiality and anonymity of complainants to protect them from revenge; strengthening the role of women elected officials in cases of sexual harassment; enhancing social protection for adolescents.

3. Strengthening governance and ensuring accountability of government mechanisms and personnel: This would include holding those accountable who are responsible for preventing child marriage, violence, and sexual harassment; digitising and providing birth, marriage, and death registrations; and filling in data gaps on trafficking, child marriage, etc.

# 1. Introduction

This research sheds light on women's access to justice in Bangladesh through an analysis of adolescent girls' life transitions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This link between them is based on two broad premises.

The rationale for a special focus on adolescent girls demonstrates the increased recognition of how their future trajectories are shaped by the close inter-relationship between the "productive and reproductive domains of their lives" (Presler-Marshall & Stavropoulou, 2017) in the adolescent years. Poverty and lack of labour market opportunities hamper the aspirations of young girls and their parents, interrupt their education, and encourage child marriage and early childbearing, which in turn restricts their future livelihood options, leading to economic dependency for much of their lives and greater risk of poverty in old age (Presler-Marshall & Stavrapoulou, 2017). Lack of education, early marriage, and economic dependency are all linked to reduced agency and limited choices, and thus greater vulnerability to violence in different forms, for which they are seldom able to seek help or legal action. For instance, while 72.6% of married women faced partner violence, only 2.6% took legal action (BBS, 2016). Thus women's access to justice is linked to the capabilities they develop as adolescent girls.

The rationale for focusing on adolescent life transitions during the COVID-19 pandemic is because the decisions about the life trajectories of adolescents (both girls and boys) taken by the family as part of their livelihood strategy may be disrupted in ways that have negative consequences for them. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a loss of income, livelihoods, and lives, has taken a toll on people's health, exacerbated various inequalities, and has entailed profound reverberations in the home. Given the poverty profile of Bangladesh, even under regular conditions, households carefully balance and allocate resources available to them. It is imperative to see how households re-strategize the allocation of the reduced resources faced with the economic crisis driven by the COVID-19 pandemic. Depending on how much the pandemic has affected their livelihoods and how resilient they are, families may be compelled to make hard choices between keeping their children in school, getting them married, and putting them to work. The choices made now by families will have long and deep repercussions on the future life trajectories of their children.

This research intends to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the capabilities related to the life trajectories of adolescents, particularly girls, through which the pathways to women's access to justice can be better understood. This involves (1) understanding adolescents' vulnerability to risks, particularly violence, through analyzing household decision-making strategies that determine the trajectories of their lives; (2) adolescent girls' assessment of life transitions and vulnerabilities; and (3) adolescents' knowledge of and access to support

that can help identify, negotiate, and seek recourse for the vulnerabilities and risks they face in life. At the same time, the additional focus on a smaller component of adolescent boys will provide a meaningful context and comparison to assess adolescent girls' vulnerabilities and address the vulnerabilities of adolescents in Bangladesh as a whole.

A series of livelihood surveys conducted by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) on poverty dynamics and household realities during the COVID-19 in Bangladesh shows that although there has been some recovery since the lockdown of the first wave (March 2020), it is fragile. A class of "new poor" has emerged and currently represents 14.7% of the population (24.5 million people) (April 2020). In the second wave of the pandemic in 2021, people's savings were depleted by 24% in rural areas and 11% in urban areas. The debt burden doubled for most socioeconomic categories of people. The loss of unemployment has partially been recovered by people moving into the informal sector. But women are five times more likely to remain unemployed than men and face greater challenges in reentering the labour market (Matin & Zillur, 2021).

Many families have experienced economic turmoil during the lockdown (Biswas, K. et al, 2020). There was a significant decrease in paid labour during the lockdown, especially for men and boys (Makino et al., 2021). The pandemic has caused temporary or permanent job loss in many households (Asadullah, 2020). This has contributed to an increase in household tensions (Neumeister et al., 2021) such as food insecurity (Guglielmi et al., 2020). Children were found to be more afraid and stressed during the pandemic. This increased their susceptibility to violence and risk in an environment where their access to justice may be limited.

Even before the pandemic, global evidence showed that girls are considerably disadvantaged compared to boys, as their educational opportunities are cut short so that they can do more work at home or marry early and raise a family—all of which restricts their already limited social networks and economic capabilities. More significantly, evidence also shows that many of the deprivations that women experience as adults could have been averted had there been greater investment in their economic capabilities earlier in life (Asadullah, 2020) Kabeer, 2018). One such example is gender-based violence, which is highly prevalent in Bangladesh. Research shows that women who marry young tend to have less education, begin childrearing early, and have less decision-making power in the household. They are also more likely to experience domestic violence (Jensen & Thornton, 2010). Low levels of education and financial autonomy were also identified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as two individual-level characteristics that place women at greater risk of physical and sexual violence. Age is another factor. For example, in urban Bangladesh, 48% of adolescents aged 15–19 years reported physical or sexual violence, or both, by a partner within the past 12 months, versus 10% of 45–49-year-olds (WHO, 2005). Similar evidence is found in many studies. The qualitative findings on domestic violence in rural Bangladesh

show that women believe that with more education and income, they will be less vulnerable to domestic violence. Statistical analysis of the same study shows that in fact, only education was associated with significantly reduced odds of violence (Bates et al., 2004).

Given the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we would like to know whether the investment in girls' capabilities will be affected and if so, will be more or less than the investment in the capabilities of boys.

Will girls be married off to reduce the burden on the household, kept at home to contribute more to domestic chores or family labour, or placed into paid work to help household income? Why and how are these decisions made? Are these decisions made only for girls or for boys as well? Are their experiences and trajectories going in different directions or the same? As gender intersects with class, culture, social position, and physical location, what are the different ways in which adolescents are experiencing these transitions? What are the implications for their vulnerability to risks and violence, now and in the future?

The evidence so far points to the fact that COVID-19 will harm adolescents' access to rights and the development of their potential. Viewed through the framework of access to justice, many of the hurdles women face in accessing justice—be it cognitive, social, material, or financial barriers in claiming their rights and protecting themselves from vulnerabilities and violence—could be averted with greater investment in their capabilities during their adolescence, which is now in jeopardy. This research will thus contribute to identifying entry-points for policies and design programs and tailor interventions that can expand the opportunities and build capacities of girls to enhance their access to justice now and in the future.

This report is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 specifies the research questions. Chapter 3 summarizes the mixed-method research methodology. Chapter 4 provides a literature review on issues pertinent to adolescents in Bangladesh. Chapter 5 describes the study respondents. Chapter 6 is divided into nine sections focused on the findings. Chapter 7 draws conclusions from the findings and makes policy recommendations.

# 2. Research questions

The overall research questions are as follows:

- What is the impact of COVID-19 on the capabilities related to the life trajectories of adolescents, particularly girls, through which the pathways to women's access to justice can be better understood?
- What are the risks and vulnerabilities adolescent girls are facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic and increased poverty, (gender, rural/urban, and disability dimensions to be considered), and how are these different from those faced by boys?

- What choices are female adolescents and their guardians taking/have taken/or considering regarding their future and are these choices leading them towards greater vulnerability, thereby jeopardizing their present and future opportunities to access justice? How do these choices differ from those available to boys?
- What are the support mechanisms available for the—family, community, state, non-governmental organization (NGO)—and, are these meeting their needs/capable of meeting their needs?

# 3. Literature review

This literature review presents an overview of selected issues relating to adolescents in Bangladesh. The issues addressed include early marriage, education, child labour, sexual and reproductive health, and mental health. Each section will discuss key concerns; enabling and constraining factors; implications for future development/access to justice, and the impact of COVID-19.

## 3.1. Adolescent marriage

Bangladesh has the fourth-highest rate of early marriage in the world. According to UNICEF (UNICEF, 2017, 2018), around 22% of girls are married by the age of 15, and 59% by the age of 18. This is common in both rural and urban informal settlements of Bangladesh (Biswas et al., 2019). A complicating factor for child marriage in Bangladesh is an age-heaping or digital preference, where young girls misreport their age, claiming to be older or younger than they are. Analysis based on four nationally representative cross-sectional surveys over the last 10 years shows that the age-adjusted results are similar to the reported age results in terms of the direction of the associated socioeconomic factors; however, their effect sizes have changed. Data from 2004 to 2014 from the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) were used and cumulative link mixed models (CLMM) were fitted to ascertain the risk factors by adjusting cluster effects, where the outcome variable was categorized by women's age of marriage (ordinal). Even after age adjustment, the education of respondents and their partners, the age of both the head of the house and their partner, and the geographic division showed a significant association in all surveys. Although the year-wise effect showed significant improvement over the years in pooled data, the rate of improvement was not encouraging. Notable cluster (or community) level variations have been observed over the years, indicating that community-specific factors such as regional culture and local environments should be considered during the intervention design (Biswas et al., 2019). Early marriage is correlated to the level of education. Girls with no education are four times more likely to get married early compared to those with secondary or higher education (Biswas et al., 2019). This is of key concern because, early marriage results in depriving girls of their rights as children, curbing their voice and agency; cutting short their education; limiting their economic and political participation, and making

them vulnerable to poor health and a higher risk of mortality, and domestic violence. The Bangladesh government has targeted to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, by bringing down the early marriage rate to 10%; and have set the minimum age requirement for marriage at 18 years for girls.

Child marriage has been illegal in Bangladesh since the adoption of the Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) of 1929. According to this law, the legal age of marriage for girls is 18 years, and for boys, it is 21 years. However, the law is poorly enforced and the punishment - up to one month in jail and/or a fine of up to 1,000 Taka (US$13) - rarely acted as a deterrent. This act was revised in 2017, which caused some controversy. Section 19 of CMRA 2017 allows child marriage to take place without treating it as an offence under "special circumstances." However, only parents/guardians, the court, and the verification committee are allowed to invoke it. Adolescents who wish to exercise their right under personal law to marry a partner of choice below the minimum age under CMRA, 2017, and against parental consent will be liable to face prosecution and punishment. In case of elopements or romantic relationships, parents can file cases against the daughter's partner if the girl is below the minimum age bar. This is of concern because of its implications for access to justice by adolescents.

In terms of what drives early marriage, it is presumed that poverty is the most common reason for early marriage in rural Bangladesh (Biswas et al., 2019, Islam et al., 2016; Kamal et al., 2015; World Vision, 2021). For instance, Rangpur, a northern state of Bangladesh with a 42% poverty rate, and vulnerability to chronic disasters, also has the highest rate of early marriage (Islam et al., 2016). Other factors include rigid social norms, lack of education and earning opportunities; dowry, and parents' fear of sexual violence against girls (Chowdhury, 2004; Mahmud & Amin, 2006; Verma et al., 2013), among others.

Many interventions have sought to empower adolescent girls and bring down early marriage. These include cash transfers to keep girls in school, loan and savings groups; skill training on income-generating activities (IGA); livelihood skills training, life skills training, education support through tutoring, gender awareness training, and rights-based training (Amin et al., 2011, 2016, 2018; Buchmann et al., 2017; Hahn et al., 2018; Heath & Mobarek, 2015; Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021; Shahnaz et al., 2008). The Female Secondary School Stipend Program (FSSSP) was designed and expanded to keep young girls in education and thereby delay marriage. It is widely acknowledged for its success in preventing early marriages, although there are debates. Creating income-generating opportunities for girls is another pathway to reducing early marriages (Amin et al 2018).

Concerning the impact of COVID-19, a study by the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF, 2020) cited pandemic-induced poverty as the major reason for the recent spike in child marriage in Bangladesh. A global survey found an explicit association between early marriage and hunger (World Vision, 2021). The survey also found that a girl child who went to bed hungry for four weeks was 60% more likely to get married than their peers who did not experience hunger. Long-term school closures are another reason for increased child marriages during COVID-19. A

blog on a BRAC study (BRAC, 2020) reveals that 71% of child marriages amid COVID-19 occurred due to school closures.

## 3.2. Adolescent education

Tremendous progress has been made in closing the gender gap in primary and secondary enrolment, although a gender gap still exists (Ahmed et al 2018). According to national statistics, 58.48% of girls and 66.57% of boys in Bangladesh completed secondary school (BANBEIS 2017). In the same year, 41.52% of girls and 33.43% of boys dropped out of the same level. Early marriage, poverty, distance from school, and lower education levels of parents were some of the reasons behind higher female school dropout rates (Sultan et al 2021). Other research has shown that adolescents who dropped out were on average older, repeated more grades, came from lower-income homes, had parents with lower levels of education, had more household duties, and had much less support for their schoolwork from their parents (Sabates et al 2010; Huq et al., 2021; Hinson & Petroni, 2014). Adolescent girls with disabilities from rural areas and poor families are even less likely to get any family support, making them more susceptible to violence and mistreatment (Karim, 2016).

Despite barriers like early marriage and other socioeconomic obstacles, girls have been found to have higher ambitions regarding education and employment than boys (Sultan et al. 2021). A study on a non-formal education programme called SHIKHON found that on average, girls achieve on par with boys across four subject areas, including literacy (English and Bangla), numeracy, science, and social science (Gee, 2015); however, girls are systematically excluded from STEM education (Siddiqa and Braga 2019). Thus, norms have a strong role in how far girls get to study and what they study.

One remedial measure for high drop-out rates has been the rapid expansion of non-formal education programs, especially those targeted to reach out to school children. A study on the Reaching Out of School Children (ROSC) program run by the government reached more marginalized communities and remote areas where infrastructure is insufficient compared to BRAC school locations (Asadullah, 2016). The female secondary school stipend program (FSSSP) has been hailed as another successful intervention to increase the enrolment of girls in secondary schools. A study found that FSSSP increased female students' years of schooling, and helped to prevent early marriages and pregnancies (Salahuddin et al 2014).

Concerning the impact of COVID on adolescent education, Bangladesh, along with Myanmar, experienced the longest closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gayares, 2021). At least 97% of school-going adolescents reported continuing their studies during the initial lockdown but lost their motivation later (Jones et al., 2021). Online platforms were available only to a few children, as many did not have access to the internet in their homes. Girls were found to have had significantly less access to mobile devices and the internet (Biswas, et al., 2020; Edwards & Szabo, 2020; Raha et al., 2021), especially in rural areas and urban slums. Girls

also faced significantly more disruptions to their studies, as they were more involved in household chores and domestic care-work (Makino et al., 2021; Neumeister et al., 2021).

## 3.3. Adolescent sexual and reproductive health

In Bangladesh, one in three girls become mothers by the age of 18 years (BBS and UNICEF Bangladesh 2017). A study conducted on married adolescents in four slums of Dhaka revealed that 26% of below-14-year-olds, 30% of 15-year-olds, and 43% of 16-year-old married adolescents had a child within the first year of marriage (Hinson & Petroni 2014). Maternal mortality is a leading cause of death among adolescent girls. As such, access to sexual and reproductive information and health services is a major concern for adolescents, whether married or single.

In terms of access to information on SRH, formal sex education in Bangladesh started in 2013 with the introduction of a chapter on "puberty and reproductive health" in school textbooks. This information was distributed to students in class six to nine with age-appropriate information. However, the information provided there is insufficient, as it mainly focuses on menstruation and puberty, and there are many information gaps without proper explanation or discussion about sexual health. The government faced backlash from parents, teachers, and ministry officials on this initiative. The Madrasa Education Board revised the textbooks themselves before distributing them among students (Naripokkho, 2016). Naripokkho's research also revealed that some parents thought including sex education in the curriculum may increase sexual harassment. The greatest resistance came from teachers who were worried about losing their social status if they talked about sex in the classroom.

A systematic review of programs on SRH shows that few are directed specifically towards adolescents (Ravindran and Govender, 2020). Most programs exclude boys and there is a critical gap in SRH information and services for unmarried adolescents. Married girls, due to the social acceptability of sexual union and childbearing inside marriage, can seek and receive a range of SRH, maternal health, and family planning services, irrespective of their age. However, programs and policies continue to restrict unmarried adolescents' access to SRH knowledge, information, and services, which makes them vulnerable to health risks and discriminatory treatment.

According to BDHS (2017, 2018), 86% of villages have a health facility within their village or neighbourhood. Still, unmarried adolescents face difficulties. For unmarried adolescents, going to a family planning clinic (government and NGO health clinics are often identified as such) places them at greater risk of shame and exploitation. On the contrary, seeking antenatal care (ANC) services has increased among married adolescents. Women below the age of 20 (84%), women with first-order births (89%), and women living in urban areas (90%) are more likely to receive an ANC from a medically trained provider than older women, second-order births, and rural women (BDHS, 2017, 2018).

The socio-legal taboo against adolescent sexuality is a serious concern, obstructing access to sexual and reproductive health information and services (including contraception, abortion, and institutional deliveries). Their limited access to be informed about and meet their SRH needs lead to high rates of early pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual violence, limited negotiation skills, forced marriage, and high fertility rates (The Daily Star Oct 20, 2019)[1], which all have direct repercussions on the future development of adolescents.

COVID-19 has exacerbated the limitations, and adversities of adolescent girls because of limited mobility, access to adolescent-friendly service channels, etc. One study found that 26% of unmarried female adolescents faced greater challenges accessing menstrual hygiene products and 15% of married adolescents faced greater challenges accessing SRH services during the pandemic (Oakley et al., 2020) Adolescent girls' heightened vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence during school closures and forced marriages may press the need for remediation and support services, and also emergency contraception and other reproductive health services.

## 3.4. Mental health and adolescence

The report of the National Mental Health System in Bangladesh shows that 16.1% of the adult population (aged 18 years or older) of Bangladesh suffers from some form of mental disorder (WHO, 2007). A systematic review of the mental health situation in Bangladesh revealed that the overall prevalence of mental ill-health varied from 6.5% to 31% among adults and from 13.4% to 22.9% among children (Hossain et al., 2014). Studies have shown that depression and anxiety can cause adolescents to get involved in drug abuse, alcohol abuse, smoking, and unsafe sex (Bai et. al 2018). Depression in young people can increase the risk of unhealthy lifestyle behaviour and can lead to substantial disability, social problems, poor health, and suicide. Bullying, abuse at home, and cyberbullying worsen the mental health status of adolescents, which can cause adverse employment and education outcomes in adulthood and even give rise to criminal activities and substance abuse (Zafar et al 2021; Richter et al., 2021).

Among the many enablers of mental health problems., quality of their home life and relationships with peers, violence (especially sexual violence and bullying), harsh parenting, and severe socioeconomic problems are recognized risks to mental health (WHO 2020). Bangladeshi rural adolescents who lived in households without their parents (either due to work, education, or marriage) were found to be more likely to attempt suicide (Begum et al, 2017). Studies have identified that female adolescents are more prone to having depressive symptoms compared to their male counterparts (Anjum et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2020; Mohammad et al., 2019). It is noteworthy that adolescent girls who had been pregnant and given birth were found to have symptoms of depression (Hossain et al 2014). Research has also shown a connection between mental health and internet use. Depression and anxiety are higher among adolescents who use the internet for more than five hours every day (Mamun et al., 2019). In

[1] (https://www.thedailystar.net/health/news/the-challenge-adolescent-srh-services-bangladesh-1815982)

the US, while girls engaged more in social media and boys in games, in both cases, it resulted in poor mental health (Ciarrochi et al., 2016). In Bangladesh however, adolescent girls' access to mobile phones and the internet is lower than boys and shared devices also pose a limit to the number of hours they spend on the internet (Huq et al 2021).

Protective and supportive environments in the family, at school, and in the wider community are important. A higher level of parental engagement was found to be consistently protective against mental health problems, including suicidal behaviours and substance use. (Anjum et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2020; Mohammad et al., 2019). This was disrupted by COVID 19. The socioeconomic consequences of COVID-19, income shock, and loneliness from long-term school closure are strongly related to the deteriorating mental health of adolescents (Khan et al., 2020). Research shows that around 75% of more than 2,000 surveyed adolescents in Europe reported high levels of fear and anxiety around COVID-19. About 5% indicated symptoms of moderate to severe depression, which was more common for older adolescents (Oakley et al., 2020). In Bangladesh, a study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that 36% of school-going adolescents reported experiencing loneliness, anxiety, being bullied, or having no close friends in 12 months (Khan et al., 2020). Another study on in-school adolescents in Bangladesh shows that boys were in a worse state than girls as they were not accustomed to being restricted at home. At least 80% of those adolescents also reported an increase in household stress since the onset of COVID-19 (Baird et al., 2020). At least 40% of these adolescents reported they were receiving less support from friends and family during the pandemic, although 15% reported an increase in support, too. Additionally, harsh parenting is also a cause of mental health disorders among adolescents (WHO, 2020).

## 3.5. Child labour and adolescence

In Bangladesh, some 1.2 million children are still trapped in the worst forms of child labour, according to the latest National Child Labour Survey conducted in 2013 (BBS 2015). UNICEF estimated that child labour in Bangladesh decreased marginally from 1.29 million to 1.28 million in 10 years between 2003 and 2013. A closer look reveals that this number was driven wholly by 34% among boys, while the number of girls employed increased by up to four times. Among them, 0.5 million children are known to be engaged in hazardous labour and of them, 70.3% are 12–13 years of age.

Earlier studies have shown that the majority of children who work in Bangladesh do not go to school at all (Ali, 2006). Various programs were undertaken by the government and NGOs to enable working children to continue education (e.g., BNFE, UNICEF, MJF). Various studies have shown that parents would almost always prefer to send their children to school if financially feasible (Roelen et al., 2020; PPRC/ BIGD 2021)[2].

[2] COVID Impact on Education Life of Children, May 2021

A draft National Plan of Action to Eliminate Child Labour (2020-2025) was prepared by the National Child Labour Welfare Council (NCLWC) under the joint leadership of the Department of Factory Inspection and Establishments (DIFE) and the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MOLE) has started a "Back to School" campaign to bring in possible dropouts and those in child labour, in collaboration with several NGOs working for child protection (NCLWC 2020).

The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 defines children as persons less than 14 years of age. However, the definition of a child under the 2010 National Children Policy is any person under 18 years. Section 34 of the 2006 legislation prohibits the employment of children under 14 years in any occupation and describes the conditions under which adolescents (children aged 14-18) are allowed to work. Section 44 of the Act provides an exception and establishes that children who are at least 12 years of age may be employed in such light work as not to endanger their health and development or interfere with their education. Section 1 of the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 also excludes many sectors of the economy in which children work, including small farms, family enterprises, street work, and domestic service, from the scope of application of the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006. Domestic workers are, however, addressed in the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy (2015), whereby 12- and 13-year-olds are permitted to work with parental permission.

The government ratified the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999 (No.182) in 2001. National legislation on hazardous child labour was subsequently revised in 2006 and a list of hazardous forms of child labour was adopted in 2013. However, the Bangladeshi list of "hazardous work" consisting of only 38 jobs, is highly limited, choosing to ignore less immediate or visible symptoms, such as psychological effects of chronic illnesses, to focus more on more obvious physical injuries (Ali et al., 2021; ILO, 2018). Bangladesh has not ratified ILO Convention 138, which would require the country to set up the minimum age for child workers. The age limit must not be less than the age of completion for compulsory schooling.

Finally, policies directed to decrease child labour in Bangladesh have notable limitations. There is an overlap in responsibility between the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) and the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs.

The pandemic has jeopardized the government's target to eliminate hazardous forms of child labour by 2021 and all forms of child labour by 2025. Historical experience shows that the number of children forced into labour due to household poverty increases largely in times of economic shocks (ILO, 2018). The ILO and UNICEF Child Labour: Global 2020 estimate that without mitigation measures, more children are at risk of being pushed into child labour by the end of 2022 due to the pandemic (ILO and UNICEF 2020).

The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action has looked at the different ways COVID-19 has pushed children to WFCL and sexual exploitation to provide basic needs for families. The lack of external workers and the free time from school closures may increase children's domestic activities, especially those reinforcing gender roles (ILO and UNICEF 2020).

A recent study conducted by Educo Bangladesh reported that more than 72% of the 940 working children interviewed stated that they must work to support their families (Dhaka Tribune 11 April 2021). One-fifth of the children reported their families could not meet their schooling costs. One-third of the children suffered from physical injuries, 15% suffered from mental health issues, 30% faced verbal abuse, and 8% faced physical abuse.

# 4. Methodology

The research was a multi-method study with both qualitative and quantitative methods. The study design and tools were developed and discussed with RoI GIZ and also reviewed by the legal consultant to ensure juvenile justice issues were addressed. The entire research proposal along with the tools, consent, and assent forms was submitted to the Institutional Review Board for an ethical review and clearance. This was obtained 23 October 2021.

A stocktaking of existing literature and studies on the situation of adolescents during COVID-19 and also pre-COVID-19 regarding child labour, continuing education, and child marriage was done. This included a review of existing national policies and plans in this area. Three districts were chosen:  Cumilla (more prosperous and international migrants), Narail (high prevalence of child marriage), and Gaibandha (extremely poor). The sample consisted of two-thirds of girls and one-third of boys as a comparison group. The qualitative sample was drawn from the villages chosen for this survey.

## 4.1. Quantitative sample selection and data collection

The quantitative analysis of the study is based on a survey conducted on 2,758 households. The data has been collected through in-person interviews. Adolescents being the main focus of the study, the aim was to interview households that have current members aged between 12 and 18 years. Hence, 2,400 households from three districts: Cumilla, Narail, and Gaibandha that have at least one adolescent member from this age group have been interviewed.

In addition to the 2,400, an additional 358 households, which do not currently include adolescent members but had adolescent members who have been married off to different households in the past 2 years, were surveyed. This helped increase the sample size of married adolescents as households that have married adolescent members (daughter-in-law/son-in-law), tend to misreport and overstate the age of the adolescent members – resulting in a very small number of married adolescent members in the initial survey data.

The survey was launched on 4 October 2021 and ended on 17 November 2021. A total of 32 enumerators, divided into 16 teams of two, conducted the surveys. Each team consisted of one male and one female member. From each of the three districts, all the Upazilas (26 in total) were selected, and from each Upazila, 10 villages were randomly selected. From each village, 11

(Cumilla and Gaibandha) to 14 (Narail) households have been surveyed and in this way, a total of 2,758 households have been surveyed. From each household, all the adolescent members and the household heads were interviewed. In the case of the adolescent members, male enumerators interviewed male respondents while females interviewed female adolescents.

A "random walk" method was used to sample households. Enumerators started from the corner of each selected village and checked for eligible respondents at pre-specified intervals. Enumerators stopped surveying in a village once the targeted number of households was surveyed. They repeated the process if the targeted number of households were not surveyed after returning to the starting point or reaching the last household in the village. For the sample containing at least one adolescent member, the teams surveyed a household to see if the household had at least one member who was 12-18 years old. The interval for selecting households for the group for boys was twice as long as that for the group for girls. In this way, we surveyed a total of 3,139 adolescents and 2,758 household heads from 2,758 households.

## 4.2. Qualitative data collection

The qualitative sample was drawn from the villages chosen for the quantitative survey. The qualitative data were collected throughout October 2021 after receiving ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board and once the COVID-19 situation was considered to be safe enough for in-person interviews. In-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions were conducted in peri-urban and rural areas of the 3 districts: Cumilla, Narail, and Gaibandha.

We purposively sought out four categories of adolescent girls for the in-depth interviews: 1) in-school; 2) drop-out; 3) married; 4) working. They could also be a combination of any two categories, for example, in-school and working or drop-out and married. In the case of adolescent boys, we focused on two categories: 1,) in-school; 2) drop-out and/or working. In each area, we sampled eight girls and four boys, half of whom were from a rural area and half from a peri-urban area. The total number of adolescent respondents in the three areas was 24 adolescent girls and 12 adolescent boys. All interviews took place in person at respondents' households.

The age of the respondents ranged from 12 to 18 years old. This age range represents children who are at most risk of dropping out of school, starting work as child labour, and being at risk of early marriage. Long-term school closures due to the COVID-19 outbreak have made the livelihood of this age group more vulnerable and set limits on achieving their future aspirations.

Adolescents were identified from the quantitative survey list based on the information from the household survey. The respondents were purposefully chosen from the three districts and surveyed villages. As the objective was to find adolescents according to the criteria mentioned above, the team first tried to find adolescents who met the criteria of the survey sample. However, in cases where adolescents fulfilling those criteria were unavailable, the team took the

contact information of similar adolescents fulfilling the criteria in the same village and contacted them. A purposive method was adopted in the selected villages under the qualitative study to identify and interview adolescent girls who have been married in the last year (since COVID-19 onset) or adolescents who have started paid work since the onset of COVID-19. Finally, 22 of the thirty-six adolescent respondents of the qualitative sample were outside of the quantitative survey list.

Six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted, one in each community (one peri-urban one rural in each district) with parents (mothers and fathers) to discuss various scenarios and options for adolescent girls in that area. The FGDs were arranged by the researchers and the parents of the respective areas. (Guidelines in annex)

For key informant interviews, five key informants were interviewed per district, fifteen in total. The key informants included the Judge of the *Shishu Adalat* (juvenile court), UP chairman or member; education officer or school headmaster/mistress; probation officer, and the police officer (Child Specialized Police Desk) of selected areas. GIZ RoL provided information about the KIIs at Gaibandha and Cumilla. The legal advisor of the research team helped access the Shishu Adalat Judge and Probation Officer at Narail. The key informants interviewed for this research included:

**Table 4.1: Key informants**

| | Cumilla | Gaibandha | Narail | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| District Judge | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| DSS Probation Officer | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| UP Chair/Member | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| DEO | | 1 | | 1 |
| School teacher | 1 | | 2 | 3 |
| Law enforcement agency (SI/ASI) | 1 | 1 | | 2 |
| Total | 5 | 5 | 5 | 15 |

For data analysis, the researchers prepared detailed field notes of each interview. Half of the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed. The research team also held debrief sessions after collecting data from each district. The report outline was then developed based on the debrief discussions.

## 4.3. Challenges

- Working children who had migrated were not home
- The age of underage married girls is falsified
- In-laws will not consider a daughter-in-law as a child bride

- Married adolescents are not likely to be in the parental home
- The nature of school opening (partial and assignments) and the fact that final exams had not taken place when the fieldwork was done meant that it was not possible to have an idea of the number of children who were dropping out form school.
- The survey design initially was meant for households where the daughters were living with their parents. Later the survey design was modified to include households where the girls had been married off in the last two years and where the girls were not residing with their parents.

To ensure that we were able to achieve the objectives of the research and ensure quality research outputs, we have adjusted the survey design. The initially designed sampling strategy only included households that had at least one adolescent member aged between 12 to 18. However, when the field survey got initiated, the two following issues were observed:

(a) Household members that have a married adolescent member (daughter-in-law/son-in-law) tend to misreport and overstate the age of the adolescent member. In this way, it would lead to a very small number of married adolescent members in our survey data.

(b) There are some questions that in-laws would not be able to answer and only the parents of the adolescent member can respond. However, since married adolescent females were mostly living with in-laws, we would not be able to get that information properly.

Hence, to address these issues, in our design, we included an additional 400 households which do not currently include adolescent members but had adolescent members in the past 2 years who were married off to a different household. This helped increase the sample size of married adolescents and the responses of their parents.

# 5. Household and adolescent profile

## 5.1. Quantitative data

Understanding the key characteristics of the sample households and adolescents is important. For this study, both adolescents and household heads were surveyed. Therefore, this section will discuss the characteristics of the households and the adolescents.

**Table 5.1.1:** Sample households: Some key characteristics

| Indicators | Statistics |
|---|---|
| Average household size (total number of members) | 4.58 |
| % of female-headed households | 30.68 |
| Average age of household head (age in years) | 45.01 |

| | |
|---|---|
| % of households with current per capita monthly income less than BDT 2,310[3] | 37.23 |
| % of households with at least 1 disabled member | 6.67 |
| % of households with at least 1 migrated member at present | 11.86 |
| % of households with at least 1 internationally migrated member at present | 1.74 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | **2,758** |

From Table 5.1.1, it can be seen that the average household size is 4.58, which is slightly higher than the average of 4.11 for rural Bangladesh, as per the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES 2016)[4]. Around 30% of the sample households are female-headed and given the patriarchal social structure of Bangladesh, this seems intuitive. The average age of household heads is 45 years. As for per capita income, the percentage of households living below the per capita monthly income of BDT 2,310 (poverty line) is around 37%. Even though the poverty rate in Bangladesh was 20.5% in 2019 (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2019), different studies (BIGD, 2021; SANEM, 2021) have found that after COVID-19 struck the economy, there has been a sudden upsurge in the number of "new poor." Therefore, the numbers from our survey seem intuitive considering that aspect.

In terms of disability, about 6.7% of households have at least one disabled member, which conforms to the national-level data, of 6.94% (HIES, 2016). Over the recent decades, migration rates have shown an upward trend in Bangladesh. In this sample, about 11.9% of households have at least one migrated member, and 1.7% of them have migrated internationally. Although the total migration rate is close to the national data, the international migration rate is 7 percentage points lower than the national data.

The education of the household head is a very important factor to shape different aspects of a household. Within this sample, a fifth of household heads never went to school; 8.86% of them did attend school but dropped out without passing any class. On the other hand, 12.5% of them completed primary level education (class 5); 7.5% completed secondary level education (class 10 or equivalent), and 3.5% completed their higher secondary level education (class 12 or equivalent). A very small percentage, about 2%, of household heads completed tertiary level education (undergraduate and postgraduate).

[3] Lower poverty line according to data from HIES.

[4] Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Statistics and Informatics Division, Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. (2019). Report on the household income and expenditure survey, (HIES) 2016. http://www.bbs.gov.bd/site/page/648dd9f5-067b-4bcc-ba38-45bfb9b12394/Income,-Expenditure-&-Poverty

**Table 5.1.2:** Sample adolescents: Some key characteristics

| Indicators | Statistics |
|---|---|
| The average number of adolescent members per household | 1.12 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | **2,429** |
| The average age of male adolescent members (age in years) | 14.60 |
| The average age of female adolescent members (age in years) | 14.42 |
| % of married adolescents | 0.79 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | **3,139** |

Focusing on the adolescents, as Table 5.1.2 shows, out of the 2,758 households, 2,429 had at least one adolescent member. The average number of adolescents per household is 1.12. The table also provides sex-disaggregated data on adolescents' average age. The average age of male and female adolescents from the sample is around 14 years, whereas the males are slightly older.

Looking into the educational attainment of the adolescents, from the data, it can be observed that, most of the adolescents from our surveyed sample range from fifth-grade graduates to ninth graders. This is as the age range (12 to 18 years) that we have selected for the study generally comprises people from these grades. Around 2% of the adolescent respondents have received informal religious education (i.e., *Hifz*).

## 5.2. Qualitative respondent profile

### 5.2.1. Profile of in-depth interview respondents

Three points became apparent when we were looking for appropriate categories for adolescents:

(1) There were very few official dropouts from school, whether adolescent boys or girls;

(2) Girls had got married within the past year but had not necessarily dropped out of school; and

(3) Working adolescent girls were extremely hard to find compared to working adolescent boys.

Adolescent girls and boys were both from similar types of households. Most households consisted of 4–5 members, including parents and siblings and, in some cases, grandparents. Only a few of the households in Cumilla were slightly larger. All the households in the qualitative research were male-headed households where the majority of the male heads were agricultural and non-agricultural wage workers or transport workers (auto-rickshaws, rickshaws, cars).

Several of them were farmers with their own land or mortgaged land. Very few had their own business (grocery shop or tea stall) or had salaried jobs (ship worker, security guard, international migrant) and only two had government jobs. Apart from those who had government jobs, the remaining male household heads had little or no education. Only two of

the mothers were found to be doing paid work as wage workers, although a few more worked as unpaid agricultural workers. The main difference between peri-urban and rural households was that the latter were more likely to be agricultural wage worker households. Peri-urban households were a mix of non-agricultural wage worker households or households where the heads were small businessmen or salaried jobholders.

The majority of the adolescent girl respondents were aged between 15 and 18 years with only one 12-year-old, one 13-year-old, and one 14-year-old. Fourteen of the 24 adolescent girls were unmarried. Unmarried Single girls were all in school and studying between classes 6 and 8.

Ten of the adolescent girls interviewed were married (including one who is divorced and currently engaged). Married girls ranged from 15 years (only one) to 18 years, with most married at 16/17 years. The majority of married adolescent girls (7 out 10) were in school, at the cusp of either the secondary school certificate examination (SSC) or the higher secondary certificate examination (HSC). Since they were not having to do regular classes and they were examinees, they were able to remain "in school" after marriage. It is noteworthy that both the HSC examinees were from economically better-off households (cashiers at government banks and property owners).

Four of the 10 adolescent girls married over the last year were either pregnant (two) or had given birth (two) during this time. Their husbands were mainly young men who worked in local auto-repair workshops, mobile repair, or other types of shops, or as masons, car drivers, or had salaried jobs as security guards or garment factory workers in Dhaka.

It took considerable searching to find adolescent girls doing paid work. One adolescent girl (Gaibandha) was learning tailoring to earn money. Her father was a rickshaw puller and her mother a brick-breaker. Another girl gave private tuition. Her father was unemployed and her mother a day labourer. It is important to note that only these two adolescent girls among all our respondents had mothers who were earning.

Like the adolescent girls, the majority of the adolescent boys interviewed were between 15 and 18 years, with only one 13-year-old and one 14-year-old boy. All the adolescent boys, except one 18-year-old boy, were single. It was far easier to find boys doing paid work, which they mostly did in garages repairing motorcycles or auto-rickshaws or doing skilled work such as being a mason or electrician. Additionally, boys were found to work in the fields with their fathers as unpaid agricultural workers or minding their fathers' shops or businesses. Their households were not different from the households of other boys. Interestingly, we found a married adolescent boy.

### 5.2.2. Profile of focus group discussion participants

We held two mixed focus group discussions with fathers and mothers of adolescent children in each district (rural and peri-urban) and a total of six FGDs in all. Each FGD had a mix of men and women. The participants ranged from 30+ years to 60+ years. Irrespective of the peri-urban or

rural location, the majority of the men and women had some form of education, mostly below class 8 and only a few had completed SSC. Women in the peri-urban area of Narail were more likely than in other areas to have a secondary school education, although similar to other areas, it also had many older women who had no education. All of the women, except one (tailor), identified themselves as housewives with no income. The occupations of male participants ranged from mainly wage labourers and skill workers to small businessmen, farmers, and service holders (two).

# 6. Findings

## 6.1. COVID-19 impact on household income, livelihood, and savings

In this section, we will discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the adolescent's household income and the livelihood of the household members from the quantitative survey and the perspective of the adolescents as revealed through the interviews. We will investigate how the pandemic impacted the employment and income of household members. We will also discuss if there was an income loss, and how it affected the overall household food security and other expenses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, we will discuss household financial conditions during the pandemic in terms of changes in savings and household financial liability.

### 6.1.1. Changes in income/employment

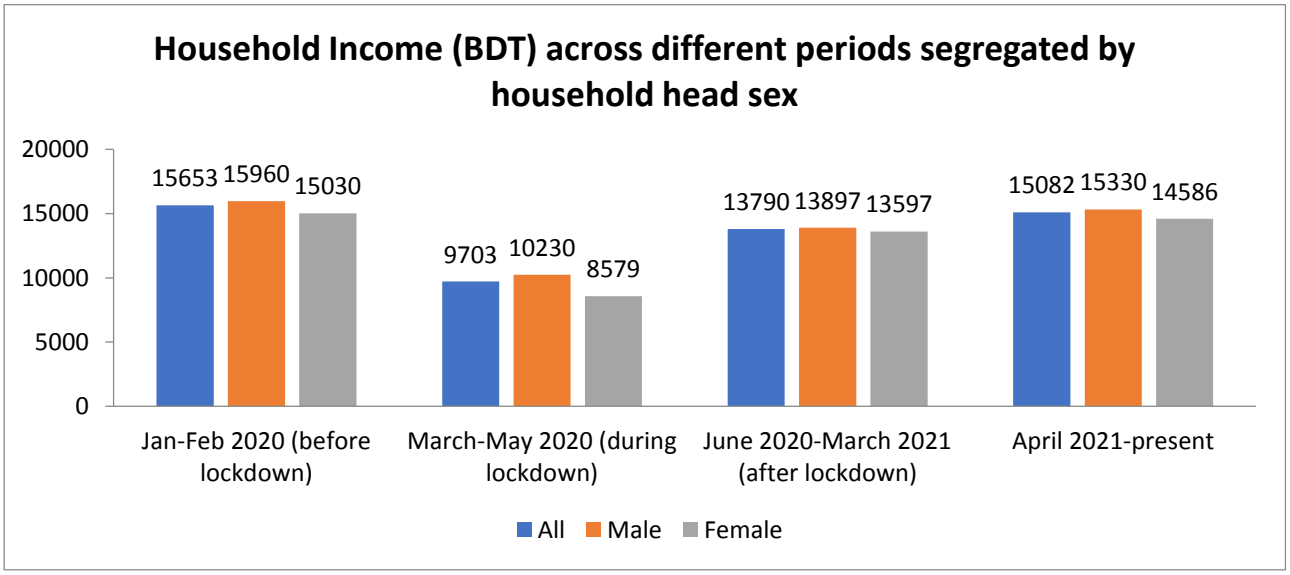



**Figure 6.1.1** Household income (BDT) across different periods segregated by household head sex (N=2,758)

The survey found that income was lowest in the period March-May 2020 which was during the first lockdown across the country. The average income decreased from BDT 15,653 to BDT

9,703; for males headed households, which was lower compared to female headed households. The income gap between male and female household heads was approximately BDT 1,000 before the first lockdown which increased to approximately BDT 1,600 during the first lockdown. A steady recovery was observed in the successive periods, with income returning to almost the same levels as before. We observe the same situation across the country. For Cumilla, the average income decreased in March-May 2020 and then slowly went back to pre-lockdown levels for both males and females by April 2021. For Gaibandha, the pattern is similar as well but income decreased to almost half for females during the first lockdown (See Appendix Figure A1). While in Narail, we observe that the income decreased to almost half for both males and females during the first lockdown period; it recovered almost fully after April 2021.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the household's financial condition depended on the income security of the main earner of the family. There was no geographical difference. Except for the service holders, all households with adolescents from the three regions faced financial changes. Most of the households experienced income loss both during and after the lockdown. Households of jobholders, such as cashiers in banks, and clerks in the local municipality had financial security as they were paid their salary during the pandemic. Their households did not face any financial struggle during the lockdown.

According to the qualitative findings, most of the main earners of the adolescents' households were male members and were either the father or the husband of the adolescents. There were also supporting income-earning members like brothers, mothers, or the adolescents themselves. The main income earners were in different kinds of occupations. Mostly farmers, agricultural labour, day labour, rickshaw or van pullers, fish and vegetable sellers, shopkeepers, and security guards. During non-COVID-19 times, the earnings for these categories of employment were low and during the COVID-19 pandemic, their income was uneven and lower than usual. During the lockdown, some of them completely lost their income as they could not find a job.

The day labourers and the rickshaw-van pullers from the peri-urban region became unemployed immediately after the lockdown. Due to sudden income loss, these households experienced acute financial crises. The adolescents mentioned that before the pandemic, their father was earning but during the pandemic, they could not go out in search of work. For these reasons, the families suffered more. One of the female adolescents whose father was a van puller from the peri-urban area said,

> *"During the lockdown, my father could not earn. So we faced financial problems. After the lockdown, he could not earn regularly. If he could find work one day then he could not work the other days.*
>
> —Female (15), Cumilla, peri-urban, school dropout

Shopkeepers' incomes also decreased during the lockdown as the law enforcement authorities were strict about imposing the lockdown. They could not open their shops for fear of being fined. One of the female adolescents whose father was a shopkeeper mentioned,

> *"My father could not keep his shop open all the time during the lockdown. That is why his income has decreased. He also became ill after the lockdown and many new shops have opened nowadays. So income is still very low."*
>
> —Female (18), Gaibandha, married, school dropout

In the rural areas, some adolescents' parents were farmers whose income also decreased during the lockdown, as they could not sell their produce or had to sell them at a lower price because of the lockdown. One 13 years old female adolescent from a rural area whose household had some agricultural land mentioned,

> *"Although we have some agricultural land where we produce rice and jute, it was not possible to go to the market to sell those. There was a strict lockdown. We struggled with income loss and food habits."*
>
> —Female (13), unmarried, in school

There were adolescents whose parents were regular income earners, and worked elsewhere as car drivers, on ships, and as overseas migrant workers. Their financial crisis was comparatively less during the pandemic. But at the time of lockdown, households with regular income earners also faced financial difficulties as they were earning less than usual, they could not get their salaries timely and as a result, they failed to send money regularly. In a few cases, the income-earning members returned to the village after losing their jobs in the city and could not find any work in the village.

Few households also had secondary earners working as day labourers, working in a stationery shop, and rearing cattle and poultry. During the lockdown when the main bread earners were unable to earn, the supporting member's income contributed to coping with the crisis. A 16-year-old married adolescent from the rural area mentioned that her mother raised poultry at home and she sold that poultry during the lockdown. With that money, they bought food as there was no other money in the house.

### 6.1.2. Changes in household food and non-food expenditure

The quantitative findings presented in Figure 6.1.2 show that household food expenses decreased from BDT 7,218 to BDT 6,604 during the first lockdown. A gradual increase is seen for the successive periods and it returns to the pre-lockdown level. There is not much difference in terms of non-food expenditure with numbers varying between approximately BDT 3,900 and BDT 4,000. Non-food expenditure includes rent, bills, and other daily costs. In terms of education, a very sharp drop is observed - about 67% from BDT 1,960 to BDT 648 during the first lockdown. Similar to food expenses, expenditure on education gradually increases but is yet to return to previous levels.

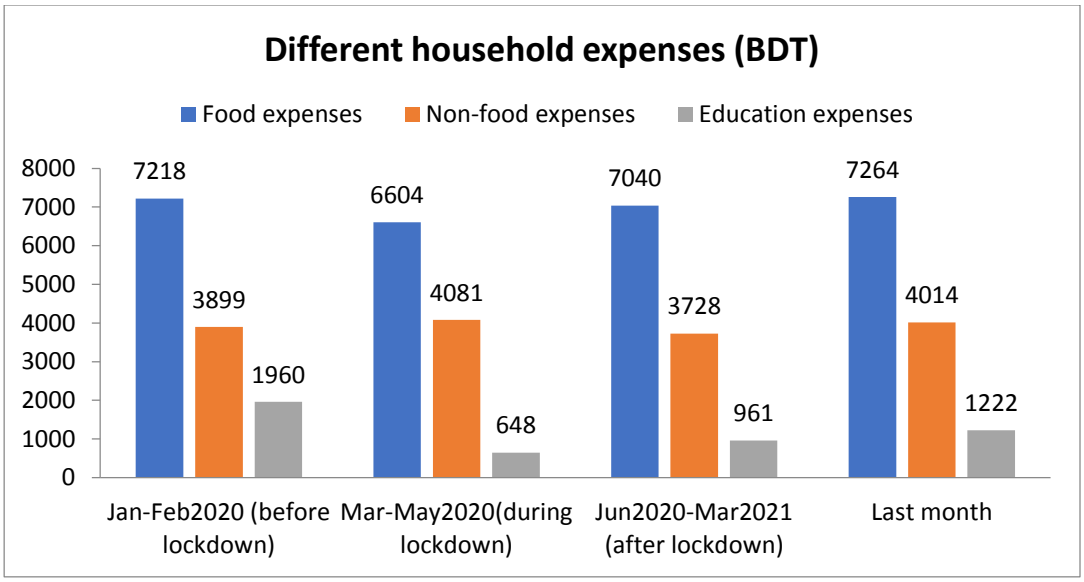



**Figure 6.1.2:** Changes in Household Food and Non-Food Expenditure (N=2,123)

Qualitative findings revealed that most of the households with adolescents struggled with meeting household expenditure during the COVID-19 pandemic. Households without income could only spend money on necessities, such as buying food like rice and vegetables. On the other hand, those who could less than usual had to think each time before making any expenditures.

One of the male adolescents whose father was a migrant worker and could send less amount of money during the lockdown said,

> *"During the lockdown, my father could send BDT 1,000 but on the other times, he used to send BDT 3,000. As there was less money, we had to spend less. Suppose we had 2 kg rice instead of 5 kg. After all, we had to buy according to the income."*
>
> —Male (13), unmarried, in school

The adolescents or their family members did not purchase clothes or cosmetics in general or at the time of festivals during the pandemic. Households with adolescents in rural areas were living in their own houses, so they did not need to spend on accommodation but had to pay the utility bills. In the peri-urban area, a few of the adolescents had to pay the house rent and other bills. During the lockdown, all the household members were staying at home, so the utility bill was higher than the usual time. This kind of expenditure was compulsory and non-reducible, so they had to cut other expenditures and save money to pay the bills. In addition, adolescents whose family members were sick during the lockdown needed to spend money for their treatment, which was an extra burden during the pandemic.

New kinds of expenditure increased during the pandemic, like internet cost for education and entertainment—mobile games, using different apps like YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok; a few families even had to buy new smartphones for the adolescent to join online classes and do assignments during the pandemic.

On the other hand, some of the households could not pay educational expenses, like school fees, private tuition fees, or the cost of buying books, during the pandemic as there was less money in the household. So parents had to compromise on their children's education-related costs.

### 6.1.3. Food security

We first look at the changes in food security captured by the survey.

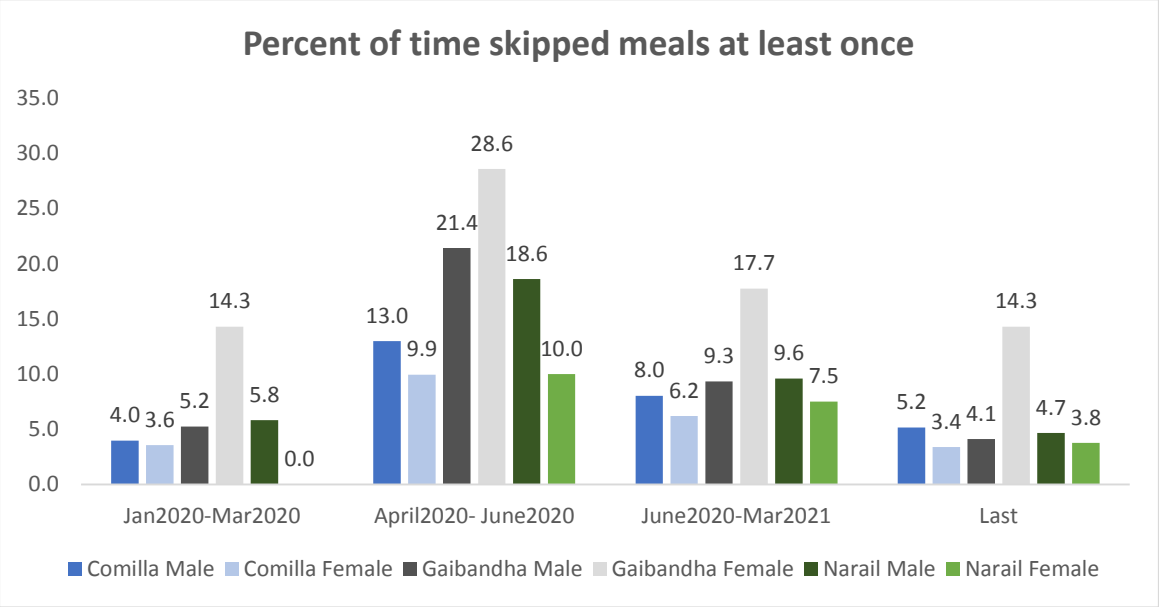



**Figure 6.1.3:** Share of respondents who reported skipping meals at least once by district and time (N=2,684)

Regarding food security, respondents were asked if they had to go without food at any time for different periods. There is a stark increase after March 2020, the first lockdown. The percentage of times without food at least once increased by almost 10 per cent points across all districts and sexes. The worst is seen in the case of the females of Gaibandha; there was an increase from 14.3% in the previous period to 28.6%. The rate decreased gradually over the next periods but is yet to come down to pre-lockdown levels.

The qualitative research found that the majority of the households with adolescents had to compromise food consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown, the food crisis was more intense as there was no money on hand due to sudden income loss. Food quality was compromised, as occasionally consumption of fish and meat was stopped during the lockdown. Moreover, the rising price of commodities added to their struggle. In addition, shops

were only open for a few hours in the morning. So the daily earners could not buy food in the morning as they were paid in the evening after finishing their work. The father of an adolescent said,

> *"The day labourers faced problems during the lockdown. After working the whole day when we entered the market to buy food, it was empty. Nothing was left. And even then, we were in a rush, afraid of getting caught, so we would leave hurriedly. The police used to chase us."*

Where the main income earners of the household were daily wage earners and lost their jobs during the lockdown, adolescents from these households from all the research sites informed that they suffered a lot during the lockdown, as there was less food and some days there was no food in the household. One of the female adolescents from the rural area said,

> *"During the lockdown, sometimes there was no rice in our house. I used to buy buns from the local shop and ate that with my younger siblings."*
>
> —Female (16), unmarried, in school

Farmers from rural areas who had their land were able to store basic food items like rice and lentil, as they grow these kinds of crops, and also collected vegetables from their house garden but had to struggle to manage the grocery cost. One of the female adolescents whose father was a farmer and used to grow rice and greens on their land said,

> *"We could eat rice and lentil as there were crops in our house from our land. We faced a problem buying groceries from the shop."*
>
> —Female (15), married, in school

Households without income had to depend on the goodwill of neighbours for food. One of the female adolescents from the rural area mentioned they did some work and got food in exchange. With that food, her whole family survived the lockdown. She said,

> *"During the Ramadan amid lockdown, affluent persons from our neighbourhood gave us some food. After the lockdown, sometimes one of my neighbours called me to help them with cooking and after work, they gave me some food like rice and curry. Our whole family ate that food."*
>
> —Female (15), married, working

Some households where the main earners were unemployed during the lockdown depended on the relief for food consumption. However, this was rare and only a few adolescents from both the rural and peri-urban areas were informed about getting relief. They got relief items like rice, potato, oil, and salt, and that was once or twice. Also, a few of them got food support from their relatives. With this support, the household was able to survive for a few days during the lockdown.

Some of the adolescents and parents from comparatively poorer households who were able to save some money before the pandemic mentioned that they had to use their savings to meet the food cost for the family. A few of them also took out a loan to buy food. The mother of an adolescent said,

> *"There was no work, people had to borrow money to buy food."*

On the other hand, from the service holders' category, their food habits and diet did not change during the lockdown. One of the female adolescents from peri-urban whose father was a government employee getting his salary regularly said,

> *"We did not have a food crisis during and after the lockdown. We were able to maintain the diet quite well."*
>
> —Female (16), unmarried, in school

Some families were able to store basic food items in their houses immediately after the lockdown and that helped them to get by for a few days. By doing all of this, households were coping with the shock and started going back to their normal food habits. However, some still compromised their food consumption as they were repaying loans due.

### 6.1.4. Changes in savings and financial liabilities

The figures below show that savings decreased slightly during the lockdown period for all districts across both sexess. The savings of female-headed households in Cumilla saw a greater decline in savings compared to the males (Figure 6.1.4). Even though savings increased after the lockdown, it is yet to reach the pre-lockdown level. Gaibandha district had the least amount of savings on average among the three districts. The savings of female-headed households in this district increased significantly compared to their male counterparts (Figure 6.1.5). Lastly, Narail had the highest savings among the three districts. As expected, there was a decrease in savings after lockdown and gradually returning to levels as before the lockdown. The male-headed households are observed to have even greater savings now than pre-lockdown levels (Figure 6.1.5).

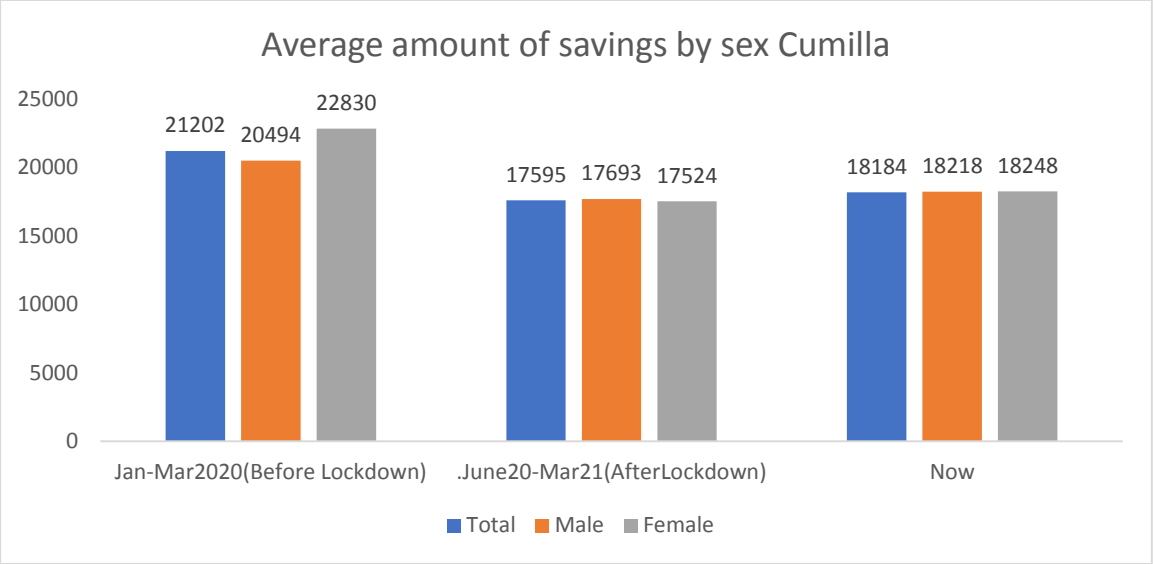



**Figure 6.1.4:** Average amount of savings of different time periods by gender, Cumilla district (N=1663)

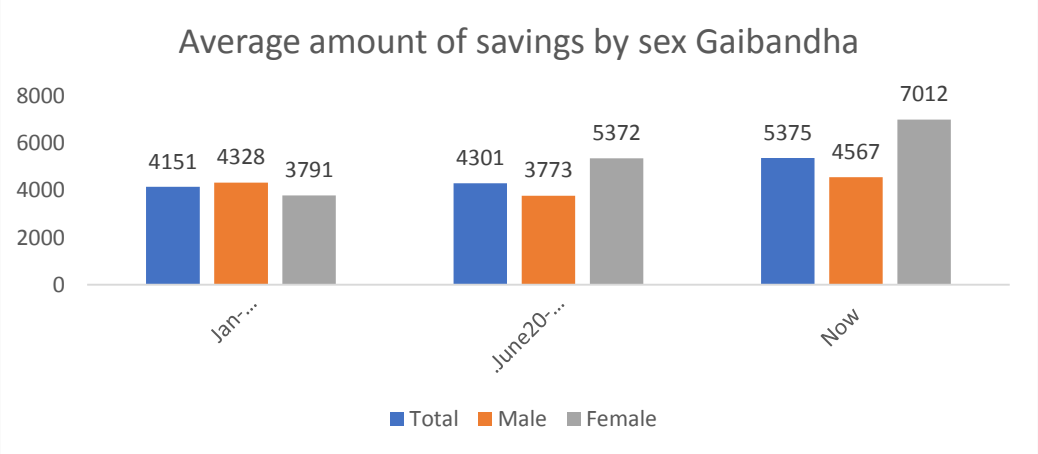



**Figure 6.1.5:** Average amount of savings of different time periods by sex, Gaibandha District (N=711)

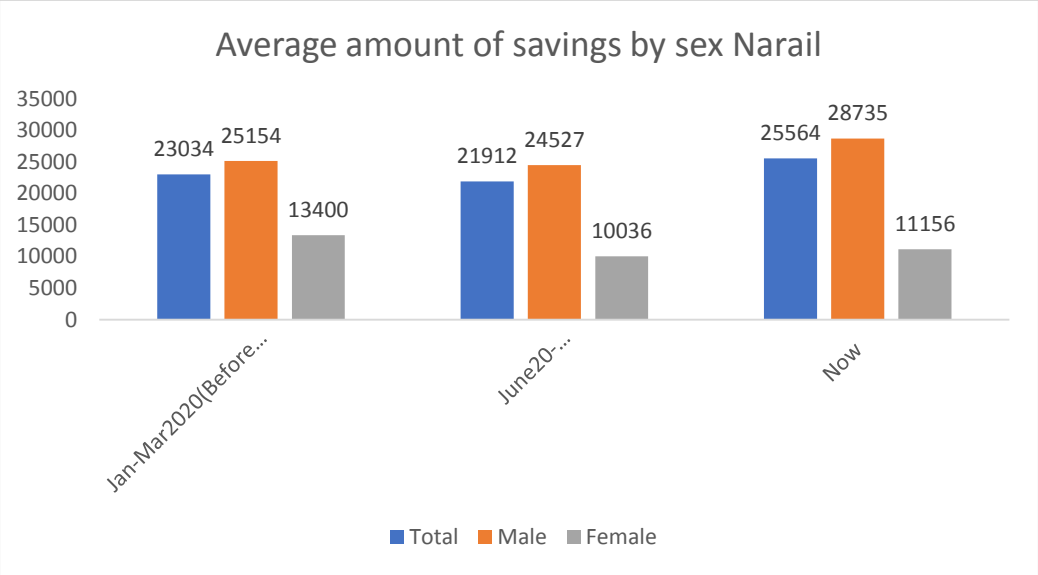



**Figure 6.1.6:** Average amount of savings of different times by sex in Narail (N=388)

From the figure below, we see that for both Cumilla and Gaibandha, female-headed households used up more savings after March 2020. Only in Narail, it is seen that male-headed households used up their savings more. This may be due to a variety of reasons: males losing employment or business in that particular area, lower access to other forms of credit etc. When asked about the reasons behind using up the savings, the most common response was to use it for primary consumption purposes or to pay back loans during the lockdown period. This pattern was consistent across all districts and sexes.

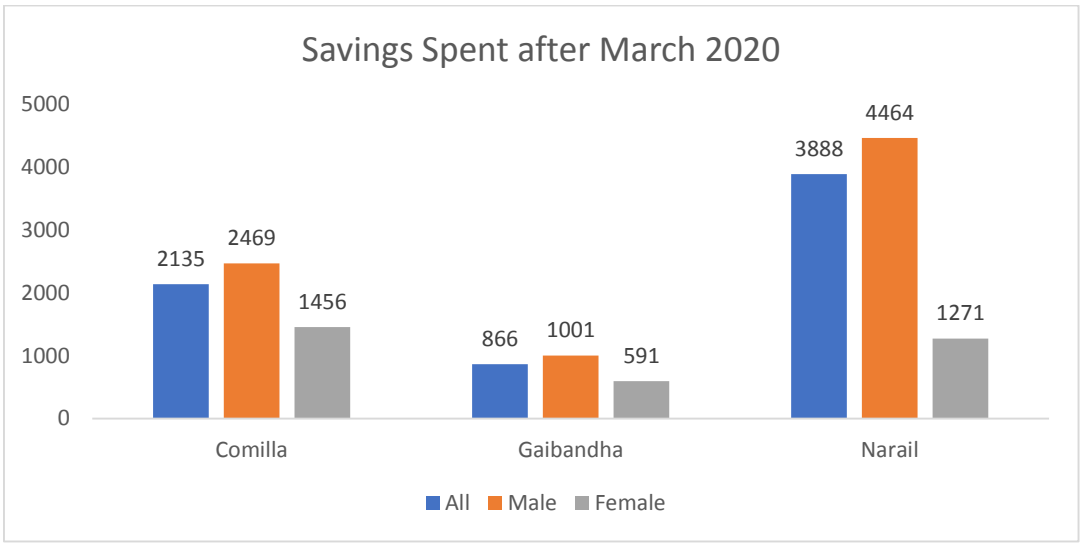



**Figure 6.1.7:** Average amount of savings spent after March 2020 by sex (N=2,762)

Most of the households from our qualitative sample were not able to save money before the COVID-19 pandemic, as most of them were economically insolvent. To meet all the expenditures, a few of the households, especially those whose main source of income was

stopped because of the sudden lockdown, were using savings. At the beginning of the lockdown, they had to depend on whatever money they had in hand. As the lockdown extended, families without income were completely dependent on their savings which soon ran out. At the time of the extreme crisis, a few of them had to spend the money which they were saving for business capital or planning to buy a piece of land, or for marrying off their daughters. The father of a male adolescent said,

> *"I used to do wood business before the COVID-19 pandemic. But when the lockdown started, I lost my income. For survival, I spent all of the capital of my business which was 2 lac taka. Now I have nothing in my hands. Everything is finished."*

When the main earning members migrated, their dependent family members also had to spend their savings during the lockdown, as the main earners could not send money timely. Adolescents also mentioned having personal savings. Mostly the female adolescents had their savings which they used for their educational expenses and buying clothes and cosmetics during the pandemic as parents were unable to meet these types of costs.

### 6.1.5. Loans

**Table 6.1.8:** Percentages of loans taken in different periods in the districts

| | Cumilla | Gaibandha | Narail |
|---|---|---|---|
| Before 25 March 2020 | 4.99 | 2.81 | 6.7 |
| During 25 March2020 to May 2020 | 1.92 | 0.98 | 1.55 |
| From June 2020 to March 2021 | 12.39 | 10.55 | 10.57 |
| April 2021 onwards | 80.7 | 85.65 | 81.19 |
| Number of Observations | 1891 | | |

When we observe the time the loans were taken across the three districts, we found an interesting result: the highest percentage of loans was taken after April 2021 across all districts and the lowest percentage of loans were taken during the first lockdown period.

A possible explanation for this phenomenon could be that people took loans during the lockdown to use for consumption purposes only. As other economic and business activities were halted, the percentage of people taking loans was low. It can also be the case that loans were harder to access during lockdown restrictions. To further explore our assumption, table 6.1.8 shows what were the main reasons people used their loans (multiple answers were allowed).

**Table 6.1.9:** Loan purposes

| For what purpose did you use the loan money | Before 25 March 2020 | 25 March-May 2020 | June 2020–April 2021 | April 2021 onwards |
|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| To make a living due to the pandemic | 14.73 | 26.67 | 17.70 | 23.94 |
| Treatment | 8.53 | 4.44 | 4.97 | 4.16 |
| Education | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.62 | 0.86 |
| Buying/construction of house | 10.08 | 2.22 | 14.60 | 10.25 |
| Fixing of house | 2.33 | 13.33 | 5.90 | 4.23 |
| Lawsuits | 0.78 | 2.22 | 0.31 | 0.00 |
| Paying back loans | 13.95 | 22.22 | 15.22 | 14.62 |
| Release mortgage | 1.55 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.43 |
| Business capital | 10.85 | 4.44 | 13.35 | 9.82 |
| Cost of industrial machinery | 1.55 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.14 |
| Investment | 3.88 | 0.00 | 0.62 | 1.86 |
| Mortgage of land | 0.78 | 0.00 | 2.48 | 1.51 |
| For cultivation | 2.33 | 6.67 | 3.42 | 5.52 |
| Buying asset/land/poultry | 7.75 | 8.89 | 9.01 | 9.03 |
| Cost of providing electricity | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.31 | 0.14 |
| Social festival | 0.78 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.22 |
| Foreign trip cost | 10.85 | 6.67 | 6.52 | 5.95 |
| Marriage/dowry | 7.75 | 0.00 | 4.04 | 5.66 |
| Funeral services, funerals, etc. | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.22 |
| Others | 1.55 | 2.22 | 0.93 | 1.43 |
| Number of observations | N= 1891 | | | |

As postulated, we see that during the first lockdown period, the highest percentage of loans were used for fixing the house and other consumption-related purposes. No investment was made during the first lockdown period, whereas after April 2021, 78% of loans were used for investment purposes. The same pattern can be seen if we look at business capital and buying business assets. Therefore, it is evident that people usually take and use a higher percentage of loans when business activity is “business as usual” in the economy. The lockdown induced people to use up savings, even to pay back loans, and loans were mainly used for primary consumption activities.

The qualitative research found that taking out loans was a common practice among households in all the regions. Except for two of the households with service holders, all of the households had to take out a loan during the lockdown or after that. As we have seen in the previous section, economically marginalized households with adolescents used up most of their meager savings during the lockdown to buy food and meet the household expenditure. They took out loans for treatment and also to marry off the female adolescents.

Some borrowed money from their relatives or took loans from moneylenders upon interest. One of the female adolescents mentioned,

> *"During the lockdown, my father borrowed twenty thousand taka and now we had to pay five thousand taka more as interest."*
>
> —Female (15), unmarried, in school

Adolescents and their parents also mentioned taking out loans from microcredit before and during the pandemic. Although during the lockdown, the loan installments were stopped for two months, after which, they had to pay all the due amount together; so it was extra pressure for them. The father of an adolescent said,

> *"The hardest part was giving the installment. Each and everyone here has to give this. (…) The service charge of each installment after the pandemic; each household had to give at least 6,000–7,000 taka late fee. We had to pay the interest fee. If the installment was running [continuing], we would not have to pay the interest. This amount is a big deal now."*

## 6.2. Education and COVID-19

This section looks at the changes in education of adolescents since the onset of COVID-19. The quantitative and qualitative data are analyzed to show whether and why adolescent boys and girls dropped out of school, the challenges they faced in continuing schooling—highlighting differences among boys and girls—and how that has affected their aspirations.

### 6.2.1. Continuation and changes after the onset of COVID-19

A slight difference is found in school participation among adolescents before and after COVID-19 restrictions were imposed. Before the pandemic, 96.74% of the adolescents went to school, while the rate decreased to 94.43% as pandemic-related mobility restrictions subsided. There is a significant difference between the male and female cohorts. At least 5% of males were not in school before COVID-19, which increased to 8.81% after the pandemic. The rates for adolescent girls were 1.99% and 3.66%, respectively. If we look at only adolescent male data, we find that the change is driven mainly by adolescent boys in Cumilla.

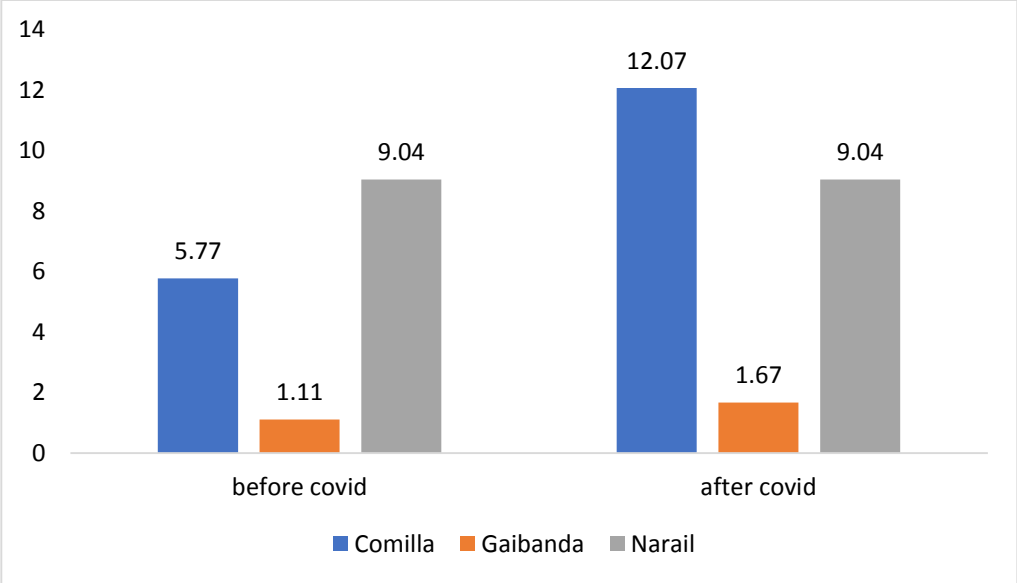



**Figure 6.2.1:** Percentage of male adolescents out of school by area (N=738)

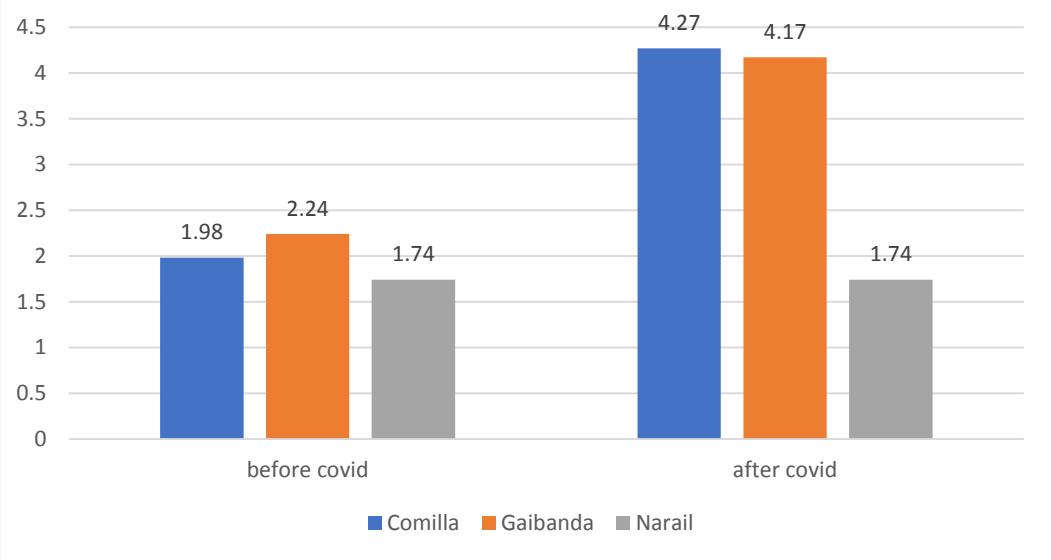



**Figure 6.2.2:** Percentage of female adolescents out of school by area (N=1256)

Before COVID-19, 5.77% of male adolescents in Cumilla said that they were not in school and the rate increased to 12.07% after COVID-19. In Gaibandha, 1.11% of adolescents said that they were out of school which slightly increased to 3.67% after the COVID-19 lockdown period. No difference was visible in Narail both before and after the COVID-19 period. The highest change is found in Cumilla where out-of-school students rose by around 7% after COVID-19 compared to before the pandemic.

In the case of adolescent girls, it is interesting to note the change among married adolescents: an increase from 6% to 10% from before COVID to after COVID.

There is a significant difference in education status by marital status both before and after COVID-19. While 33% of married adolescents said that they were not in school before COVID-19, the rate went up to 55% after the COVID-19 lockdown period.

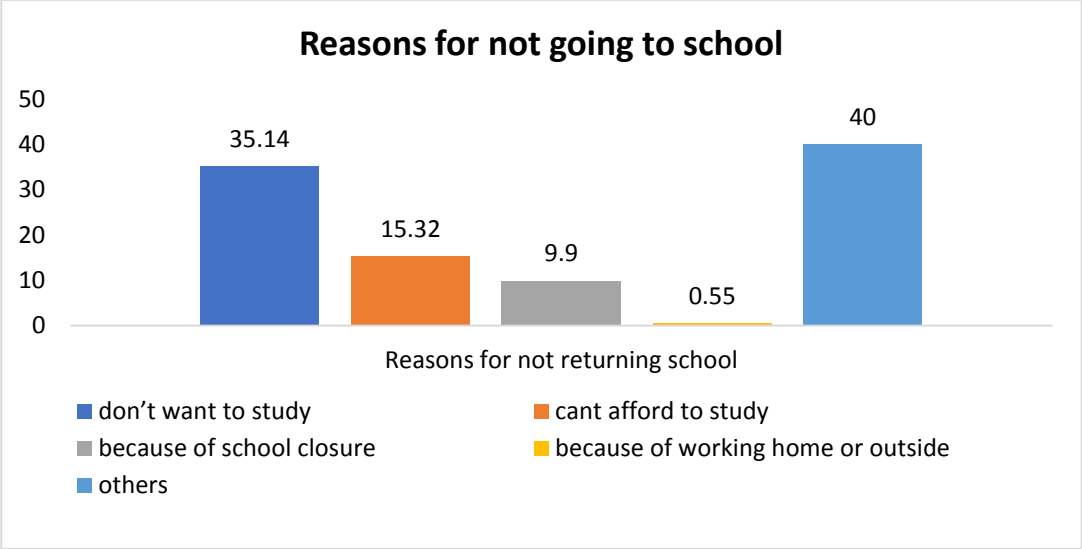



**Figure 6.2.3:** Adolescents' reasons for not going to school after COVID-19, in percentage (N=111)

Those who did not go to school after COVID-19 were asked why they dropped out. Only 0.55% of adolescents could not return to school after COVID-19 as they were either working outside or at home. Of the remaining adolescents, 35% did not want to study, while 15% said that they could not afford school.

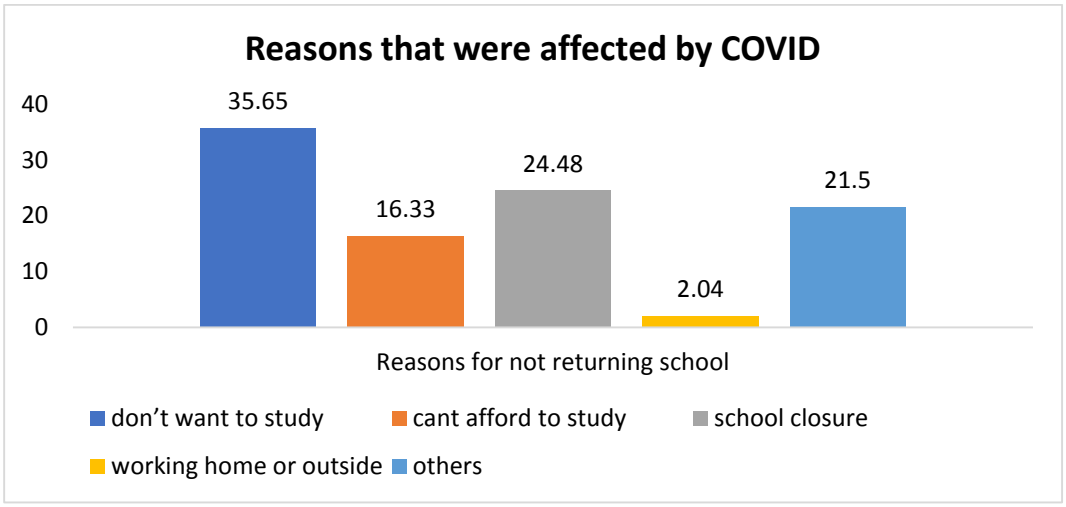



**Figure 6.2.4:** Adolescents' reasons for not going to school that was affected by COVID-19, in percentage (N=111)

The adolescents were asked which of the reasons for not going to school were affected by COVID-19. Of all the reasons for not returning to school, COVID-19 was identified as the reason

why adolescents said that they felt the unwillingness to study (35%), could not afford to study (16%), the school was closed (24%), and that they had to work (2%).

Among the seven adolescents who were either working outside or doing at-home kind of work, they said that they did not work before the COVID-19 pandemic. The remaining 10 said that they were involved in some kind of work before COVID-19. However, qualitative data revealed that these adolescents want to return to school after reopening.

In the qualitative research, we had 26 adolescents currently in school out of 36 adolescents interviewed. Among the 24 adolescent girls in the qualitative research, 18 were students still enrolled in an institution. Among those who dropped out, five were married or engaged and cited marriage specifically as a reason for dropping out. The sixth considered her dropping out to be temporary, and said she will be continuing her education as soon as it becomes financially feasible. Among the 18 adolescent girls still affiliated with schools, all six married students were registered to give the coming board exams (two HSC examinees and four SSC examinees) and seemed unlikely to continue studying afterward. Of the 12 unmarried students still going to school, nine respondents were in grade 9 (about 14 years old) or younger and thus were considered too young to be required to get married. There was one exceptional respondent who was an HSC candidate whose parents wanted her to be a police officer. The remaining two school-going students are currently helping the family financially in some way.

Of the 12 adolescent boys interviewed, eight were in school, two of whom were also working. Among those who have dropped out, two were working full time and the other two will be working soon.

The qualitative research further explored how the adolescents reacted to school closure and the implications it had for them.

In almost all cases, widespread anxiety was expressed by both parents and students over the school closure. Some initially felt happy about a break from studies, although it meant not being with friends. But compounded with the norm of early marriage and financial pressures, it was soon overtaken by worry. This was particularly the case for two groups of students. Those who had board exams coming up when the lockdown was announced were unnerved by the uncertainty. Many of this group of students also represented a group nearing the age of marriage and for them, the uncertainty of their future.

> *"If I could tell my parents the exact exam date, my wedding would have been postponed till then. The uncertainty scared my parents, and I was also only sitting home doing nothing."*
>
> —Female (15), Cumilla

Some of the adolescents felt that school closure meant they were able to help out at home, either financially or in domestic work.

For the parents, the biggest source of worry was adolescents, especially girls, now having ample free time to explore romantic relationships. Romantic relationships are considered detrimental to the reputation of the entire family and the girl's future marital prospects. With boys, the main fear of the parents was that the academic momentum would be lost.

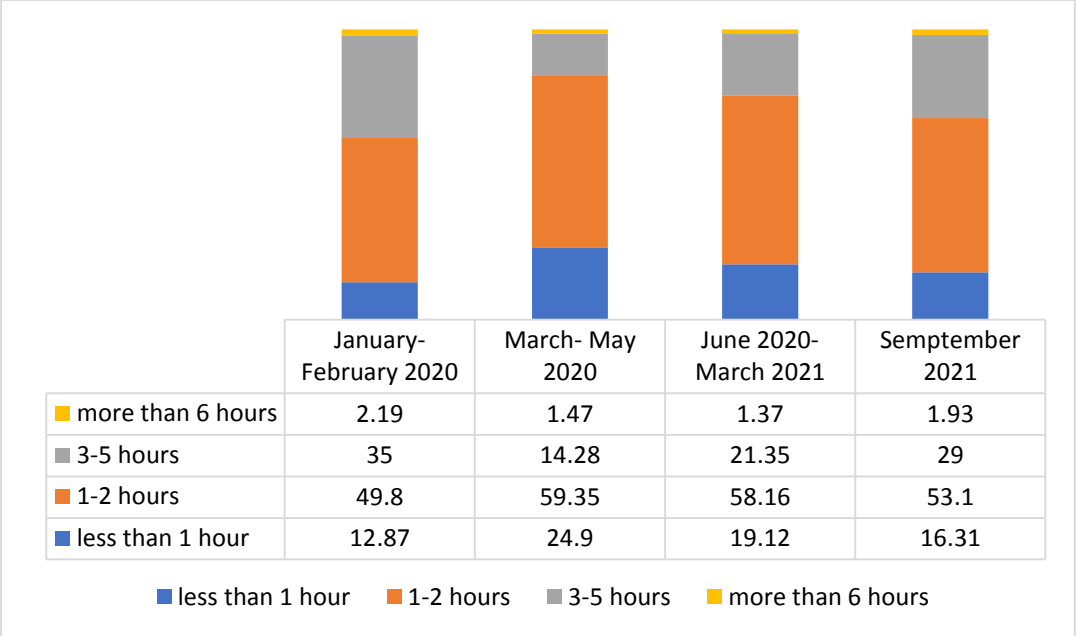
> *"When school initially closed, I was angry, wanted to kill the teachers, why wouldn't they reopen school! I wanted to be a doctor…It is okay now if I study until grade 8 or 9. I enrolled in school because my father said he will hit me if I don't attend."*
>
> —Male (15), Cumilla

A potential solution sought by parents was religious education. *Madrasas* were kept open longer than formal schools and were considered a form of alternative education. Parents in rural Cumilla had also organized informal morning classes for the boys in the area to get together and read from the Quran to both occupy their time and positively influence their actions.

The District Education Officer in Gaibandha believed a more accurate dropout rate would be possible to obtain once the final exams took place, and many students may be further attracted by the reduced number of classes and subjects. A secondary school headmaster in Narail expressed similar views. The idea of remedial education was unpopular as it would mean extra classes. The ministry was also expected to send out a circular on fees, which may have had a positive impact on children's attendance. The District Education Officer had also called Zoom meetings with local teachers to ask them to personally reach out to students to encourage them to return to school. Given the added awareness of adolescent problems, a UP member in Gaibandha mentioned adding adolescents' problems like child marriage, menstrual hygiene, dropping out, and eve-teasing in the curriculum.

### 6.2.2 Challenges to learning during COVID-19

Adolescents faced a lot of challenges in continuing education while schools were physically closed. These changes are partly reflected in the fluctuations in the hours they spent studying in the different periods Since January 2020.




| | January-February 2020 | March- May 2020 | June 2020-March 2021 | Semptember 2021 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| more than 6 hours | 2.19 | 1.47 | 1.37 | 1.93 |
| 3-5 hours | 35 | 14.28 | 21.35 | 29 |
| 1-2 hours | 49.8 | 59.35 | 58.16 | 53.1 |
| less than 1 hour | 12.87 | 24.9 | 19.12 | 16.31 |

**Figure 6.2.5:** Hours studied before and after COVID-19 (N=3139)

As can be seen from the figure 6.2.5 above, adolescents studied less during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 35% of the adolescents studied for 3–5 hours. The rate dropped as schools shut down during the initial lockdown period from March to May 2020. During this period, only 14% of students reported having studied for 3–5 hours. The drop in the number during the lockdown and in the post-lockdown period is reflected in the increase of the percentage of students who studied between 1–2 hours rose from 49.8% before the pandemic to 59.35% during March-May 2020. Similarly, 24.9% of students studied less than an hour after the initial lockdown was announced, as opposed to 12.87% before the pandemic.

As students and their parents grew accustomed to the new normal, the ratio of students studying for 3–5 hours also increased to 21.35% from June 2020 to March 2021 and 29% in September 2021. It is worth mentioning that the average hours spent studying still have not reached its pre-pandemic levels.

Parents were asked how much time they spent on their children's studies. With the onset of the pandemic, the time spent by parents on the education of their children also fell. While 25.88% of the parents spent 3–5 hours daily on their child's study before COVID-19, the rate decreased to 14.34% during the initial lockdown period. On the other hand, 27.77% of parents spent less than an hour during the lockdown, as opposed to 13.12% of parents before the pandemic.

The uncertainty and shock that accompanied the initial days of COVID-19, along with school closure, may have caused such reluctance among parents. And their lack of attention may explain the reduced hours of study for the adolescents during this period as well. Although the percentage began to rise after the lockdown measures were loosened, it is still to reach its pre-pandemic level.

One of the challenges to continuing studies was the fact that very few had television (TV) or access to the internet or mobile phones needed to access the government's attempt for continuing education through TV and online classes. The qualitative research found that amongst those who did have access, most adolescents did not like the TV *Sangsad* classes. Many found the one-sided TV lectures difficult to understand. The lack of two-way communication also meant they were not able to clarify confusion as it occurred. A 15-year-old male respondent from Cumilla complained that it was not engaging, did not hold their attention, and that they would much rather be watching something entertaining while another, 17-year-old female, mentioned simply being distracted by all the other available channels on the TV. A 15-year-old girl said her friends were glad to have extra time to watch YouTube and TikTok. This opinion seemed to resonate with quite a few others in our sample

Another challenge was to maintain studiousness. Students themselves felt disinterested to study on their own and mentioned during interviews that their study time per day decreased as the lockdown continued. Parents were also worried that the habit of studying at a particular time was lost. Teachers recognized this difficulty for students.

> *"They have become quite absent-minded. Schools have been closed for a while and they have no relationships with their teachers. The situation is similar to a house arrest."*
>
> —Teacher, Narail

For the female adolescents, schoolwork had to be juggled with an increase in housework.

> *"Previously I did not have so many chores. Sometimes I would wash the dishes after eating. If there was other work, I would help; if not, I would go roaming around here and there with my friends. Now I do almost all the work required within a household."*
>
> —Female (15), Cumilla

Boys were more likely to be bought personal phones by their parents for academic reasons, as there was a stigma for girls owning personal phones. The fear was that girls may get into and sustain romantic relationships through the phone, and many adolescents spoke of friends who had done so.

> *"It is the norm here. Whenever girls are seen with a phone, if it rings in public, people will say, 'She is so spoiled; I am sure she is talking to her boyfriend.' That is the norm here. So it is better if girls don't have phones because people will talk."*
>
> —Female (17), Cumilla

However, while the parents of adolescent boys, as well as the boys themselves, mentioned that male children and adolescents engaged in playing mobile games more than using them as an

academic tool, the opinion seemed to have no impact on their decision to buy a phone. On the other hand, teachers interviewed in Narail were quick to point out the negative impacts of easily accessible mobile phones.

**Table 6.2.1:** Rate of adolescents who went to private tutors for study and average monthly cost of a private tutor

| | No | Yes | Average monthly cost |
|---|---|---|---|
| **January–February 2020** | 32.83 | 67.17 | 606.61 |
| **March–May 2020** | 72.82 | 27.18 | 660.1 |
| **June 2020–March 2021** | 60.42% | 39.58% | 697.68 |
| **September 2021** | 54.47% | 45.53% | 631.58 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | **1,968** | | |

In September 2021, only 48% of adolescent students went to private tutors, as opposed to 70.1% before the pandemic. As the first phase of the lockdown was announced in March 2020, that percentage fell sharply to only 29.3%, possibly because of the fear of infection. However, as people learned to manage their fears under the new normal, the ratio of students going to private tutors is rising again, suggesting that there has been no systemic change in attitude.

Average monthly cost sharply rose from its pre-pandemic level of BDT 606 to about BDT 660 during the initial days of the pandemic. The average cost rose again after the initial phases of lockdown to about BDT 697.68 between June 2020 and March 2021. However, the average cost appeared to be increasing to its pre-COVID level in September 2021.

Sex segregated results show that female adolescents are more likely to go to private tutors than male adolescents in all periods. Before COVID-19, 33.56% of male adolescents did not go to a private tutor, while the rate is 32.4% for female adolescents. During COVID-19, 74% of male adolescents did not get any private tuition, while the rate is 71.95% for females.

There is no visible difference between the rate of adolescents taking private tuition in Cumilla and Gaibandha. In all periods, around 1% difference is found between Cumilla and Gaibandha. However, a higher rate of adolescents in Narail takes private tuition compared to Cumilla and Gaibandha. Before the COVID-19 period, 24.55% of adolescents in Narail did not take private tuition which increased to 62% during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, the rate stayed lower than Cumilla and Gaibandha in all four periods.

The qualitative research also found that strategies for taking private tuition changed to match the needs and reduced finances. Many students attended one or more private tuitions before the lockdown. Initially, with repeated notices of social distancing seen by the adolescents and their parents in the news and over social media, and infrequent police raids, private tuitions were also closed. However, they slowly resumed but not fully. Those who could afford it tried to

continue private tuition to stay in touch with academics. For instance, still wanting to eventually become a doctor, a female respondent from Gaibandha sought out extra private tuition to catch up and understand the material she has missed. Many adolescents mentioned decreased or excused fees, while others opted out of coaching for certain subjects to reduce costs.

In the interviews, much of the conversation on education was regarding the "auto-pass" and weekly assignment system initiated by the Ministry of Education to keep students engaged. This had surprising hidden costs. Blank paper, about 4–5 per assignment, had to be bought from the market.

> *"I need about 100–150 per week. I try to save money to pay for the assignments instead of asking for money. Sometimes my father gives me 5–10 taka to eat some snacks. I'll save that instead."*
>
> —Female (15), Cumilla

In peri-urban areas, students also mentioned needing to buy mobile data to find answers on YouTube, an idea given to some by the teachers themselves.

> *"I use my father's phone for assignments. I can search 'class 7, day 18, assignment answers', and that will show the answers. No, this system is quite useless. Only helping to improve our handwriting, I think.*
>
> —Female (15), Cumilla

Those without phones mentioned paying classmates who have smartphones for their answers to copy from.

In some cases, the notices of assignments and registrations did not reach the students on time. While a 13-year-old female respondent from Narail mentioned that her school called to let her know about the assignments, a 17-year-old from Cumilla mentioned missing the SSC retake registration notice. The auto-pass system also had some opposition. One of the respondents from Narail mentioned that her automatic grades were bad due to a previous board exam being bad, and if there were regular exams, she would have done much better. Another younger respondent from the same peri-urban area believes that the auto-pass deprived students of the chance to learn the material taught that year, and now they might find studies difficult next year.

### 6.2.3. Choices/Decisions made by parents and adolescents

The choices made between continuing studying or getting married or combining the two are discussed in section 6.4.2 below. The choices made between continuing studying or working or combining the two are discussed in section 6.3.5 below.

### 6.2.4. Future aspirations

The prolonged lockdowns and resultant worries caused many to rethink their aspirations. At first, it was nice to stay at home for a while. But when the school closure continued indefinitely, the good feelings deteriorated.

> *"I always thought I would finish college and have a bright future, but now I am worried if college will even open anytime soon and whether I will be able to study or give the exams."*
>
> —Female (17), Gaibandha

For some, their educational aspirations changed in light of the financial burdens faced by their families during the lockdown.

> *"I wanted to go to school but no, I don't go anymore…I had wanted to be a teacher."*
>
> —Female, married, Cumilla

A 15-year-old female student from Cumilla considered giving up studying to work in a food processing factory, even though her initial desires were to at least complete her SSC exam. For others, marriage and children took priority, requiring renegotiation with in-laws to complete studies until SSC. A 15-year-old child-bride from Narail had previously wanted to be a teacher, while a 16-year-old, female, dropout from Cumilla was sure she wanted to study further. A teacher in Narail mentioned that even though girls on average were better students, it was more difficult to keep them in school.

Overall, the boys mostly showed more concrete decisions and opinions regarding continuing their education. They were seen to be making their own decisions and seemed to have the space to negotiate for parents' support. Girls relied almost completely on their parents' or in-laws' decisions. Even when they were able to voice their opinions, they concluded by acknowledging the constraints of their circumstances. Those who were hopeful and aspirational were so because of reassurance from their parents, or because their parents themselves wished to have more educated children.

Girls also had more barriers to education throughout the lockdown period. While the families may have faced similar financial issues, the boys had the option to work for their tuition or school costs. They were also more likely to be allowed mobile phones to attend online classes. On the other hand, girls had to juggle the threat of family defamation, wedding proposals, and domestic work to continue studying.

## 6.3. Adolescents' work and COVID-19

This section will discuss the changes and challenges of adolescent lives in terms of carrying out paid work, due to COVID-19, how decisions/choices are made by the adolescents and parents, and differences in aspiration regarding work.

### 6.3.1. Changes during COVID-19

**Table 6.3.1:** Adolescents in paid work during and after COVID-19 period

| | Frequency | Percent | Male (percentage) | Female (percentage) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **No** | 2,484 | 92.55 | 87.72 | 95.03 |
| **Yes** | 200 | 7.45 | 12.28 | 4.97 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | | | | 3,139 |

Most of the adolescents did not do any work before and after the COVID-19 period. Only 7.45% of adolescents were engaged in any kind of work. Sex disaggregated results showed that males are more likely to be paid in work than females. While 12% of male adolescents were engaged in work, only 4.97% of female adolescents said that they were engaged in any paid work during and after the COVID-19 period. Possibly female adolescents were working at home, so they did not consider that when responding to the survey. Most of the working adolescents were engaged in heavy and light works such as handicrafts, domestic animal husbandry, agricultural and non-agricultural labour, and tuition, and some of them also worked as service holders.

A higher rate of older adolescents across all districts were in work compared to others. While 4.5% of adolescents 12–14 years old were at work, the rate is 11.14% for adolescents in the 15–18 years old age group. A higher rate of adolescents was engaged in work in Gaibandha and Narail compared to Cumilla. While 6.55% of adolescents in Cumilla said they were at work, around 9% of adolescents in Gaibandha and Narail said that were at work.

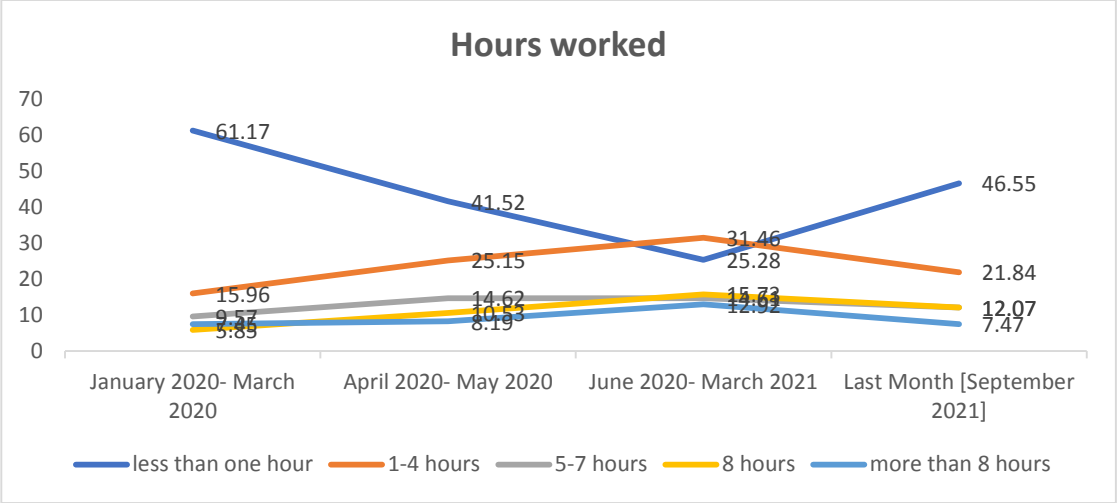



**Figure 6.3.1:** Average hours worked by adolescents (N=200)

**Box 6.3.1:** Adolescents under Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA).

Although the Children Act, 2013 defines "child" as anyone under 18 years of age for the purposes of the Act, Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 defines that child means a person who has not completed 14 years of age [Section 2(63)]. On the other hand, a person who has completed 14 years of age but has not completed 18 years of age is defined as an "adolescent" [Section 2(80], and a person over 18 years of age is defined as "adult." Under provisions of Section 34 of the BLA, employment of children below the age of 14 years is prohibited. However, an exception has been made in Section 44, which states that a child who has completed 12 years of age may be employed in such light work as not to endanger their health and development or interfere with their education; however, employment of children below 14 years of age is prohibited (Section 35). The BLA also provides that an adolescent may be allowed to work in any occupation or establishment only subject to fulfilment of obtaining a certificate of fitness issued by a registered medical practitioner (Section 34). Working hours of the children are also limited by the law; it is five hours in a day and 30 hours in a week in any factory and mine, and seven hours in a day and 42 hours in a week in any other establishment (Section 41). No adolescent shall be allowed in any establishment to clean, lubricate, or adjust any part of machinery while that part is in motion, or to work between moving parts or between fixed and moving parts of any machinery which is in motion. Employment of adolescents in underground and underwater is also prohibited (Section 39 and 43).

Adolescents' working hours and days increased both during and after the COVID-19 lockdown. During January–March 2020, only 14.5% of adolescents worked 21–26 days per month which increased to 20.5% during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, the rate increased from 32.5% in June 2020 to March 2021 and decreased to 22% in September 2021. Adolescents also had to work for more hours during these periods. While 5.85% of adolescents worked eight hours a day in January–March 2020, the rate increased to 10.53% and 15.73% during April–May 2021 and June 2020–March 2021, respectively. Though the rate decreased to 12.07% in September 2021, it is still higher than the pre-COVID period.

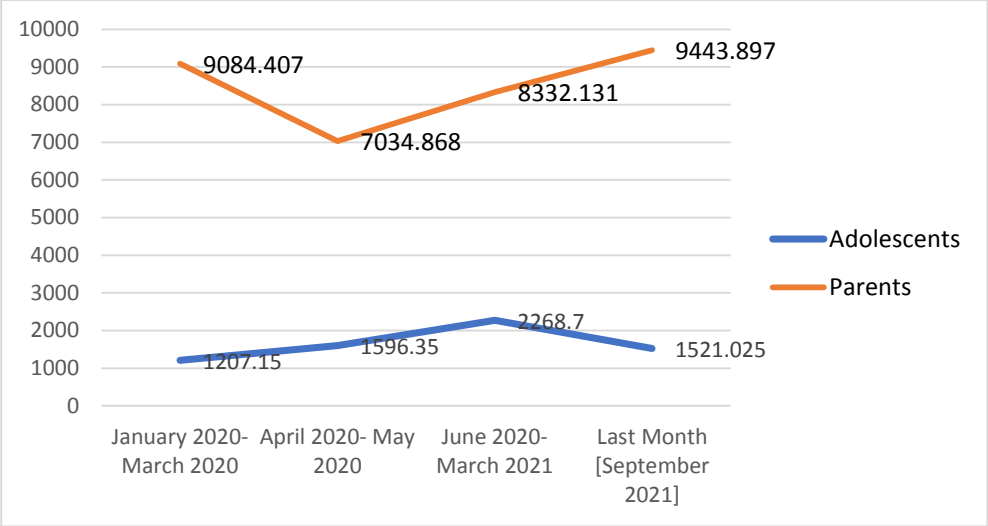



**Figure 6.3.2:** Average monthly income of households whose adolescents are in work and income of those adolescents in work (N=200)

With increasing working hours, adolescents' average income also increased during and after the COVID-19 lockdown period. Adolescents' average monthly income was BDT 1,207 from January to March 2020 period which increased to BDT 1,596 from April to March 2020. Their average monthly income peaked at BDT 2,268 from June 2020 to March 2021 and decreased to BDT 1,521 in September 2021.

Three factors can explain fluctuating income of adolescents. One reason is that adolescents had to compensate for their parents' reduced income. Adolescents' parents' income decreased during the COVID-19 lockdown period, while adolescents' income slightly increased at the same time. However, the trend does not show a major correlation between June 2020 to March 2021, and September 2021. From Figure 6.3.1 and Figure 6.3.2, it can be inferred that adolescence had to work more hours during the COVID-19 period which explains their increased income.

School opening can be another reason for decreasing income in September 2021. Around 85% of working adolescents were enrolled in school during September 2021, so it is plausible that they had to allocate more time to school rather than work, consequently, decreasing their income in September 2021.

The qualitative research findings also suggest that majority of the adolescents were not engaged in any work before COVID-19 and were busy attending school, tuition, coaching, and studying at home. Among 36 adolescents in this study, five boys and two girls were found working. Two working girls started working before COVID-19, one of them working as a tailor and the other one started tuition to meet up her education expenses and continuing till now. Among five working boys, three dropped out of school and decided to work full time. The other two continue working and started schooling as well after their schools reopened.

The long school closure resulted in the majority of the girls working for their households for longer hours than ever before, but they did not consider housework as "work." It is also discussed in the leisure and psychosocial well-being sections (6.5 and 6.6) that they think housework is just another way of spending time at home. A 15-year-old girl from a peri-urban area in Gaibandha said that "it is natural to do the household chores when you are at home and you are not studying." Another girl from a rural area of Gaibandha who dropped out of school due to the income loss of her father and brother and got married mentioned that her life changed during this school closure. She said,

> *"I hardly had to do any household work in my parent's home, but now I have to cook, clean, and look after the housework following my mother-in-law's instructions."*

On the other hand, the majority of the boys mentioned not helping their family members with their household work, only five adolescent boys mentioned that they have helped with household work or worked 4–5 hours every day on their agricultural land during the lockdown. A 17-year-old boy from rural Cumilla said,

> *"I do household work along with other things, like taking care of our cows and sometimes shopkeeping."*

Ten adolescents dropped out of school after COVID-19, six of them are girls and four of them are boys. The study found different reasons behind dropping out, like financial crisis, getting married, losing interest in education, etc. Only four boys among the 10 dropped out of adolescents and gave up studying because of work. They also have different stories behind it; one of them started working in their family motorcycle garage as an assistant just after school closure and now he has become almost professional and wants to continue in the future, two of them dropped out because of the poor financial condition of their families, and another one dropped out due to a lack of interest in school and also got married two months ago. A 15-year-old boy from Narail peri-urban area who started working as a helper mason mentioned,

> *"My father lost all the money and some land doing drugs and now if he earns BDT 300 a day; he would give us 100 for family expenses. That's why I decided to stop studying and start working."*

Two working girls who started working before COVID-19 and continuing after school reopened live in Cumilla, and their income has changed due to COVID-19. A girl from Cumilla who started tuition before COVID-19 to manage her educational expenses added three more students for more income during the school closure and is now earning BDT 2,000 per month and also supporting her family with that money. Another girl from Cumilla mentioned,

> *"I started my work by making my clothes with my sister's machine, and when my neighbours saw that she owns a machine, they started giving her clothes to sew. During the COVID-19 lockdown, my neighbour's*

*income dropped, that's why I didn't get much work at the beginning. Later my business was booming when the neighbours started to get income."*

Three adolescents started working during the school closure as they have nothing to do and could not continue for a longer time. An adolescent boy from a peri-urban area in Gaibandha mentioned,

*"I have only worked for a week as a substitute for my elder brother who is a TV cable operator in our area."*

Another girl in Cumilla mentioned,

*"I have made four quilted blankets and some designed hand fans during the school closure and I send them as gifts to my relatives and family members."*

Among seven working adolescents, only two are spending their money for themselves. The rest of them take their pocket money only and contribute to the family income. A 17-year-old girl in Cumilla said,

*"I decided to pay for my expenses outside of bare necessities. My family still pays for food and education. I'm using my money for cosmetics. My mother does not allow me to spend my money on family expenses."*

### 6.3.2. Migration of adolescents for work

**Table 6.3.2:** Effect of COVID-19 on male migration according to parents

| Effect of COVID-19 | % |
|---|---|
| **No effect would have gone away to work anyway** | 16.67 |
| **There was some effect** | 29.17 |
| **The effect was huge, the pandemic was the main reason** | 54.17 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | 97 |

Of total households, 5% of households (n=97) saw male adolescents' migrate from home for work. Almost 55% of parents of migrated male adolescents said that COVID-19 had a huge effect on their child's migration. At least 29% of parents said it had a moderate effect, while 16% of parents said that COVID-19 did not have any effect on their decision to send their child to work. Of the migrated male adolescents, almost 65% left the study because of work, while others continued it.

In the qualitative research, five adolescents interviewed and the parents who participated in an FGD mentioned that many boys migrated to Dhaka and Chattogram to work as garment workers and construction workers. The phenomenon of adolescents migrating to Dhaka and Chattogram is common in Gaibandha and Cumilla and migrating for joining a crew of a ship is common

among adolescent boys in Narail. A schoolteacher in Cumilla peri-urban area mentioned, “20% boys of his area started working and 20% girls got married during the school closure.” He also said that “when adolescents start earning money, they will not come back to school. They will not get any money from attending school. He would earn 300–400 taka a day, why would they come to school?” A girl from Gaibandha rural area said,

> *“Some adolescents in my village also went looking for jobs in Dhaka and Chattogram during Corona. Some will come back to school when school opens.”*

### 6.3.3. Challenges of work

Three major types of challenges have been identified: (1) challenge of finding work; (2) challenge of not being able to get work or be permitted to work, although willing or needing to work; and (3) challenge in terms of being forced to work.

Findings suggest that most adolescents are engaged in paid work, like mason, garments worker, sewing, tuitions, construction work, shopkeeper, motor mechanic, electrician, hardware shops, working in shipyard/dockyard, etc. Adolescent boys and girls who are above 15 and want to work migrate to Dhaka and Chattogram for joining garment factories. A school-going married girl from Narail mentioned,

> *“Some of my male college friends joined work during COVID-19 since college was closed and education came to an uncertain stoppage. Some migrated to Dhaka and other areas to work but they have returned since college opening.”*

Among 24 girls in this study, only two are working because work opportunities for girls are rare both in rural and peri-urban areas. A 16-year-old married girl from Gaibandha who is also attending school after reopening said,

> *“I thought of starting work during the lockdown but there was no job at that time. I asked some of my seniors but they couldn’t find any work as well.”*

The conservative mentality of parents towards girls’ work also plays an important role. A girl from Cumilla who got married during the school closure and dropped out of school said that her brother also dropped out of school and started working. But her mother mentioned that she is okay with her son dropping out and working but would not allow her daughter to pursue a job.

A girl from a peri-urban area in Gaibandha had to stop studying and get married due to the sickness of her father who used to run a shop in the local bazaar. She mentioned that she used to keep that shop when her father was absent and his father taught her how to run it. She had to stop keeping up that shop just because she is a girl. She said,

> *"When I was little, my father taught me how to keep the shop. After growing up, I could have taken control of that shop if I were a boy. Also if I could continue working, my father would have stayed in a good position now with me."*

Parents who participated in FGD, both in rural and peri-urban areas, agreed that there are no work opportunities for girls in their area. When they were asked about job opportunities for girls and boys, they replied,

> *"There are no work opportunities at all. Girls aged 14–15 can't work for garments as they would have to leave 9–10 at night which is risky. Girls used to work for other households, but they were not treated well, that's why they stopped doing that work."*

Many parents have pre-set conditions for girls' work, like regular daytime jobs in factories or any work available near their area. Parents in rural Gaibandha agreed that girls are not allowed to work far from home. They mentioned that "boys can join any work no matter how far the place is, but girls cannot." Parents in a peri-urban area in Narail mentioned,

> *"There are no factories in our area, what kind of work our daughters would do then, they can sew clothes while staying at home but 20–30 sewing machines are running in our village already."*

### 6.3.4. Aspirations: Parents and adolescents

The majority of the parents of these adolescents are well aware of the importance of education. At the same time, some parents in rural areas in Cumilla agreed that when food and clothes are scarce at their home, continuing schooling becomes a luxury. They also think that parents should support their children to continue education as much as they can. If some of their children can get the HSC/BA certificate and become big officers/teachers, people will appreciate the parents for their effort. Parents in Cumilla rural area said,

> *"We are bound to allow our children to join work. They will fall into bad patches if they don't do anything, that's why allowing them to work is a better option. If we would have that financial ability, we would always want them to be educated and be someone great. We sent them to work when there are no choices."*

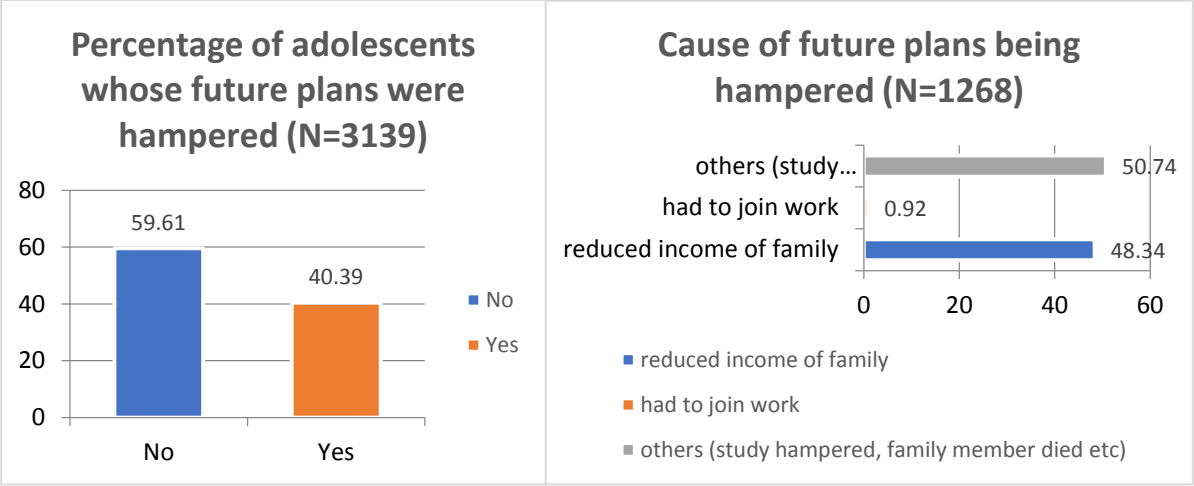
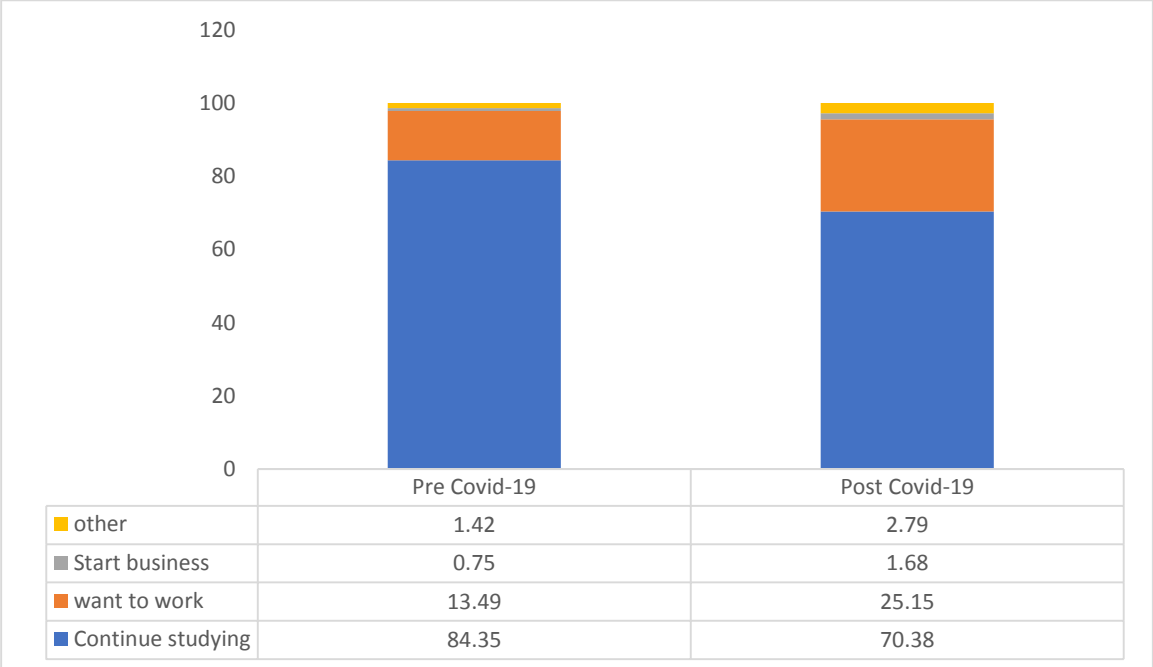



**Figure 6.3.3:** Adolescents whose plans were hampered By COVID-19

When asked if COVID-19 hampered their plan, almost 40% of adolescents (47% male and 37% female) said that their plans were hampered by COVID-19. Of adolescents whose plans were hampered, 48.34% said that it is because of reduced family income and 0.92% of them had to join work. Other 50.74% of them had to change their plan because of other reasons such as study breaks and family members' death.




| | Pre Covid-19 | Post Covid-19 |
|---|---|---|
| other | 1.42 | 2.79 |
| Start business | 0.75 | 1.68 |
| want to work | 13.49 | 25.15 |
| Continue studying | 84.35 | 70.38 |

**Figure 6.3.4:** Where adolescents want to see themselves after five years in the pre-and post-COVID period (N=3139)

Before the COVID-19 period, 84.35% of adolescents planned to continue their studies and 13.49% wanted to work. After COVID-19, now 70.38% of adolescents want to continue their

studies and 25.15% of them want to join work. Compared to the pre-COVID period, the rate of those who want to continue their study decreased and the rate of those who want to join work increased after the COVID-19 lockdown period. Figure 6.3.4 shows how their plans have changed because of COVID-19.

Female adolescents have a higher aspiration to study and lower aspiration to work compared to male adolescents. A higher rate of female adolescents before and after the COVID-19 (85.5% and 72.8%) wanted to continue studying compared to male adolescents (82.13% and 65.68%). Male adolescents have a higher aspiration for work (14% and 26%) compared to females (13% and 24%) in both periods.

Work aspirations for adolescents mostly depend on the financial stability of their families, willingness of the parents, type and placement of available work, social insecurity, and conservative mindset for girls' work.

In all three areas, some common findings suggest that adolescent boys aspire to get a job after passing school and college. They mentioned that they have no problem joining both the government and private sector after completing their education. They also want to join the police, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), and the Army as they required only school and college education.

There are some contextual work aspirations found in all three areas. In Narail, many adolescent boys and elder men are working in a shipyard or dockyard of a ship and it has already become a traditional job opportunity for them. Also, there are some brickfields where some adolescents are working, some are pulling rickshaws and vans, and some are doing agricultural work on their land or working as day labourers. In Gaibandha, adolescents' work aspirations are more vocational study-oriented as they have more vocational schools than in other areas. Two adolescents in Gaibandha are studying vocational curriculum and aspire to become diploma engineers after completing SSC and specific diplomas in their majors; they also have their parents supporting them. One of them said,

> *"I'm studying in a vocational school with a major in mechanical engineering and planning to complete a diploma and then a bachelor's course to become a professional mechanical engineer."*

In Cumilla, boys want to work in motor garages and metal workshops because of the availability. One boy said,

> *"I have decided to work in a motorcycle workshop but it is like an unpaid internship. The decision was made recently by my uncle so that I can learn some skills before becoming a professional."*

For girls, there are fewer work opportunities compared to boys, In Narail and Gaibandha, parents and girls are ready to get married after getting a certificate from school and college.

Findings reveal that only three among 24 girls want to become a teacher after their education. A 17-year-old girl in Cumilla mentioned,

> *"I want to be a teacher after completing my honours in the future."*

Another girl in rural Narail aspired to become a banker. She said,

> *"I want to study as much as possible and would like to complete honours. I will study accounting and would like to be a banker."*

The majority of the girls do not know about their work aspirations as they do not know how far they can study and when are they getting married. A girl) in Gaibandha who wanted to have the opportunity to study and not be married until she wants to say,

> *"I wanted to study and do a government job to change my future but my parents agreed to the marriage proposal and married me off. My in-laws promised that I could continue my study after marriage but now they are opposing it and do not want to let me study anymore."*

An adolescent girl and a boy, respectively from Cumilla and Gaibandha, wanted to become nurses after passing the HSC exam. A 15-year-old girl in Cumilla said,

> *"I had a big dream like becoming a doctor and now that I have a financial problem in my family, I want to become a nurse."*

Working adolescents in this study made their own decision and started working with the silent support of their parents as they have no other choices left due to income loss and school closure. All working adolescents made their choices depending on the availability and affordability of work. They chose work that is easy to get and they joined using their connection around them. An 18-year-old boy in Narail was working in a motorcycle servicing shop in a rural bazaar in Narail which is owned by his uncle. He started working after school closure and now has become a full-timer in that shop. He was indecisive about his upcoming SSC exam because he did not go back to school and did not complete his syllabus, thinking about not attending the exam. His aunt said why would he go back to school when he can earn a thousand taka for his family working in that servicing shop each day. A 17-year-old girl Cumilla, who has a sewing machine and is tailoring clothes for customers from her village, learned sewing from her neighbour.

On the other hand, a few working adolescents are working because of the financial inability of their families caused by the COVID-19 lockdown. A boy in Narail decided to stop going to school after the COVID-19 lockdown because his father is a drug abuser who spent all his money on it and did not give sufficient money for family expenses. They all are living in a tiny tin-shed home with no partition. So he and his younger brother who is eight years old decided to drop out of school and start working for proper meals and a home. He said,

*"I want to earn money to manage proper meals for us and save some to build a house in near future."*

Adolescents of a peri-urban area in Gaibandha has some scope of work as an electrician and TV cable operator as they live near the bazaar area.

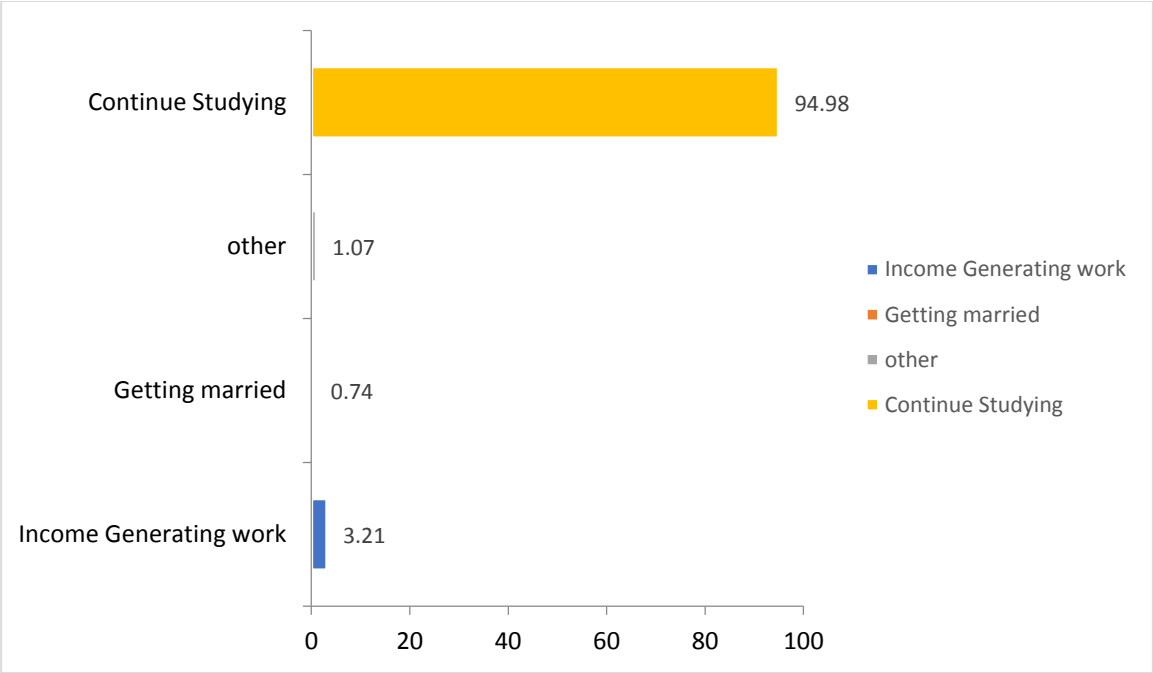



**Figure 6.3.5:** Parents' opinion on what is best for their children to do in the present time (N=2429)

A substantial number of parents think that presently, studying is the best option for their children. Only 0.74% of parents think that getting married is the best option for their children, while 1% and 3.21% of parents, respectively, think other works (e.g., going abroad to work) and joining an income-generating work is the best option for their children.

Most parents (58.52%) want their children to be service holders in the future. At least 10% of parents want their children to join different types of jobs such as that doctors or lawyers. Only 1.41% of parents want their children to be farmers, while 0.35% of them want their children to work in the garment sector. Around 10% of parents want their children to get married and become a housewife. Meanwhile, 1.5% of parents want their child to be a religious speaker and 7.1% of them want their child to do other work like going abroad.

**Table 6.3.3:** Types of work that parents want their children to do in the future by sex

| | **Male** | **Female** |
|---|---|---|
| **Agriculture** | 0.40 | 1.75 |
| **Service holder** | 70.79 | 63.01 |
| **Business** | 4.31 | 0.08 |
| **Job (doctor, lawyer, etc.)** | 11.44 | 12.25 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Garment worker** | 0.54 | 0.24 |
| **Getting married** | 0.13 | 15.19 |
| **Housewife** | 0.00 | 1.11 |
| **Mawlana (religious speaker)** | 1.62 | 1.43 |
| **Other** | 10.77 | 4.93 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | 2429 | |

Sex disaggregated results show that 0.40% of parents want their child to work in the agriculture area when their child is male, while the rate is 1.75% for their female adolescents. However, while 70.79% of parents want their adolescents to work as service holders when their child is male; the rate is 63% for female adolescents. A similar result is found in the business sector. More parents want their adolescents to work in a job and business sector when their child is male compared to their female adolescents. In terms of getting married, working in agriculture, jobs (doctor, lawyer), and other types of work, more parents want their child to work in these sectors when their child is female. Interestingly, an almost similar rate of parents wants their child to be a religious speaker for both male and female children.

### 6.3.5. Combining work and school

Four out of 36 qualitative respondents are attending school and doing work at the same time. After the school opened, they had to attend school only for a day every week, which enabled them to combine school and work. A 15-year-old girl in Cumilla mentioned that her mother used to be the main earning person in the household. But due to COVID-19 and her recent sickness, she cannot work regularly. So, she started doing tuition in her village; she would spend all her day at school and coaching and spend the rest of the time studying. She would do one tuition and earn BDT 500. However, now that the school hours have been reduced, she took extra tuition to use that time to earn more money to support herself as well as her family. A headteacher of Narail rural area mentioned,

> *"Many people want to do their construction work on Fridays and Saturdays because school-going adolescent boys are ready to work at a lower rate than usual on their school weekends. Normally a contractor would pay BDT 300 per day for construction work, but they can easily get the school-going boys paying 200–250 taka a day."*

An 18-year-old boy in Gaibandha mentioned that he started working as an electrician just four months ago and worked on their agricultural land as well when the school was closed. Now he is attending school one day a week and working as an electrician the rest of the days when he is at home. Another 17-year-old boy in Cumilla was continuing work and school and mentioned that he does household chores along with other work. He drives an auto-rickshaw which he loans from his friends. He also does household chores and takes care of a family-owned cow. Sometimes he helps in the family shop. He does not have any savings as he spends all of his money on family. During COVID-19, he used to work in a polythene making shop for a few

months then he returned home for school. One of the respondents is financially incapable of continuing his education as his father, a migrant worker, could not send money at the onset of COVID-19. He has done some work as a mason and is planning to work full time to support his family as well.

## 6.4. Adolescent marriage and COVID-19

A critical matter of concern in the life of adolescents, particularly adolescent girls, is early marriage. As per the laws in Bangladesh, marriage under the age of 18 (for females) and the age of 21 (for males) is considered child marriage. In Bangladesh, 51% of women aged 20 to 24 years were first married or in union before age 18."[5] (UNICEF, 2020), meaning more than half of the women who are currently in their 20s were married before they turned 18. In this section, we look at different aspects related to child marriage.

### 6.4.1. Prevalence and change in early marriage during/after COVID-19

The first indicator we examine regarding child marriage in the context of COVID-19 is the prevalence rate. An attempt to capture the prevalence of child marriage has been made using data from the surveyed households. For pre-COVID statistics, we consider marriages taking place in 2018 and 2019, while for the COVID-19 period rates, we consider marriages from 2020 and 2021. From figure 6.4.1, it can be observed that in the samples of our study, there does not seem to be much variation due to COVID-19 and the rate seems to be declining over time. However, since we are limited by our samples, meaning that we are only analyzing based on data from different members of our sample households, the information is local and nothing in a global sense can be concluded from this information. As for sex-disaggregated data patterns, the general prevalence rate is much higher among female adolescents compared to males.

[5] https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/media/4526/file/Bangladesh%20Child%20Marriage%20report%202020.pdf.pdf

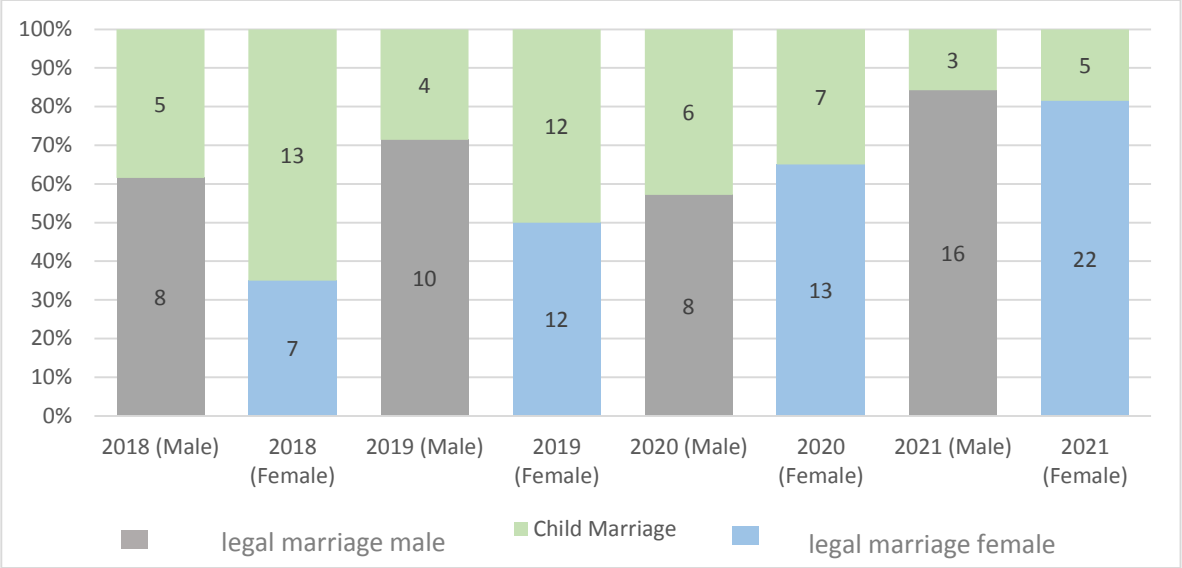



**Figure 6.4.1:** Proportion of child marriage among all marriages taking place across years (2018–2021)

From our surveyed sample, a total of 145 adolescents dropped out of school during the lockdown and 104 of those 145 dropped out adolescents were males. However, of those 145 dropouts, 26 adolescents dropped out of school due to marriage and only four out of these 26 respondents are male adolescents. This indicates that, for females, marriage is one of the primary reasons behind dropping out of school, while it is not even remotely close to this for boys.

Table 6.4.1 below looks at different statistics related to child marriage. The average age of marriage among respondents who already faced child marriage seems to have gone up during the COVID-19 period. For the girls from our sample, the average age at marriage was 16.71 years in 2018 and 2019, which rose to 17.25 in the 2020 to 2021 time period. For boys, the change is 20.22 from 18.77 years. However, it should be kept in mind that the number of observations is quite small.

Looking into the receipt of marriage proposals as seen in table 6.4.1 below, due to the sociocultural dynamics prevalent in Bangladesh, expectedly, the average number of proposals received by female adolescents is much higher than that of males. An interesting observation from the survey is the fact that, when asked about their perception of the increase or decrease in proposal inflow, for male adolescents, around 22% of the household heads report that receipt of proposals has increased. A very small share reports that they think it decreased for males. While for females, a moderately small share of household heads think it increased and a similar share think it decreased, resulting in an ambiguous net effect for females. This might seem a bit contradictory given the fact that only 0.02% of all the males received proposals in the first place.

**Table 6.4.1:** Some child marriage-related statistics

| Indicators | Female | Male |
|---|---|---|
| The average age of marriage for those who faced child marriage before COVID-19 | 16.71 | 18.77 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | **25** | **9** |
| The average age of marriage for those who faced child marriage during COVID-19 | 17.25 | 20.22 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | **12** | **9** |
| The average number of proposals received by females since January 2020 | 1.57 | 0.02 |
| % of household heads who believe proposal inflow has increased during COVID-19 | 16.21 | 21.49 |
| % of household heads who believe proposal inflow has decreased during COVID-19 | 15.54 | 1.79 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | **1,827** | **1,047** |

## 6.4.2. Choices/decisions made by parents and adolescents

In the survey, we included households that had adolescents but currently had migrated out. One of the reasons was the marriage of the adolescents. Parents were asked why they chose to get their daughter married and whether COVID-19 had anything to do with the decision.

**Table 6.4.2:** Cause of marriage (N=303)

| Causes | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Did not want to lose a good suitor | 76.9 |
| The amount for dowry was favourable | 0.66 |
| Was forced because of poverty | 15.51 |
| Other | 6.93 |

Almost 20% of the household said that at least one female member left home in the last two years (2020–2021) because of marriage (n=1,920). Various reasons for marrying off were cited by parents. Around 76% of parents did not want to lose a good suitor, while 15% of them were forced because of poverty.

When asked if COVID-19 had any influence on the marriage, almost 50% of parents said that it did not have any effect and they would marry off their children anyway. However, 27% of parents said that it had a moderate effect on their decision, while 22% of parents said that

COVID-19 had a big effect on their decision and that the pandemic was the main reason for marrying off their child.

Among the 36 respondents of the qualitative sample, 11 respondents were married (10 girls and 1 boy) and one was soon to be married. The respondents' age at marriage varied between 15 and 17 years. Among these respondents who got married, only one of them is an adolescent boy, the rest are adolescent girls. The parents decided to marry off their daughters. Most of the girls did not want to marry but were not able to refuse as they did not want to go against their family's wishes. All of the 11 were in school when they got married. However, out of the 11 respondents, six respondents are continuing their education and the rest of them dropped out.

In the qualitative interviews, we found different reasons why the parents decided to marry off their daughters but it was mainly influenced by COVID-19. The parents decided to marry off their daughters because of the closure of school which led to the adolescents being at home with nothing to do other than household work. This created uncertainty about their future. When the parent's received a suitable proposal for their daughters, they married them off. One respondent said,

> *"If not for Corona, the marriage would have taken place after two years. I would stay independent for a few more days, I would get my parents' affection."*
>
> —Female (17), Cumilla, Married-Dropout

Her mother said that since her daughter was sitting at home and they were poor, they married her off when a good proposal came.

Another reason why the parents married off their daughters is that they were worried about their daughter's safety and the obligation to maintain social status. Parents were afraid of elopement because of phone romances and adolescents getting involved in pre-marital affairs. One of the female adolescents from Narail said that girls and boys are in multiple relationships because they got access to mobile phones for online classes during the lockdown. Parents were worried that this would harm the family's reputation. This is why when a suitable proposal came for their daughters during the lockdown, their parents decided to marry off their daughters. One of the respondents was married off at the age of 15 when she got romantically involved with a local boy of the same age.

During a discussion with the parents' group in Gaibandha, one of the parents said,

> *"My hassle is over if I get my daughter married. Then her responsibility and security lie with her husband."*
>
> —Father, Rural FGD, Gaibandha

Another influencing factor was the community practice of marrying off girls at a young age. This practice creates social pressure on the adolescents' parents to marry off their daughters early.

While discussing the age of marriage, the parents claimed that their daughters were between 18 and 20 years old even though during the interview, the average age of marriage of the adolescents was 16/17 years. Parents generally denied that child marriage took place in their areas. However, during the focus group discussion, one of the fathers of a son at rural Cumilla FGD said that sometimes parents are persuaded to marry off their daughters at a younger age and they would also prefer 16/17 years old girls as their son's wife, with 15 years being even better. In FGDs, parents also were asked why girls were being married off young. One parent mentioned that, with higher education, the attractiveness of the girl as bride decreases. If the now educated girl does not immediately get a job, then the parents are left with a double loss—money wasted on education and an unmarried girl sitting at home. He also mentioned that educated girls cannot be married off to less-educated men, and other educated men are often from a higher economic class.

While discussing the numbers and types of proposals, both the parents and the adolescents said that they received more marriage proposals since the closure of schools (which is different from the survey responses; see Table 6.4.1 above). Most of the proposals came from close relatives, the community, etc. In Cumilla, the parents received proposals mostly from returnee migrants. Parents preferred those proposals where the suitable groom had a steady income. We found that the husbands of the married adolescents had small businesses, ran small shops, and were internal migrants working in cities. Parents in Cumilla and Gaibandha said that they preferred to marry off their daughters in nearby villages where they can easily commute. One of the respondent's matrimonial homes is close to her maternal grandfather's house. Her mother consciously picked that area so that the respondent's grandfather can visit her regularly. Another 17-year-old boy from Cumilla drives an auto-rickshaw and helps out at the family grocery shop. He received two marriage proposals during COVID-19 because he was working. One of the proposals offered BDT 1 lac dowry and some gold. However, he refused because he is already engaged (in a relationship) and his parents also knew about his relationship.

While exploring adolescents' agency regarding marriage-related decisions, we found that almost all of them did not want to get married at first, except for two respondents who agreed to the marriage because they had a romantic relationship with the proposed groom. We also observed that the girls did not seem to strongly protest the marriage plans. Those adolescents who did not want to get married changed their minds later on. We found a few influencing factors related to it. Some of the adolescents wanted to respect their parent's wishes and some did not want to harm their family's reputation by refusing the marriage. In some cases, economic hardship seemed to have played a role in the adolescents changing their minds and agreeing to the marriage.

> *"This pandemic has caused a lot of harm. Now my family has made the decision. Perhaps it is because they cannot care for me so they got me married. In that case, what could I do?"*
>
> —Female (15), Narail, married, in school

Another married adolescent thought about contacting the helpline to stop her marriage, but after thinking about her parents' reputation and the repercussions of contacting the police, she did not call.

A teacher from Narail interviewed mentioned that the lockdown and school closure had created a communication gap between the teachers and the students, which is why they did not get the chance to intervene and stop when their students got married before 18.

> *"There was a huge communication gap with the students at that time. Earlier they would tell us, 'Sir, that girl is getting married on that day. Her marriage has been fixed.' We would try to instill fear in them. We would say we will tell the police, file a case, so and so forth. But naturally, we could not give them this support during that time."*
>
> —Secondary school teacher, Narail

Students who were about to be or already registered for board exams were likely allowed to continue studying long enough to achieve certification. They were less confident about whether a full-time studentship would be possible.

Female adolescents unanimously believed that their parents wanted the best for them, and, in cases of disagreement regarding education decisions, they would obey their parents' wishes. Even in cases where they could mention the positive impacts of prolonged education or the legal aspects of early marriage, most of our respondents ultimately relied on their parents for the final say.

### 6.4.3. Expenditures for marriages

Parental household expenditure of female adolescents who got married during the pandemic increased. This is because in most cases, the paternal family of the married female adolescent had to pay dowry and other costs of marriage. Some of the female married adolescents talked about how their families managed to give dowry during the pandemic despite facing economic hardships. To pay the dowry items like gold chains, nose rings, and furniture at the time of the wedding, they have taken loans. To pay the loan installment, the paternal families of the married female adolescents were struggling. Also after the marriage, large amounts were spent to entertain the grooms and their relatives. After marriage, few of the married pregnant adolescents or adolescents with their newborn babies came back to their parental household for a long time. The paternal households had to bear the costs of the adolescents and their children during the pandemic.

Parents discussed this in the focus group discussions (FGDs). And some of the parents said that after marrying off their daughter, the expenditure increased. The father of a female adolescent said,

*"Relationships and the number of relatives increases. We did not understand this. The groom's family come visiting."*

The mother of a female adolescent also said,

*"Earlier it was the daughter only. Now there is the son-in-law and five more people from the daughter's in-law side. There will be a son-in-law, her father- and a mother-in-law. They will visit you. And then you have to buy food by any means, doesn't matter if you have to take a loan."*

### 6.4.4. Changes in the lives of adolescent girls due to marriage

The most significant change which took place for the adolescents who got married was the marriage itself. With marriage came additional household responsibilities, unwanted early pregnancy, post-pregnancy-related health issues, and continuation and discontinuation of education, some also became victims of domestic violence. It seemed like they changed from children to adults in a matter of days. With marriage also came additional household responsibilities. These responsibilities include cleaning, cooking, and being the primary caregiver of the house. However, the workload varied from respondent to respondent and not everyone was able to cope with it. One of the respondents did all the household work as per her mother-in-law's instructions. Another respondent, on the other hand, could not adjust to moving to a new home and the additional responsibilities. She now spends most of her time at her paternal home, going back and forth between her house and her matrimonial home.

Among the married adolescents, three were pregnant at the time of the interview. Two respondents had a child and both of them gave birth to premature babies. However, for two of the respondents, their pregnancy was unwanted but they were compelled to continue with their pregnancy due to societal pressure and exam-related uncertainties. The respondent's neighbours and elderly people said that it would be inauspicious to abort the first child. Therefore, she decided to keep it. Meanwhile, another respondent faced domestic violence for not wanting a child and for wanting to study. Her husband and her in-laws put psychological pressure on her and when that did not work, they physically hurt her. She is also being denied prenatal care. These adolescent mothers are suffering from post-pregnancy complications from giving birth early. One of them has had health issues such as weakness, low blood pressure, fever, and extreme period cramps ever since she gave birth. Also, it was observed that these adolescent mothers do not know how to take care of their newborns and are struggling to cope with this new change in their lives. One of the coping strategies is that their mothers are taking care of their newborn child.

### 6.4.5. Challenges

When the parents decided to marry off their daughters due to different reasons, their decision was also met with challenges. However, these challenges were mostly about giving dowry at the time of the marriage and also after marriage, fulfilling different demands by their daughters' in-

laws. In the rural FGD with the parents in Gaibandha, they said that BDT 1 lac is the minimum dowry.

> *"Those who have nothing, even they need one lac taka to get married. They may have a house, but nothing in the house. Or have one or two decimal land—even they need one lac taka dowry."*
>
> —Mother, rural FGD, Gaibandha

Due to COVID-19-induced economic hardship, some of the families negotiated to bring down the dowry to an affordable amount. Some families have asked for time to pay off the dowry money. Adolescents' parents in Cumilla have taken loans ranging from BDT 80,000 to BDT 1.5 lac at the time of their daughters' wedding and are now paying off the loan through installments. Parents gave gold chains, nose rings, and furniture at the time of their daughters' wedding. One family additionally invested BDT 50,000 for her husband's business. Another respondent's father has promised to give him more furniture and jewelry when he will be able to save more money.

However, only a few were fortunate enough to not pay dowry. In peri-urban Gaibandha, two mothers did not give dowry during their girls' marriage. Also, unmarried adolescent boys said that they do not want to take dowry when they get married. One such adolescent boy did not want to take dowry when he gets married as he will not "sell himself" by taking money.

The parents mentioned that UP members help give (age) certificates to get girls married without money, to help out families in need. They marry off their daughter as per *Shariat* once they reach menarche. The UP member in Narail said that when an underage marriage takes place, they have a religious ceremony but the marriage is registered when the adolescent turns 18. He also blamed the *Kazis* (marriage registrars) for increasing the age of underaged girls during marriage registration.

### 6.4.6. UP member's views on child marriage

Two of the UP representatives interviewed claimed that generally there were no child marriages in their areas and it had not increased during the COVID-19 period. The UP member in Narail (Joypur Union, Lohagora Upazila) felt that child marriage was more prevalent among the poorer families. The UP member interviewed in Perul Union, Lalmai Upazila, Cumilla mentioned the functioning of the Child Marriage Restraint Committee at the union level. He stated that we would explain the negative consequences of child marriage in the committee meetings which would result in people not following this practice. But he also said that if people chose to go to court for having underage marriage there was nothing he could do to stop it.

This was also mentioned by the UP member in Narail (Joypur Union, Lohagora Upazila). However, the same member admitted that they had to give in to parental and social pressure to allow underage marriage. "*Amrato Bangali* (We are Bengalis)" he said. To preserve the "honour" of the parents he has to ignore the law. He also gave the example of a case where he found the

Kazi performing an underage marriage. However, the Kazi asked for his forgiveness and he felt that he had to forgive him as a religious man (*hujur manush*).

### 6.4.7. Combining marriage and education

We found that school dropout rates are higher among married adolescents. In Cumilla, all the married adolescents had dropped out from school; in Gaibandha, some married adolescents have dropped out and some are in school and in Narail, all of the married adolescents are in school.

Continuing education was determined mainly by pregnancy, the support of the in-laws, and who is bearing the educational costs. Married adolescents dropped out of school because of the lack of support from their husbands and in-laws, having a child, lack of aspiration to continue their education, and discontinued communication with their schools and classmates. We found that the parents sometimes gave a condition during the marriage that their daughter would continue her education but not everyone complied. One particular respondent's in-laws had promised that she could continue her education but did not keep the promise. A respondent from Narail, who is also currently sitting for her SSC exams does not want to have children so that she can continue studying but emphasizes that it is also her husband's decision to also continue studying himself that makes postponing children possible. Ultimately, she admits that her aspirations and academic decisions depend completely on her in-laws.

*"My father says he spent a lot of money on registration and filling up the form, so he wants me to give the SSC exam and get the certificate. But my in-laws want me to stay illiterate but my father does not want that. He says, 'I have paid for my daughter, ensured her education from class one to ten, she needs the certificate.' My husband wants me to study too, but his parents do not listen." Female (16), Gaibandha, in-school*

Meanwhile, another female adolescent missed the SSC examination registration deadline due to having a child. She wants to sit for the exam next year but she worries whether her mother-in-law will allow it or not as she is expected to look after her child. However, in rural Cumilla, there was not a single high school in that village and nearby three villages. The absence of a high school also hindered the adolescents' aspirations to carry on their education.

In a few cases, married adolescents attend schools from their parental homes. The flexibility of going to school from their parental home and the assignment systems where the everyday attendance system is not mandatory is helping them to continue their education. One of the female respondents could continue her education as her father and husband are sharing the costs of her education.

School teachers have made attempts to track down students and convince them to come back to school. In Narail, it is upon going to students' houses that they found they were married off to a different village. The teacher interviewed believed that an increase in marriages before SSC

exams was due to the Corona lockdown. He also mentioned that some students who were married were also sitting for the exam.

### 6.4.8. Aspirations: Parents and adolescents

While talking about aspirations, adolescent boys and girls expressed an aspiration to continue their education. Both married and unmarried aspire to continue their education up to SSC or HSC. We found that unmarried and school-going adolescents had higher aspirations than married adolescents. Unmarried adolescent boys and girls expressed that they want to get married after reaching the legal age of marriage. They also want to finish their higher education and get a stable job. One such respondent did not want to get married before 2030. She picked this year because she calculated this is the amount of time it would require for her to become a doctor. For married adolescents, combining marriage and education was mainly determined by the support of the in-laws.

## 6.5. Social life and leisure

### 6.5.1. Social interaction

From the in-depth interviews (IDIs) with adolescents, we found two major changes that happened in the social life of adolescent boys and girls. In the case of boys, some started working to support their families. Among 12 male respondents, five started working during COVID-19 and they informed that some of their friends or classmates started working too. From our IDIs with adolescent girls, we also learned that their male classmates or neighbours started working too, which we talked about in the previous section. Therefore, social activities, including passing time with friends, playing, or roaming around, were reduced. However, some gained access to the internet and smartphones which increased their use of technology and screen time. Instead of playing outside or in a field, they started playing online games and became involved with the online gaming community.

In the case of girls, many of those who got married migrated to their in-laws' homes in a different areas. They lost touch with their friends who continued in school and who live in their parental villages. Respondents who were not married said that they could not go out or visit friends during the lockdown period. It was partly because of a strict lockdown implementation; before the lockdown, they used to hang out with friends and visit neighbours and/or relatives nearby. However, the primary reason is that it was considered to be unsafe for an adolescent girl to go outside the home except for school because something "bad" might happen or people might talk ill of her. Since they are growing and when they reach a marriage age, roaming outside with friends might lead to rumours being spread about them or neighbours labelling them as "bad girls." Therefore, adolescent girls were confined to their homes and could only socialize within their courtyards—either surrounded by two other households or with a few of the surrounding households within the same perimeter. They could not meet friends since

generally school is the only option for girls to meet their friends. Some would spend time with parents and neighbouring aunts at home and in the courtyard.

Fear of COVID-19 infection, fear of safety and social stigma, and the norms of girls staying within home boundaries hindered girls' outgoing mobility and made them stay at home. Some girls were lucky when their closest friend lived next door or both had access to a mobile phone so that could talk over a phone call. Unfortunately, not all girls had access to mobile phones. Before Corona, they remained busy with school, tuition, homework, and study. They used to spend time with friends, eating snacks such as *fuchka*, gossiping, and visiting neighbours. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, their social activities were restricted, the future of education became uncertain, and they got more engaged with household work. We talked about work in the adolescent and work section, but it is important to mention here that when female respondents talked about household work, they posed it as a way of spending time at home since they do not have school or any study pressure. They did not identify the household work as "work," rather it is something natural for a girl to do when they are at home. Some of the respondents said that they had the opportunity to watch online content. One respondent said she got tired of working at home and not being able to go to school. Another one said that she no longer could play the games that she used to because she got married.

In contrast with the girls, adolescent boys' social life did not come to an end during the lockdown but was limited. Social activities such as roaming around with friends and other boys and playing in the fields were reduced but not stopped.

Both boys and girls said that they had fewer friends now after COVID-19 because either the girls got married or the boys started working, resulting in both groups leaving school.

Some stopped playing with larger groups of friends; instead of going out in day time, they would go out in the evening, fearing Corona infection and the police (as in some areas, the police ensured strict lockdown and fined people if found on the streets.

> *"I mostly stayed at home, only a few times went outside; would go to the marketplace. Usually, I went outside at night; I would not go in the daytime."*
>
> —Male (18), Gaibandha, in school

This lack of opportunity to go out to play resulted in increased time playing online games. Boys who used to play cricket and football with friends before started playing online games on their mobiles, watching TikTok videos, and one male respondent from Narail said that he started making videos with his brother. In villages where lockdown was not strictly followed, such as rural areas of Gaibandha and Narail, adolescent boys could spend their time playing and roaming around with friends.

For girls, the changes in their social life were attributed by their parents to growing up rather than COVID-19. Most of the girls could not go out to nearby houses of neighbours because girls

around the age of 14–18 years cannot go outside because of safety issues, the social stigma that people will talk, and that they are not at the age of playing with others. Sometimes parents asked girls to stay at home so that they could stay out of trouble because there are more boys out of school with too much free time. COVID-19 has shrunk their public life and increased their vulnerability which often resulted in adolescent girls being married off.

> *"Parents would not prefer to marry off their girls but neighbours talk. So parents get worried about their reputation and they started to think differently."*
>
> —Female (17), Cumilla, in work

Respondents' answers varied depending on the presence of guardians and area. In Gaibandha, parents or any other elderly family members always guarded the respondents during the interview. In Gaibandha, almost all the female respondents said that they do not go out of their house, not even to visit their neighbours and even if they sometimes met with their friends during the lockdown, they only talked about study-related issues. This also happened in some interviews in Narail. In the interviews where parents were not present, respondents were more responsive; they talked about using the internet, social life activities such as eating *fuchka* (Bangladeshi street food) with friends at school, sexual harassment, and risky behaviours of boys, including substance use and gaming addiction.

All the school-going adolescents mentioned that they are now happy since schools opened and they could meet their friends. However, many of the girls got married and they are not coming back to school. This is because a significant number of adolescents reported getting married during COVID-19 and had left their villages to live with their in-laws. This had a great impact on adolescent girls' social life with friends. Many of the in-school female respondents said that there are fewer girls in their class.

> *"I haven't been in contact with many others [since school re-opening]; they got married, went to live with in-laws, who know where they are now."*
>
> —Female (15), Narail, in school

### 6.5.2. Use of cell phones and digital technology

While availing of smartphones or the internet depends on the family's economic condition which is similar for both boys and girls, our quantitative and qualitative data suggest that adolescent boys have more access to technology compared to adolescent girls. Among the 12 boys interviewed, six had access to smartphones and the internet; two had their phones and others used their parents' or siblings' phones. Moreover, from the IDIs, we were informed that boys can use technology through their friends or peer groups.

On the other hand, only five girls out of 24 interviewed had access to smartphones and technology; only one had their own phone and the rest used either their parents' smartphones (which were also the only smartphone of the household) or their husband's phone. The only female to own a smartphone of her own was from Gaibandha; her father bought her the phone after online classes started. Others had to borrow or use other's phones.

The survey data enabled us to look at phone ownership by district, over time, and by sex. Figures 6.5.1 present this data.

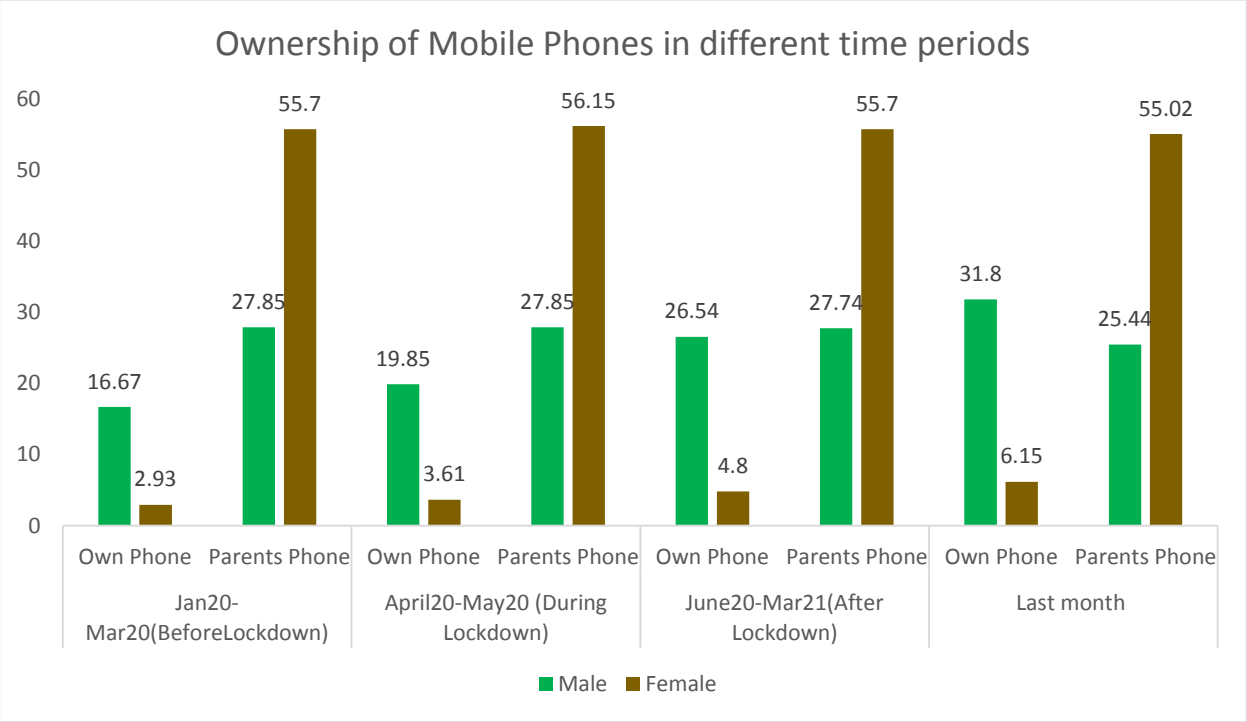



Figure 6.5.1: Whether the adolescent has access to a mobile phone on their own or by parent's phone (N=3139)

When asked about ownership of a mobile phone over the period from January 2020 to March 2021, there appears to be a trend for increasing personal ownership of a phone for both male and female adolescents across all districts. The figures for phones owned by parents are relatively stagnant across the different periods. There is a huge gap between male and female adolescents' access to their mobile phones across all districts; females have less access. Even after the lockdown, assuming mobile phones were needed for educational purposes, we still see that the girl's ownership of phones did not increase significantly. Whereas, boy's ownership of mobile phones almost doubles from the pre-lockdown figure last month across all districts. We also looked at the data by age and found that older adolescents had more access to their mobile phones than younger ones.

The adolescents in the survey were asked a follow-up question about how much time they spent daily, on average, on their phones. The daily average time spent on mobile phones has been

divided into different categories as shown below. The proportion for daily time spent up to one hour can be seen to have a relatively sharp decline during the first lockdown and then progressively increases in the later periods. This decrease is reflected in the very sharp increase in the proportion of time spent daily of more than three hours, from 13.04% to 28.83% (more than a 100% increase), during the first lockdown. These proportions decrease in the later periods, which is also the case for the other categories; time spent between one and two hours and time spent between two and three hours. As these figures drop, consequently, the proportion of time spent on phones up to one hour gradually increases as respondents are spending less time on their phones. Not much variation was observed across the three districts. Younger adolescents spent more time on their phones across all periods and districts.

From table 6.5.1 below, we observe the differences in usage by sex in percentages. Similar to the overall trend, we see that female usage is comparatively less as their access is less. However, using mobile phones for more than three hours almost doubled during the lockdown period for both males and females, then gradually decreased. Therefore, we can postulate that the adolescents who had access to mobile phones spent a considerable amount of time on their phones during the lockdown period, especially male adolescents.

**Table 6.5.1:** Time spent using mobile phones segregated by sex across different time periods (in percentages)

| Time | Time spent using mobile phones | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|---|
| Jan–Mar 2020 (before lockdown) | Less than or equivalent to 1 hour | 31.4 | 14.2 |
| | Between 1 and 2 hours | 19.1 | 7.4 |
| | Between 2 and 3 hours | 2.5 | 0.0 |
| | More than 3 hours | 21.6 | 3.9 |
| Number of observations (N) | 204 | | |
| Apr–May 2020 (during lockdown) | Less than or equivalent to 1 hour | 24.9 | 11.0 |
| | Between 1 and 2 hours | 11.0 | 7.8 |
| | Between 2 and 3 hours | 1.6 | 0.4 |
| | More than 3 hours | 36.3 | 6.9 |
| Number of observations (N) | 245 | | |
| Jun 2020–Mar 2021 | Less than or equivalent to 1 hour | 23.9 | 15.9 |
| | Between 1 and 2 hours | 16.2 | 3.4 |
| | Between 2 and 3 hours | 1.8 | 0.6 |
| | More than 3 hours | 32.7 | 5.5 |
| Number of observations (N) | 327 | | |
| Last month | Less than or equivalent to 1 hour | 28.1 | 18.0 |
| | Between 1 and 2 hours | 15.8 | 4.5 |
| | Between 2 and 3 hours | 14.3 | 2.3 |
| | More than 3 hours | 27.6 | 4.8 |
| Number of observations (N) | 399 | | |

Although adolescents with access to smartphones and the internet did use them for online classes and assignments, they mostly used them for entertainment during the lockdown and school closure; this helped them to cope with the uncertainty, anxiety, and turbulent times of COVID-19. Statistics on social media usage can be found in appendix table A2. TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook are the three most common applications that adolescents use digital technology. TikTok is considered a "fun" and "entertaining" media and has become extremely popular these days. All the respondents interviewed who use the internet on smartphones watch videos on this platform. Those who have internet access and own a smartphone, use Facebook Messenger and IMO to communicate with friends. Some also watched videos on Likee which is another video-making app.

> *"I spent my days watching these [YouTube and TikTok], I don't know what else I could do [if these were not here.]"*
>
> —Female (17), Narail, in-school, married

Besides watching YouTube or TikTok videos boys spent a greater amount of time playing online games during the lockdown and school closure period. A 17-year-old male respondent from Narail who did not have a personal smartphone before COVID-19 said he was given a new smartphone during lockdown for online classes but he spent more time playing online games. The two most played online games are PUBG and Free Fire. Besides, they also play a gambling game called "Tin Patti" and adolescents spend money to play this gambling game. From the interviews with male respondents, most of them got "addicted" to using smartphones for online gaming. This addiction often leads to adolescent boys being involved in illegal or risky activities, which is more elaborated on in Section 6.8. However, male respondents with smartphones also informed that after school re-opening internet usage has decreased.

One 15-year-old female respondent from Cumilla said that she uses the smartphone secretly when her father is asleep and she is not brave enough to use Facebook because it is bad. She also thinks that boys use mobile phones more than girls because girls do not work and earn; so, no one will give them a mobile phone.

Two other female respondents said that if a girl has a mobile phone with her, parents and neighbours think she might have a romantic relationship with a boy. Therefore, some girls do not prefer to use their phones. However, according to a few of our female respondents, girls sometimes get addicted to using mobile phones and they chat with their boyfriends all the time.

> *"Boys play Free Fire all day long, girls also play. They are always involved with it. It becomes an addiction. They do not care about the home, eating food; all they want is to play the game."*
>
> —Female (15), Cumilla, in-school

Since having a relationship or love affair is perceived as a slur on the family honour and also the girls' character and reputation, guardians are usually more controlling towards girls using mobile

phones (both feature phones and smartphones). However, there is less parental control over boys using phones and the internet. This either may be the result of gender stereotypes where it is believed that boys' character cannot be "bad" or simply because boys usually enjoy more freedom than girls.

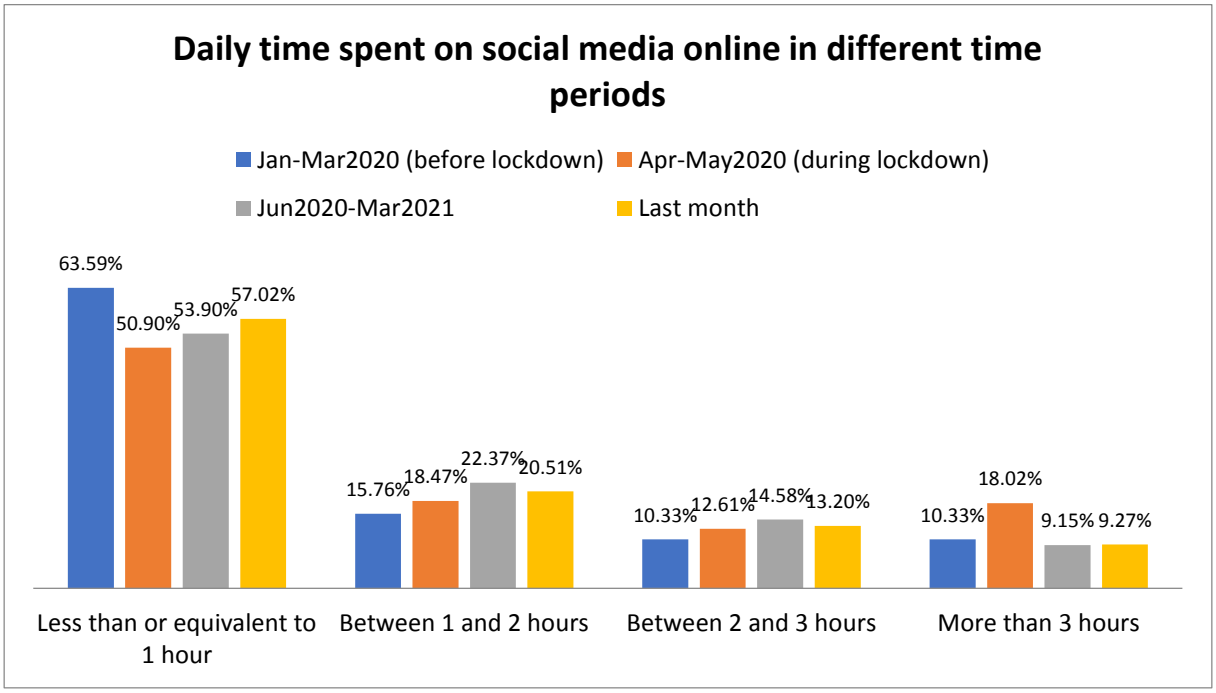



**Figure 6.5.2:** Time spent online daily in different periods (N=222)

When asked those who had possession of their phone, in the survey how much time they spent, on average, on social media daily. The trends observed here are very similar to the responses to the previous question. There is a relatively sharp decline in the proportion of the time spent up to one hour from 63.59% to 50.90% during the first lockdown. This is accompanied by a very sharp increase in the proportion of time spent on more than three hours, which is seen to have increased from 10.33% to 18.02% (almost a rise of 80%). This is accompanied by lower figures in the later periods. For the categories of time spent between one and two hours and time spent between two and three hours, a gradual rise is observed until last month, in which the figures drop. Male adolescents of the Cumilla district have the highest social media usage on average across all periods. This might be because Cumilla being a relatively richer district, males are more exposed to the online gaming scene than those from other areas. In general, males had higher social media usage across all districts. Young adolescents use social media less as they in general have lesser access.

When asked, adolescent boys with access to the internet and smartphones (See Appendix) said that they do not know much about the risks of using technology, except about hacking Facebook accounts. They do not know about mitigating or solving these problems or about any help service. However, one 14-year-old school dropout male respondent mentioned that he would go to his elder brothers or friends who are more skilled on the internet uses to seek help. Those

who do not use or have access to smartphones or the internet do not have any idea about the risk of internet use.

Three 17–18 years old male respondents from Gaibandha and one 13-year-old male respondent from Narail identified using a feature phone or smartphone or Facebook as a risk, where it may lead to having a romantic relationship. The couple might elope and result in early marriage; sometimes if the couple is found by the parents, they usually blame the boys, file a police case against them, and harass the boys in several ways, as informed by respondents, informal informants, and discussed in FGDs.

Sometimes internet-related conflicts spread among friends. One respondent said that some of his friends got into a fight while using the internet. For example, if someone gives a “haha” reaction to his friend’s post then that friend gets mad and asks the guy why he gave a “haha” reaction.

Our female respondents who are from well-off families or families that could afford to buy at least one smartphone used it for doing assignments and watching video content to pass the time. They used to use smartphones during pre-COVID-19 times to watch videos online and for educational purposes also but not much. The usage increased after the lockdown. As mentioned before, one respondent got her new phone to do online classes but also watched videos. These respondents with access to the internet said they learned about the COVID-19 through YouTube.

There are some prejudices and gender-based preconceptions regarding the use of smartphones and the internet. One of the female adolescents from Narail informed that during lockdown watching TikTok and YouTube and chatting with friends through Facebook Messenger helped her pass her free time. However, she is not using a smartphone at all for the last 10 months of her pregnancy, as both her parents and in-laws said that using a smartphone will be harmful to the pregnancy.

The FGDs in all areas revealed that most parents feel that mobile phone usage is bad for children, especially for adolescents. They believe that mobile phones lead adolescents to have romantic relationships which may result in the family being shamed or dishonoured. Although adolescent girls were using smartphones for study and entertainment, they said that using a phone is considered to be a sign of a relationship with some boys.

Adolescents sometimes think that girls become “spoilt” if they use smartphones; they fall in love which affects their school grades, they might elope with the boy or they might send private photographs to their boyfriends which boys can spread on the internet after a breakup.

We find adolescent girls are more aware than boys of the risk of using the internet and the types of harassment that could happen online. A 15-year-old in-school respondent from Narail said that she has heard that girls get trafficked for using TikTok and she thinks that these apps are detrimental. She thinks that if COVID-19 had not happened, nobody would have the time for this as everyone would be busy with their studies. While boys only mentioned playing games online,

adolescent girls mentioned some risky behaviour of boys, such as sending indecent photographs, watching porn, and playing games online with money. They also mentioned that they have heard of spreading photographs and videos of rape on the internet and know about online bullying and hate comments.

> *"Girls become bad if they use a mobile phone, they become impudent. They have a romantic relationship with boys. But when the relationship ends, boys can spread 'bad' pictures of the girl on the internet".*
>
> —Female (15), Narail, in-school

Another risky behaviour of adolescent boys regarding the use of smartphones identified by our female respondents was the addiction to online gaming. Once boys get addicted, they have to buy mobile data and for that purpose, they sometimes engaged in illegal activities, such as stealing and selling illegal things.

Female respondents from Cumilla said that girls should inform parents about any problem related to internet use, such as photo leaks and rumours, but she is scared to tell her parents if those ever happen to her. She thinks that her parents will not believe her and might blame her instead.

Girls who use smartphones said they have heard of harassment in their Facebook inbox but did not experience it personally. If something like that happens to them, they will block the harasser's ID. They do not know of any complaint mechanism regarding this. Some of the female respondents believe that it is ultimately the user's decision on whether to take part in risky behaviour. A good person will use their phone for studies instead of watching "bad things."

Using technology does not depend on rural or urban settlements but rather on the economic status. Gaibandha was a comparatively poorer area than Cumilla and Narail, and we could find only one girl with a smartphone. Several others could not afford a smartphone or a feature phone much less do online classes or use it for entertainment purposes.

One female respondent thinks that the internet always spreads false news.

> "*Internet is fake, anyone can make a video and release it"*
>
> —Female (18), Gaibandha, married, in school

She thinks that television (TV) news channels are more trustworthy than the news on the internet.

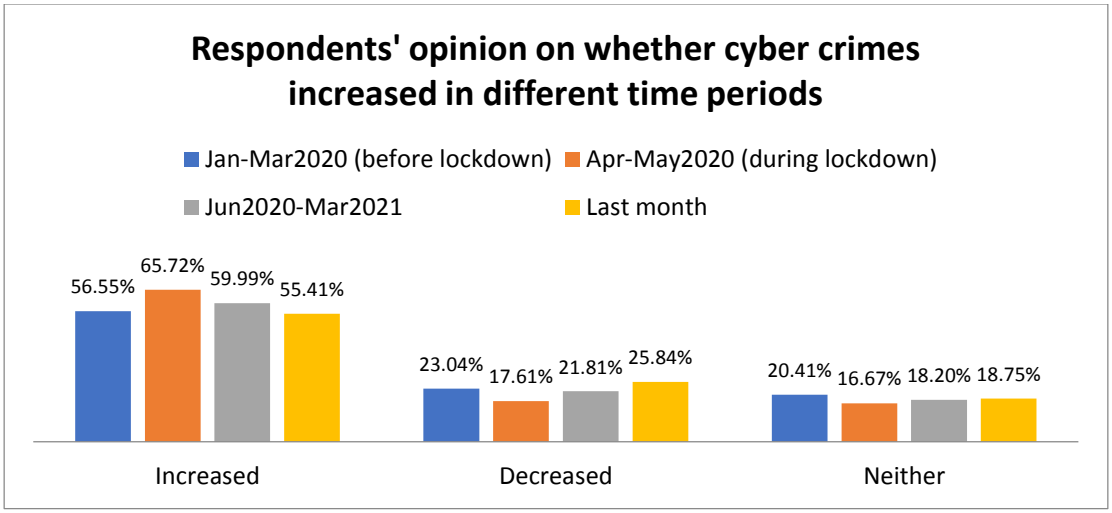



**Figure 6.5.3:** Respondent's perceptions about cyber-crime at different times (N=2,357)

All respondents were asked to give their opinion on the frequency of cybercrimes, regardless of the type of ownership of a mobile phone. For those who responded that it did increase, a rise accompanied by gradual falls can be seen during the first lockdown. This is reflected in the drop during the first lockdown for those who thought cybercrimes decreased. This is consistent with the findings of significant increases in time spent daily on mobile phones. Lastly, the figures for those who think it did not change are relatively stagnant across time.

Regarding cybercrimes, adolescents were asked which of the following incidents happened to them or they did it themselves. These include: (i) sharing offensive/threatening content, (ii) lying about someone on the internet, (iii) sharing one's photo with someone, (iv) forcing someone to do something by threatening to disclose/disclosing that person's photo/video, (v) hacking someone else's phone/computer, (vi) scamming someone online, and (vii) trying to add someone in a group online that practices violence. For each of the periods, in each of these options mentioned above, more than 95% of respondents stated they did not partake or have this happen to them. The figures are not significantly different for males and females.

## 6.6. Psychosocial well-being

It is a matter of concern for all age groups that COVID-19 would affect their psychological wellbeing. To assess the effect of the different phases of the lockdown, adolescents were asked various questions in the survey and this subject was also explored in the individual interviews with adolescents and FGDs with parents. The findings from the survey are presented first followed by the qualitative findings.

### 6.6.1. Mental health effects related to COVID-19 pandemic lifestyle changes

This section reports on adolescents' mental health status during and after the COVID-19 period using the survey data. To measure mental health, we used indicators such as sleep deprivation,

depression, irritation/hopelessness, suicide and self-harm tendency, and tendency to take drugs for entertainment. These indicators were taken from various widely used mental health indices (King, 2018) to measure mental health among adolescents in Bangladesh.

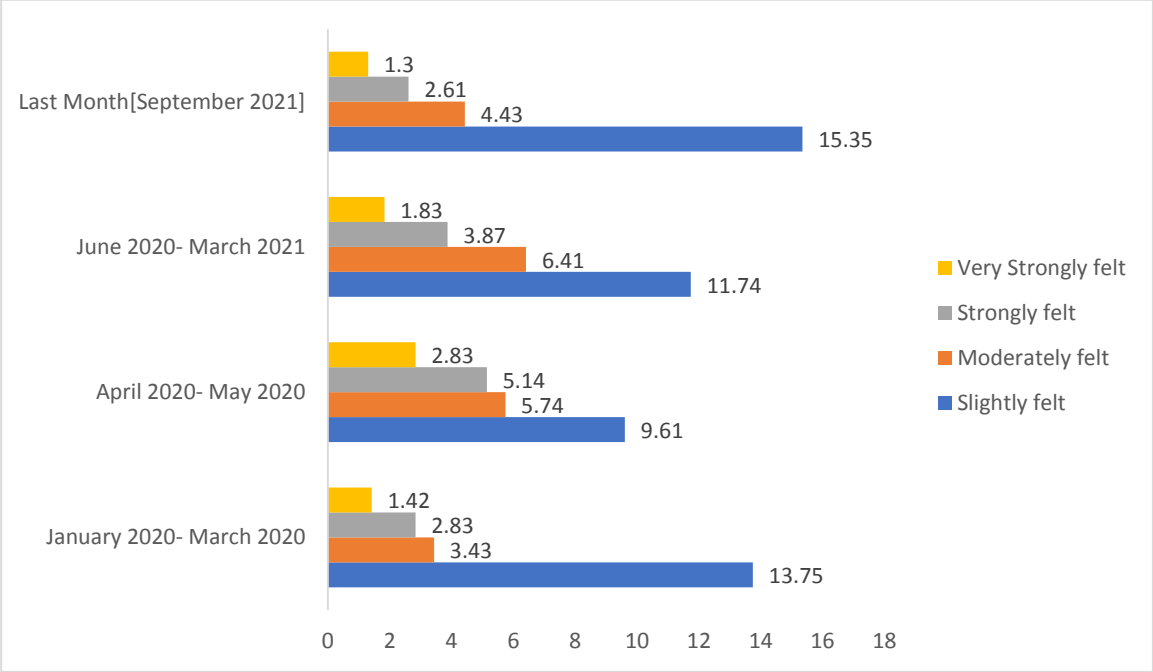



**Figure 6.6.1:** Percentage of individuals sleeping less than eight hours (N=1828)

Around 79% of adolescents said that they did not feel a lack of sleep between January and March 2020. The rate decreased from April to May 2020 and June 2020 to March 2021, while it increased again in September 2021. Individuals who felt moderate to extreme lack of sleep show the same trend as individuals who did not have a lack of sleep. Individuals who felt extreme sleep deprivation was 2.83% and 1.42% from January 2020 to March 2020, whereas it went as high as 5.14% and 2.83%, respectively, from April 2020 to May 2020 and went down in September 2021. It seems that during the COVID-19 lockdown, adolescents suffered from sleep deprivation and they started to recover after the lockdown period.

At least 15 years or older adolescents are around five percentage points more likely to feel sleep deprivation compared to younger adolescents. The pattern of change in different periods is similar for both older and younger age adolescents (see Table A3). There is a noticeable difference in sleep deprivation among different districts, but there is no distinct pattern of this difference in different periods across locations (see Table A4)

There are no differences between married and unmarried and between school-going and out-of-school respondents about sleep deprivation.

The difference between male and female in sleep deprivation do not show any consistent pattern. Fluctuation of sleep deprivation is more visible among male adolescents than females. About 77% of the female population did not feel sleep deprivation at all from January to March

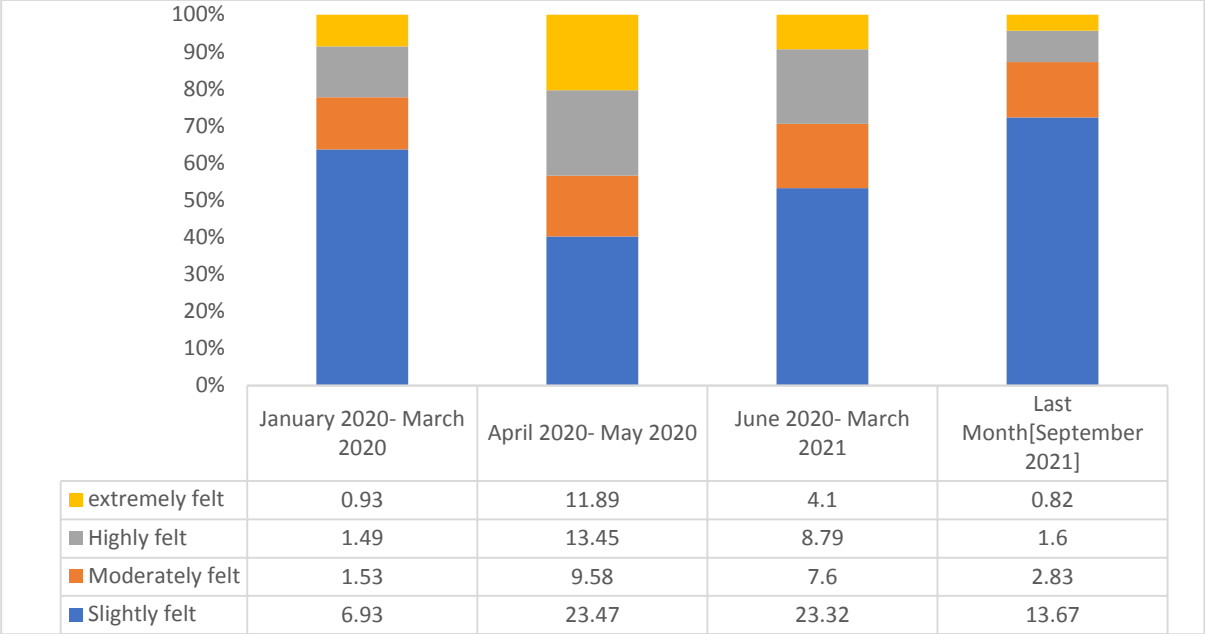
2020 and the rate is quite the same from April to May 2020. The male population felt very strong sleep deprivation more than the female population in all periods, and both of these cohorts suffered from increasing sleep deprivation during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The table however does not include those who didn't feel sleep deprivation at all. Addition of all those who felt sleep deprivation of some degree and subtracting that number from 100 will provide us with the rate of adolescents who didn't feel sleep deprivation at all. For instance, from January-March 2020, 17.98% of male adolescents reported suffering from some degree of sleep deprivation so 82.02% of male adolescents didn't feel any sleep deprivation during that time.

The rate of individuals who stayed always lonely frequently increased as those who did not stay lonely decreased. The rate of adolescents who always stayed lonely was 0.89% in January–March 2020 and the rate increased as high as 7.41% in April–March 2020, while the rate came down to less than 1% again in September 2021.

Individuals who felt lonely show a similar pattern (see Figure A5); adolescents felt lonely and stayed alone more during lockdown compared to the pre-COVID period. The rate of individuals who felt extremely lonely was lower than 1% before the lockdown (January) which increased to 8.46% during the COVID-19 lockdown. They started to recover from loneliness after the COVID-19 lockdown was over, but the recovery rate is still lower than in the pre-COVID-19 period.

No significant difference in loneliness by sex, age, marital status, and school-going status was found. No consistent pattern was found in the variation of loneliness by districts (see Table A6) Before the pandemic, around 1% of adolescents in Cumilla, Gaibanda, and Narail were strongly affected by loneliness, while the rate increased to 10%, 9%, and 16%, respectively, during the pandemic lockdown period.




| | January 2020- March 2020 | April 2020- May 2020 | June 2020- March 2021 | Last Month[September 2021] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| extremely felt | 0.93 | 11.89 | 4.1 | 0.82 |
| Highly felt | 1.49 | 13.45 | 8.79 | 1.6 |
| Moderately felt | 1.53 | 9.58 | 7.6 | 2.83 |
| Slightly felt | 6.93 | 23.47 | 23.32 | 13.67 |

**Figure 6.6.2:** Percentage of adolescents who felt frustrated (N=1828)

Similar to sleep deprivation and loneliness, the rate of frustration also increased among adolescents during the COVID-19 lockdown. Less than 1% of adolescents felt extreme depression before the lockdown, but the rate increased to 11.89% during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Individuals who did not feel any frustration at all came down to 41.62% during the lockdown from 89% from January to March 2020. The rate did not reach its previous position after the lockdown period. In September, around 80% of adolescents did not feel any frustration at all. So the adolescents are recovering but very slowly. It is also possible that the COVID-19 pandemic has a long-term impact on their mental health.

A noticeable difference in the feeling of frustration is found between the male and female cohorts during and after the COVID-19 lockdown period. For instance, from April to May 2020, 8% and 16% of males and females, respectively, felt strongly frustrated. Gaibanda shows a higher rate of moderate frustration among adolescents compared to Cumilla and Narail, while the rate is lower compared to others in case of a strong feeling of frustration. No consistent difference was found for different age groups. While 12% of younger (12–14 years old) and 14% of older adolescents felt strong frustration during the COVID-19 lockdown, the rate went down to 7% for younger and 10% for older adolescents from June 2020 to March 2021. No significant difference was found in marital and schooling status.

**Table 6.6.1:** Percentage of adolescents feeling worried and irritation/hopelessness

| **Worry** | | | | | **Irritation/hopelessness** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | January 2020–March 2020 | April 2020 –May 2020 | June 2020–March 2021 | Last month [September 2021] | January 2020–March 2020 | April 2020–May 2020 | June 2020–March 2021 | Last month [September 2021] |
| Slightly felt | 8.61 | 23.85 | 23.88 | 15.8 | 6 | 21.54 | 18.48 | 12.22 |
| Moderately felt | 2.57 | 10.51 | 9.13 | 5.1 | 1.71 | 9.31 | 7 | 2.87 |
| Strongly felt | 2.38 | 13.41 | 8.31 | 3.58 | 0.93 | 9.46 | 6.78 | 1.68 |
| Very strongly felt | 0.67 | 8.79 | 3.43 | 1.68 | 0.52 | 7.38 | 3.28 | 1.04 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | | | | | | **1828** | | |

Feeling of irritation/hopelessness and worry increased during COVID-19 and the rate recovered again after the pandemic. More than 85% of adolescents did not feel worried before COVID-19, whereas the number decreased to 43.44% during COVID-19. The rate shows signs of recovery in September, but it is still lower than the pre-COVID period. So there may be a long-term impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on the mental health of adolescents. The rate of irritation/hopelessness also shows the same trend as worry. The rate of irritation/hopelessness increased during the COVID-19 lockdown and decreased again after the lockdown.

The rate of adolescents who strongly felt worried is higher in Cumilla compared to other districts in all periods. However, other categories do not show a consistent pattern. While Gaibanda has the highest rate of adolescents who felt a little bit worried during the COVID-19 lockdown period, the rate is similar to Narail in other periods.

Older age adolescents have a higher rate of a feeling of worry in all periods and categories compared to younger adolescents. Similarly, female adolescents have a higher rate of the feeling of worry compared to males during and after COVID-19. No consistent pattern is found among married and unmarried adolescents, possibly because of the small sample size for married adolescents.

Overall, feelings of headache decreased among adolescents after the COVID-19 lockdown. We found that 57.27% of adolescents did not feel any headache at all. The rate decreased during the COVID-19 lockdown, but it increased to 66.06% in September 2021, which is a much higher rate than the pre-COVID period. The same is true for those who felt slight to very strong headaches in those periods.

COVID-19 did not have any considerable effect on drug usage for entertainment. During both the pre-and post-COVID-19 periods, 99% of adolescents said that their desire to take drugs for entertainment was not affected at all. However, a moderate and slight effect on the desire to use drugs for entertainment shows a trend with the COVID-19 lockdown, though the rate is very small; 0.07% and 0.45% of adolescents had a moderate and slight feeling of taking drugs which increased to 0.67% and 0.78% of adolescents, respectively. So the COVID-19 lockdown did not have a considerable impact on adolescents' feelings about taking drugs compared to the impact on depression and irritation/hopelessness.

Similar to drug-taking behaviour, little change is observed in suicide and self-harm tendency. There is no consistent pattern of moderate, strong, and very strong feelings of self-harm and suicide during the pre-and post-COVID-19 periods. However, the rate of adolescents who felt slight feelings of suicide and self-harm slightly increased during the COVID-19 lockdown and decreased again after the lockdown. Those who did not feel any of these feelings at all decreased during the lockdown and the rate started to recover again.

These topics are mostly considered taboo in rural areas of Bangladesh, so it is plausible that adolescents hide their true responses when responding to enumerators. So the results might not reflect adolescents' original status because of sampling error.

### 6.6.2. Adapting to stress

This section reports on adolescents' stress adaption mechanisms before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Various indicators are used, such as working outside, having hobbies, and doing physical exercise. This study uses these indicators to investigate adolescents' stress adaptation mechanism since previous studies such as that of Pressman et al. (2009) indicate that individuals who adapt to their stress through these activities attain better mental health outcomes.

A small percentage of adolescents responded to their stress through physical work outside (maintaining social distance). Less than 1% of adolescents sometimes went to work to adapt to their stress, but the number went up to 9.24% during the COVID-19 lockdown. The rate went down after the COVID-19 lockdown but it still did not return to the previous rate. The recovery might be slow but it is also possible that COVID-19 might have a long-term effect on adolescents' mental health and coping behaviour. Those who seldom, frequently, and always did physical work as adaptation also show a similar pattern.

There is no noticeable difference in adapting to stress through working outside between older and younger adolescents. The rate increased among both males and females but it is higher among male adolescents than females. It is plausible that because of mobility restrictions of women in rural areas, female adolescents cannot go outside as frequently as males can. No consistent and significant pattern of difference is visible among different districts. Those out of school have a higher rate of moderate stress adaptation through going outside compared to those enrolled in school. However, from April to May 2020, the rate turned higher for those in school.

**Table 6.6.2:** Adaptation to stress through taking up hobbies and exercise (percentage of adolescents)

| **Hobby** | | | | | **Exercise** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | January 2020–March 2020 | April 2020–May 2020 | June 2020–March 2021 | Last month [September 2021] | January 2020–March 2020 | April 2020–May 2020 | June 2020–March 2021 | Last month [September 2021] |
| Did not do at all | 87.18 | 70.79 | 77.57 | 85.13 | 68.48 | 71.2 | 72.28 | 76.3 |
| Seldom did | 6.41 | 11.62 | 11.03 | 7.97 | 13.9 | 14.94 | 14.27 | 12.44 |
| Sometimes did | 3.8 | 11.14 | 7.75 | 3.95 | 7.49 | 8.61 | 8.2 | 6.3 |
| Frequently did | 1.56 | 4.17 | 2.46 | 1.94 | 4.96 | 3.84 | 3.91 | 3.32 |
| Always did | 1.04 | 2.27 | 1.19 | 1.01 | 5.18 | 1.42 | 1.34 | 1.64 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | | | | | | | 1828 | |

A small change is seen among adolescents who adapted their stress through hobbies. About 4% of adolescents sometimes adapted their stress during January–March 2020, which increased to 11.14% during the COVID-19 lockdown. Adaptation through hobbies started to return to its previous rate in the post-COVID-19 period probably because of increasing activities and improving mental health.

However, adaptation through exercise decreased since January 2020. The rate of those who frequently and always adapted their stress through exercise has been decreasing from January to March 2020. About 14% of adolescents seldom adapted their stress through exercise before COVID-19, which slightly increased to 14.94% during the COVID-19 lockdown. The rate decreased to 12.44% last September, which is lower than the pre-COVID-19 period.

Older adolescents adapt through exercise and hobbies more than younger adolescents, but the rate is not consistent and visible over all periods. The rate of hobbies is higher among female adolescents compared to males both before and after the COVID-19 period. It is plausible that they adapted to stress through hobbies more at home because of their mobility restrictions outside of the home. The rate of exercise is higher among male adolescents possibly because of fewer mobility restrictions for male adolescents. The difference in the rate by the district is inconsistent. While Gaibanda has a higher rate of adolescents who sometimes adapt through hobbies in different periods, the rate is higher in Narail when it comes to moderate adaptation. The rate of adolescents who adopt through exercise is higher in Gaibanda compared to other districts.

The rate of adapting to stress through hobbies is higher for married and divorced adolescents compared to unmarried ones. Also, the overall rate of hobbies and exercise is higher among school-going students than out-of-school adolescents in all periods. It is plausible that school-going students have more friends and time to spend on hobbies.

### 6.6.3. Confidence and independence

This section discusses adolescents' feelings of confidence and independence from others before and after the COVID-19 period. To measure feelings of confidence and independence, the following indicators are used: adolescents' level of confidence, level of trust, the possibility of getting work opportunities, and getting out of tough situations without others' help. These indicators were selected from other studies (Bray et al., 2020; Cogswell et al., 2010) that measured individual confidence and trust level so that this study can measure adolescents' confidence and independence from others in different periods.

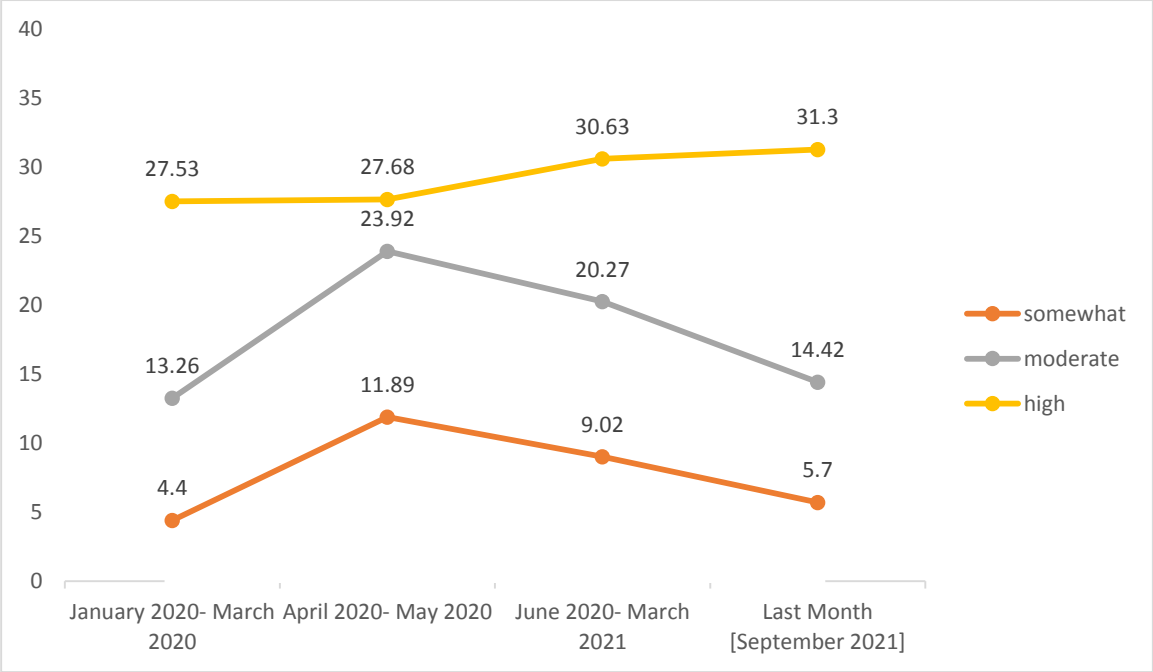
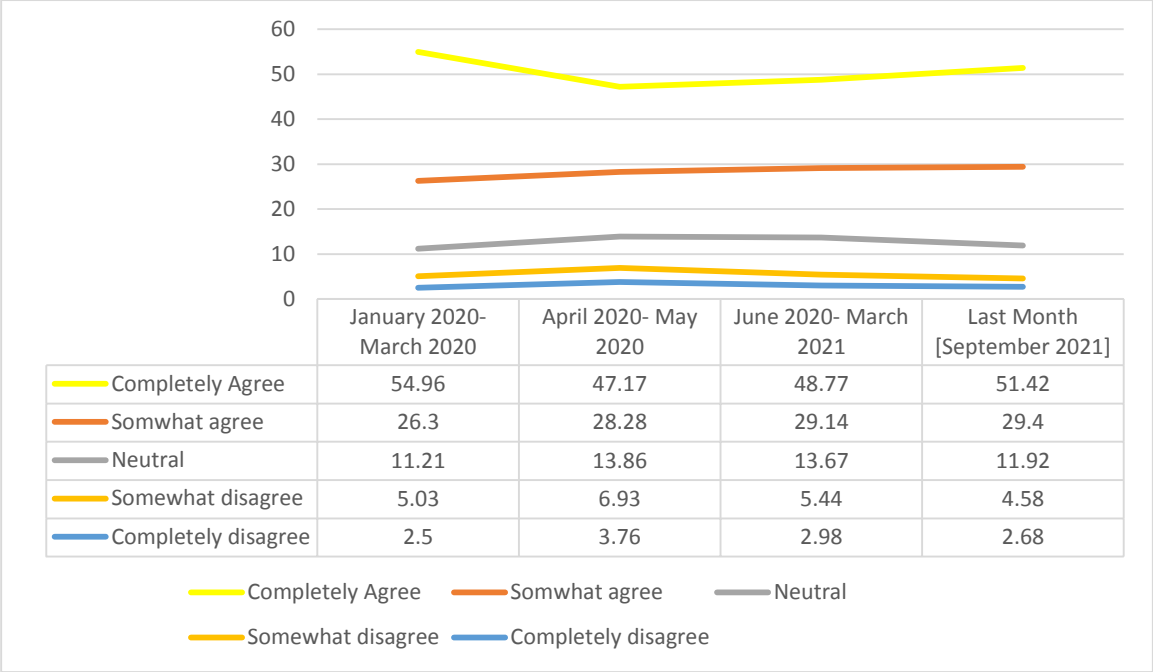



**Figure 6.6.3:** Level of confidence among adolescents by percentage (N=3139)

When asked about adolescents' confidence levels, 51.68% of them said that they had very high confidence during January–March 2020, which declined to 31.45% during the COVID-19 lockdown period. The rate recovered to 44.93% but it is still lower than the pre-COVID-19 period. While the rate of those who felt very high confidence decreased, those who felt moderate or somewhat confident increased at a similar rate.

Various reasons can cause this fluctuation of confidence besides the pandemic. It might be because of increasing loneliness during the pandemic. During this time, adolescents spend a lot of time alone which might adversely influence their other psychological properties such as confidence.

There is no noticeable difference in confidence level by age, district, schooling, and marital status. A higher level of extreme confidence is visible among female adolescents compared to males. However, in terms of moderate and somewhat confident, the rate is higher among male adolescents in most of the periods.




| | January 2020- March 2020 | April 2020- May 2020 | June 2020- March 2021 | Last Month [September 2021] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Completely Agree | 54.96 | 47.17 | 48.77 | 51.42 |
| Somwhat agree | 26.3 | 28.28 | 29.14 | 29.4 |
| Neutral | 11.21 | 13.86 | 13.67 | 11.92 |
| Somewhat disagree | 5.03 | 6.93 | 5.44 | 4.58 |
| Completely disagree | 2.5 | 3.76 | 2.98 | 2.68 |

**Figure 6.6.4:** Level of trust in others among adolescents by percentage (N=3139)

In January–March 2020, 54.96% of the adolescents completely agreed with the statement that they have people around them whom they can trust and those people will always love them. However, the rate went down during the COVID-19 lockdown period and went up again above 50% in September 2021. The rate of those who somewhat disagree with this statement went up during the COVID-19 lockdown and went down to 4.58% which is lower than the pre-COVID period. Overall, trust in others and confidence in one's self decreased during the COVID-19 lockdown period and started to recover again during June 2020–March 2021, and September 2021.

The level of trust can decrease for various reasons besides the pandemic. It is plausible that adolescents sought help from others but could not get it during the pandemic, consequently decreasing their overall trust in people during that time.

There is no visible and consistent pattern of difference in confidence by age, marital and schooling status, and gender. The rate of those who fully agree that they trust others is higher in Cumilla in all periods. Other categories of trust do not show a consistent pattern over time.

The independence of adolescents increased during the COVID-19 lockdown period compared to January–March 2020. In January–March 2020, 9.61% of adolescents said that they have a very high chance of obtaining work when a work opportunity comes. The rate went down and up

again during and after the COVID-19 lockdown. When asked if they can get out of a tough situation without the help of their relatives and friends, 24.44% of adolescents said that it is highly probable that they can get out of a tough situation by themselves. This rate does not show any noticeable change during and after the COVID-19 period. However, in January–March 2020, 20.57% of adolescents said that they have a high probability of getting out alone, while the number decreased to 15.16% during the COVID-19 period. The rate shows signs of recovery in September 2021. Overall, adolescents' independency increased and then decreased again during and after the COVID-19 lockdown.

### 6.6.4. Support systems during COVID-19

The survey with adolescents also provided information about support systems used by adolescents to deal with stress, depression, and other psychosocial well-being issues. The following section discusses the role of parents, friends, relatives, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and clubs.

More adolescents shared their problems with their parents during COVID-19. In January–March 2020, 60% of adolescents said that they share their problems with parents, whereas the rate went up to 63.39% during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, the rate started to decrease in the post-COVID-19 period and it came down to 58.89% in September 2021, which is lower than the pre-COVID-19 period.

**Table 6.6.3:** Shared problems with friends and relatives to get out of depressing/worrying situations (by percentage)

| **Sharing with friends** | | | | | **Sharing with cousins and relatives** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **January 2020–March 2020** | **April 2020–May 2020** | **June 2020–March 2021** | **Last month [September 2021]** | **January 2020–March 2020** | **April 2020–May 2020** | **June 2020–March 2021** | **Last month [September 2021]** |
| **No** | 37.30 | 52.38 | 45.68 | 39.68 | 39.57 | 40.83 | 39.38 | 41.51 |
| **Yes** | 62.70 | 47.62 | 54.32 | 60.32 | 60.43 | 59.17 | 60.62 | 58.49 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | | | | | | | | 3139 |

COVID-19 had a noticeable impact on adolescents' tendency to share problems with friends. While 62.54% of adolescents shared their problems with friends in January–March 2020, the rate went down to 47.28% in April–May 2020 when the COVID-19 lockdown was in effect. The rate recovered to 53.92% in June–March 2020 and 60.08% in September 2021. There seems to be no consistent pattern in the rate of sharing problems with cousins and relatives. While the rate recovered to 60%, it went down to 58% again in September 2021.

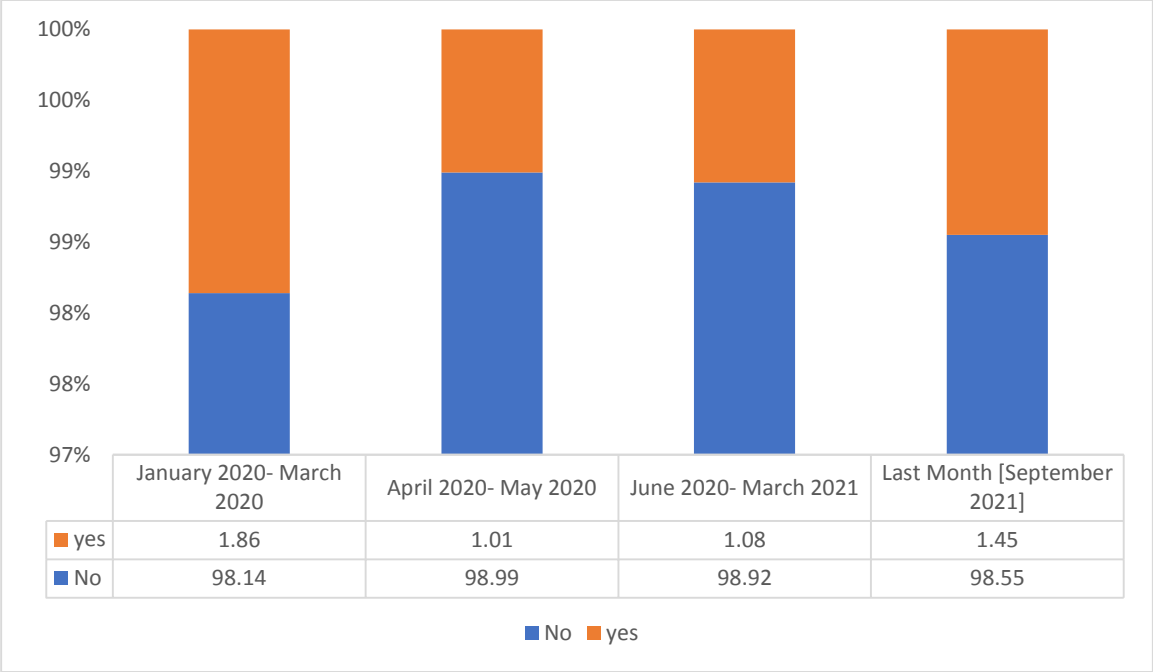



**Figure 6.6.5:** Shared problems with NGOs or clubs to get out of depressing/worrying situations (by percentage; N=3139)

Almost 99% of adolescents do not share their problems with any organisations. Sharing problems with different organisations (e.g., NGOs, adolescents' improvement clubs, etc.) shows minuscule change during the COVID-19 lockdown period. In January–March 2020, 1.99% of adolescents shared their problems with different organizations, while the rate went down to 1.06% in the COVID-19 lockdown period. The rate started to show a sign of recovery in the post-COVID-19 period.

## 6.6.5. IDI and FGD findings

The qualitative interviews revealed that almost all school-going adolescents were happy about the school reopening. They could go to school and meet their friends and can continue their studies the way it was in pre-COVID-19 times. However, we also found various reasons why the adolescents were worried, anxious, and depressed. Many of the respondents said that they were happy at the beginning of the lockdown as they got a "sudden vacation" from regular school, exams, and study. However, soon (three or four months) they got bored after prolonged lockdown and anxious about education. They felt upset.

Most adolescent girls were worried about the continuation of their education. They felt unsure whether they could go back to school and complete at least the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exam. Adolescents who were SSC examinees or studied in class 10 during the lockdown were worried about their SSC exam—whether they could sit for the exam or not. When the date of the SSC exam was announced, some were worried because they could not study properly

during school closure. One respondent said that she could not concentrate on her studies as much as she could before COVID-19.

Both male and female respondents said that they do not know of any helpline or psycho-social services. This affected them, mostly boys, by losing interest and habit of studying. The opportunity of non-stop gaming, school closure, lack of interest in online classes, and lack of regular social-physical activities affected boys in losing interest in studying. Boys from families with economic crises due to COVID-19 felt it was better to join work rather than study. Male respondents with or without access to the internet said that they did not feel like studying following a routine and merely spend an hour studying. A respondent said that his dropout from school was not because of financial reasons but rather a psychological ones as he lost interest in education since he could not study through other mediums after school closure. He is now planning to acquire some skills for future work prospects.

A girl who dropped out of school due to financial crises during COVID-19 said that she is upset about not being able to continue her education while her friends and classmates are going to school. She also said that she could not sleep properly since March 2020. She feels anxious but she could not specify for what and she does not know of any available service.

Respondents, irrespective of male or female, who were studying in class 8 in 2020 felt upset when the “auto-pass” was announced by the government. They felt that if they could sit in the exam and pass, they could have claimed it as an achievement. They would have been congratulated by their families, relatives, and neighbours. But the auto-pass announcement took away that feeling of achievement from them. (In social media, we observed people putting down students who fell in the auto-pass decision which later turned into bullying of these students).

An exception was a 17-year-old married respondent from Narail who said that she is not much worried about her education now since she got married and her future education depends on the decision of her husband and in-laws.

Fighting between parents and financial crisis during COVID-19 also affected adolescents’ mental health during the pandemic. They felt sad and could not share this anxiety with anyone. They were worried about their parents’ job loss and income loss. While boys had the opportunity to work to support their families and they did start working, there were not many working opportunities for girls. However, the girls felt the need to work as they wanted to support their parents. A male respondent explained how he was bored and anxious about education and his family’s economic condition but after he started working, his worries were reduced.

Female adolescents were also worried about getting married. One married respondent from Gaibandha said that if COVID-19 lockdowns had not happened and she did not have to get married off, she would then have gotten married two years later. Then she would have more freedom in her parents’ home. After marriage, she has a lot of responsibilities and her parents “lost their right over their daughter.” This was echoed in almost all married girls' interviews where they mentioned that they would have got married after completing their SSC or Higher

Secondary Certificate (HSC) exam and not now. They were also worried about how to cope with the in-laws.

An adolescent girl who was based in Dhaka but got married recently in Narail used to call radio shows and talk with radio jockeys (RJs) about her anxiety and boredom and it helped her to cope with the lockdown and staying at home period. We found four female adolescents who could share their anxiety and worries with friends and neighbours during the school closing period.

## 6.7. Violence and sexual harassment faced by adolescents

### 6.7.1. Experiences of violence and abuse

Experiences of violence and sexual abuse, within the family and outside, increase adolescent vulnerabilities and have important age and sex dimensions. These were explored in the survey with adolescents, in individual interviews as well as in the FGDs with parents. In the survey, we asked about abuse and sexual harassment faced by adolescents by family members, physical and verbal abuse from family members and outsiders, abuse and sexual harassment by outsiders, faced by adolescents, all before and during COVID-19 and opinion on which acts can be considered as an offence segregated by sex.

The survey results show us that younger adolescents suffer more from all types of violence compared to older adolescents: While 2.42% of adolescents from the 12–14 age cohort said they faced some kind of violence during COVID-19, the rate is 1.59 for those above 15 years old. In the case of sex differences, male adolescents suffer from more violence than females. However, girls suffer from more sexual harassment than boys.

**Table 6.7.1:** Victims of violence by age and sex during COVID-19 (N=2849)

| **Overall violence (by percentage)** | | | | | **Sexual harassment (by response)** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **12–14** | **15+** | **Male** | **Female** | **Male** | **Female** | **12–14** | **15+** |
| **No** | 72.75 | 6.38 | 73.29 | 77.29 | 1,008 | 1,786 | 1,454 | 1,175 |
| **Yes** | 27.25 | 23.62 | 26.71 | 22.71 | 14 | 41 | 36 | 19 |

We also found that very few adolescents took some kind of action against the harassment or violence that they faced. During the COVID-19 lockdown period, 25.58% of adolescents said that they were victims of some kind of violence (i.e., sexual harassment, calling names, got beaten, got scolded) by family or someone from their living area. Of those who faced some kind of violence, only 7.13% or 43 of them took some kind of action to tackle that situation.

## 6.7.2. Violence and abuse inside the family

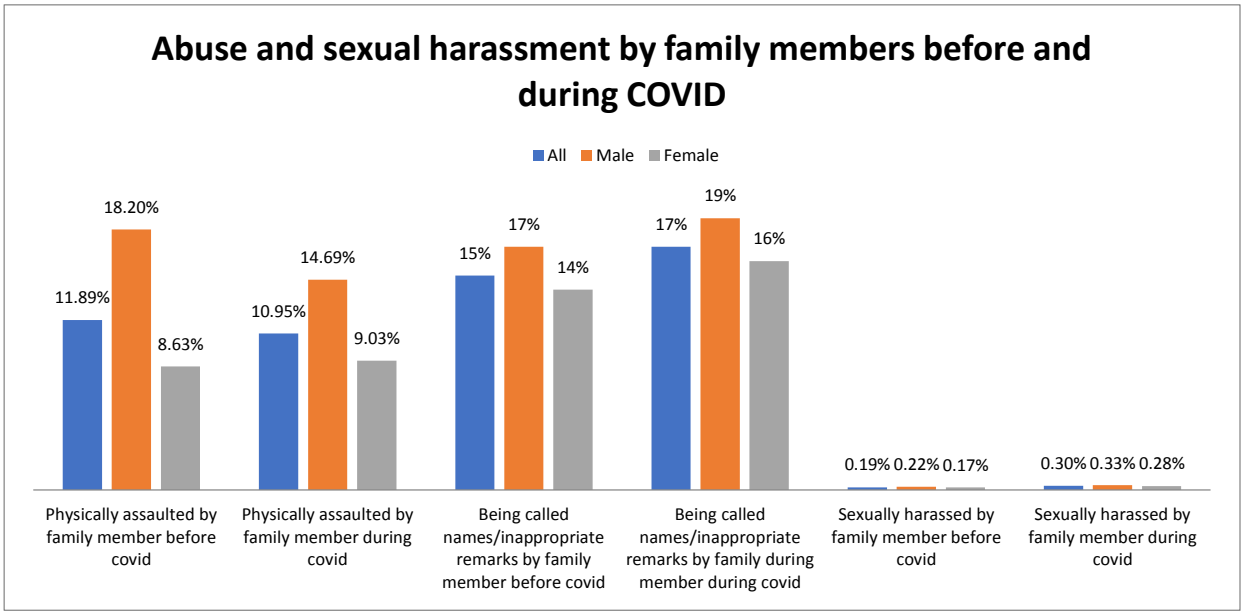



**Figure 6.7.1:** Abuse and sexual harassment (by family members) faced by adolescents before and During COVID-19 (N=3139)

When asked about physical assaults by family members, 10.95% of overall adolescents reported being exposed to physical assault by family members during COVID-19, which was less than the 11.89% before COVID-19. When we segregate the data by sex, we see that the rate is 4 percentage points lower during COVID-19 for males but increased 1 percentage point for females in the same period. However, verbal abuse increased for both males and females during COVID-19 compared to before the pandemic. The figures for being sexually harassed by a family member during and after COVID-19 are less than 0.5%, and not much variation was observed.

In the qualitative interviews, a few respondents mentioned increased fights between siblings and some boys mentioned fights between boys due to winning or losing in games, such as football, or perhaps related to boys using each other identities for online gaming.

One of the married and pregnant adolescents in rural Gaibandha faced domestic violence from her husband but was not able to take any measures against this. She had even thought of divorcing him but she did not want to shame her family. Her mother knew of the situation and had brought her home for the delivery of the baby and also so that she could sit for her SSC exams. She was hoping that after her exams she would be able to get a job.

Unmarried adolescents, both boys, and girls, in all three areas mentioned increased tensions in the family and quarrels between parents because of financial worries related to the lockdown. A 17-year-old female student in Gaibandha said domestic violence increased because income loss made everyone agitated but resolved within themselves (parents). She thought that during the COVID-19 lockdown, everyone had become more irritable and the loss of income has added

more pressure on them, so all family members were agitated all the time. She thought that quarrels and domestic violence had increased slightly.

In some families, the parents increased scolding and violence against adolescents—related to studying, mobile phone use, or to ensure that girls were doing the housework. An 18-year-old working boy in Gaibandha mentioned that his parents quarrel sometimes over family matters; his mother got frustrated and scolded him many times during the closure.

### 6.7.3. Violence and abuse outside the family

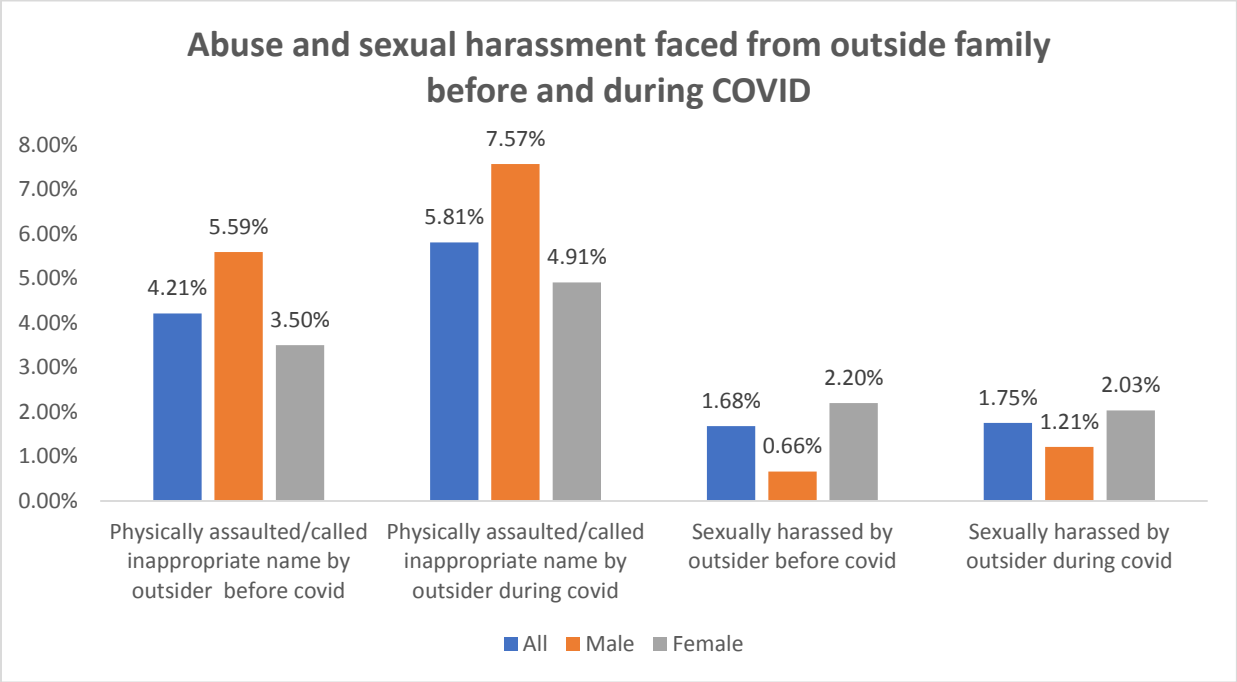



**Figure 6.7.2:** Abuse and sexual harassment (outsider) faced by adolescents before and during COVID-19 (N=3139)

Rates of physical assault/name-calling and sexual harassment by outsiders are higher than those of from the family. In the survey, 5.81% of respondents reported being physically assaulted/called names and receiving inappropriate remarks by outsiders during COVID-19, while 4.21% reported this before COVID-19. In both cases, males have been relatively more subjected to physical /verbal abuse by outsiders than females. This may be due to males having more freedom of movement than females, especially during the lockdown period. Male adolescents are also more likely to be involved in gang violence. When we look at the respondents who faced sexual harassment by outsiders both during and before COVID-19, we see no significant change the before or during the COVID-19 period. This may be because adolescents, in general, may not report abuse, especially sexual harassment. Moreover, 1.68% and 1.75% of respondents reported being sexually harassed by outsiders before and during COVID-19, respectively. The figures are higher for females compared to males in both periods. When asked if these can be considered criminal offences, 21.80% responded yes. A higher

percentage of females consider these acts to be offences —24.82% compared to 17.22% for males.

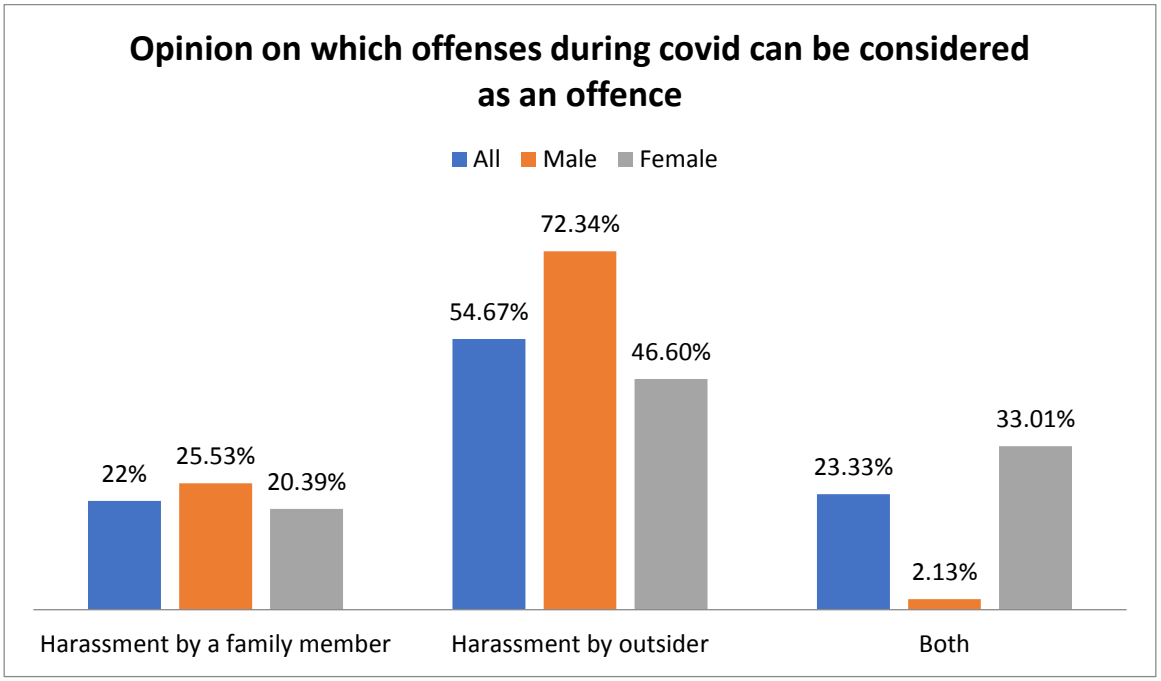



**Figure 6.7.3:** Opinion on which acts during COVID-19 can be considered as an offence segregated by sex (N=3139)

An essential element of access to justice is the demand side knowledge about injustice in the first place. With this in mind, the respondents were additionally asked which of these acts (harassment by a family member, harassment by outsiders, or both) could be considered as *onnai ba oporadh* (offence or crime). A higher percentage of females consider both harassments by a family member or outsider to be crimes at 33.01% compared to 2.13% for males.

The parents in the various FGDs repeatedly brought out their concerns about the safety and security of their daughters who were not going to school regularly as before. However, the fear was not only of violence or harassment of young girls being home or out and about since school was closed but of the young boys and girls having relationships which would lead to people talking about them and their families as being shameless.

> *"Why are you afraid of keeping girls unmarried?*
>
> *Why are we afraid? The times are bad. People have mobiles. Boys are bad nowadays. Let's say they elope. This will create a scandal. We marry them off because of that fear. This will dishonor the parents. Adolescents follow bad examples."*
>
> —FGD Narail parents

Parents talked about the “fear of losing honour,” leading to child marriage. By marrying their daughters off they “got relief from losing honour.” They explained that the girls “may have affair, she might elope with a boy, then how will you feel. When they live with their husband, the husband must ensure their safety” (FGD Gaibandha, parents)

## 6.8. Other vulnerabilities and risks

### 6.8.1. Drugs, trafficking, stealing, etc.

In all the areas both the adolescents and the parents were reluctant to admit that adolescents might be involved in criminal, unethical, or any activities in conflict with the law. They generally mentioned that it happened in other neighbouring villages or areas. A 15-year-old married girl from Cumilla even stated that the people in her area were too poor to have addictions:

> *“This does not happen in our area. Boys don’t smoke. Poor people can’t afford this. The boys are not involved in these things (i.e. drugs)”.*

Older boys, especially those out of school, were thought to smoke cigarettes and take drugs using the money they would earn. Drug use was seen as mainly restricted to boys, especially older boys. A school-going girl of 15 in Gaibandha felt that during school closures, boys went out for work to help their families financially, earned a little money, and spent it all on cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol. She felt that overall drug/alcohol abuse has increased during COVID-19.

Common patterns in all three study districts regarding children who come in conflict with the law in illegal drug-related cases are basically “carriers” of these drugs who are arrested while carrying the drugs and presumably, they have been used by the top drug dealers. As the Children Act provides for more humane and rights-based treatment of children, this is sometimes abused by people who are behind “using” the children in criminal activities, especially in illegal drug-related crimes; they are aware that children will be treated more leniently. Therefore, often they choose children instead of adults in the drug business, in a hope that children will get bail sooner and will be awarded less/alternative punishment under the provisions of the Act.

The Narail District Judge of NSNDA Tribunal and Shishu Adalat mentioned that the trade-in of drugs was a very big problem in Narail. Drug trades would use young children to transport drugs and pay them for small amounts. They would also use vulnerable women, such as widows who were financially worse off, to smuggle the drugs. It is the carriers who get caught but the people running the business do not get caught.

It was mentioned by the Cumilla DSS Probation Officer that crimes related to drugs and trafficking on the border of the area of Daudkandi, Choddogram, Shahpur, and Brahmonpara have increased in the COVID-19 era. The Narail DSS Probation also felt that drug trading had increased a lot. Adolescents being out of school increased the use of drugs. He felt that boys were more involved than girls in carrying it and girls were more involved than boys in selling it.

However, the UP member of Perul Union, Lalmai Upazila, Cumilla felt that the problem of drugs had been reduced compared to before. He attributed this to the fact that his area was the constituency of the Finance Minister who was very active in ensuring drugs would be controlled. The OC of the area is also very active in controlling the drug trade.

Hijackings were mentioned in the FGD with two incidents of hijacking of young boys/men for money—BDT 3,000/7,000. One of the female participants from Gaibandha narrated how her younger son was harassed at the marketplace:

> *"He went to buy a t-shirt. One girl came to him and took him to a corner. Others held him and called at our house asking for money. My younger daughter was crying and requested them to release her brother. Finally, we had to give him BDT 1,000 to release my son."*

Parents felt that COVID-19, the lockdown, and school closure have resulted in increased crime, drugs, and getting into trouble. The young boys were idle, could spend time with "bad boys," and went from smoking to drugs. This would not have happened if they were busy with school or studying.

A 15-year-old school-going boy from Cumilla mentioned that boys smoke, take drugs, steal, and boys of his area and neighbouring area get into fights. Another boy in Cumilla mentioned that his friends got into more conflicts during COVID-19 with other groups of kids around their age. On the other hand, a 14-year-old out-of-school boy stated that rivalry and conflicts with other groups of children decreased during COVID-19 as they had fewer encounters because of the COVID-19 restrictions.

The key informants mentioned that it was mainly the young boys who were involved in criminal activities, the most common being petty theft.

The KIIs in Cumilla had mentioned gang violence among boys and it was mentioned by several of the boys there. The Narail District Judge of the NSNDA Tribunal and Shishu Adalat mentioned the prevalence of gang violence among adolescent boys. He said,

Everywhere you will find the same situation. Youth gangs meaning groups of young boys who carry out crimes together. They are involved in all types of crimes from murders to all sorts of offences.

Increased police presence during COVID-19 having a deterrent effect was mentioned in Cumilla as well as Narail. A 17-year-old working boy from Cumilla mentioned that taking/trading in drugs, stealing, and fighting among youth went down in that area during the lockdown as police used to patrol that area at that time. In Narail it was also mentioned that risky behaviour by boys reduced since increased police presence during the lockdown when boys used to hang out less together. Another means of making sure that young boys do not get into trouble mentioned in Cumilla was that Union Parishad (UP) members keep an eye out on the boys. This was also mentioned by the UP member interviewed as well.

> *"We try and be strict with our children. Make sure they come home before evening. If we can't manage to discipline our boys then we call the commissioner."*
>
> —FGD Cumilla parents

The Narail District Judge of the NSNDA Tribunal and Shishu Adalat mentioned that the three neighbouring districts of Jessore, Satkhira, and Narail all were prone to trafficking. Kalia and Mohanlal Upazila of Narail are areas where human trafficking is common, and many victims of the crime are adolescent girls. The Narail District Judge of the NSNDA Tribunal and Shishu Adalat mentioned that he had many cases related to the trafficking of women and children in his court. He also felt that the number of such cases had gone up during COVID-19. The Narail Probation Officer and district judge explained that with the long-term closure of schools and increasing poverty among certain families, they were tempted to send their daughters to work. The traffickers tempted them saying that there were various employment opportunities in India or Dhaka and they would end up in brothels.

Adolescent survey respondents were asked their opinion on whether human/adolescent trafficking has increased after COVID19: 41.17% thought that the frequency of trafficking had remained the same, with higher figures reported for females. Among the 31% that consider a decrease, males report at 42% compared to 25.34% for females. Moreover, 15.69% consider that these cases have increased somewhat, whereas 17.72% of females share this view with 11.73% of males. Furthermore, 12.15% think that these cases have increased a lot with no significant differences in responses by sex.

### 6.8.2. Vulnerabilities at the workplace

The respondents who were involved in income-generating activities were asked about other vulnerabilities they might face in their workplace. The responses have been categorized as to whether it has never happened or happened at least once. Respondents who were at least shouted at once report higher figures in the periods April–May 2020 and June–March 2020, at 10.85% and 12.26%, respectively. This drops to 7.08% in the last month, which is similar to 7.55% during the pre-lockdown period January–March 2020. A similar trend is observed for being insulted in the workplace. It starts at 5.19% which gradually increases to 6.6% and peaks at 7.08% in the period June 2020–March 2021. The figures for being physically assaulted or sexually harassed in the workplace are generally all below 3% for each of the periods shown above. This is consistent with the fact that adolescents usually are hesitant to report sexual harassment.

Regarding exposure to risky environments, there is a sharp increase from 8.96% to 16.98% in the first lockdown. This increases to 18.4% before dropping to 10.38% during the last month. Similar observations are made for suffering from an injury because of work. The figures for suffering from an injury at least once increases sharply in the successive periods April–May 2020 and June 2020–March 2021, with 16.51% of respondents reporting being injured at least once in the latter period.

**Table 6.8.1:** Number of adolescents facing risks and other vulnerabilities in the workplace

| | Jan–Mar 2020 | Apr-May 2020 | Jun 2020–Mar 2021 | Last month |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Happened at least once** | **Number of adolescents** | | | |
| Shouted at | 16 | 23 | 26 | 15 |
| Insulted | 11 | 14 | 15 | 11 |
| Physically assaulted | 6 | 6 | 5 | 3 |
| Sexually harassed | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| Exposed to risky work environments | 19 | 26 | 39 | 22 |
| Suffered from injury due to work | 16 | 32 | 35 | 21 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | 212 | | | |

## 6.9. Access to justice and other services

This section discusses the knowledge of institutional services available for adolescents focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic. The support system during COVID-19, awareness of regulations, and adolescents' knowledge and experiences of access to services have been shown in the survey results, and adolescents' perspectives of their conflict with the law and the key informants' perspectives of the impact of COVID-19 on adolescent in conflict with the law have been explored in the interviews. We have interviewed judges of the Shishu Adalat, probation officers of the Department of Social Services, and police officers of Nari, Shishu, Protibondi, and *Boyoshko Help Desk* of all three districts. We have also interviewed the district education officer and a Union Parishad (UP) chairman of Gaibandha, one UP member of Cumilla, two school teachers, and one UP member of Narail as key informants.

### 6.9.1. Awareness of regulations and the impact of their breach

This subsection will briefly review adolescents' knowledge and awareness of laws and policies about the age of marriage and child labour. Adolescents seem to have better knowledge of female legal age than males. While 40% of adolescents said male legal age for marriage is 21, almost 60% of adolescents said that the legal age for marriage is higher or lower than 21 for males. Almost 85% of adolescents said that the female legal age for marriage is 18.

**Table 6.9.1:** Adolescents' knowledge of legal age for marriage (Response segregated by sex)

| **Male adolescents' perception of the legal age of marriage for males** | | **Female adolescents' perception of the legal age of marriage for males** |
|---|---|---|
| Below 21 | 22.9 | 17.04 |
| 21 | 28.27 | 47.1 |
| Above 21 | 48.82 | 35.84 |

| Male adolescents' perception of the legal age of marriage for females | | Female adolescents' perception of the legal age of marriage for females |
|---|---|---|
| Below 18 | 6.85 | 3.41 |
| 18 | 77.33 | 88.93 |
| Above 18 | 15.8 | 7.65 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | 2684 | |

Female adolescents have better knowledge of the legal marriage age of both sex compared to their male counterparts. While 28% and 77% of male adolescents know the legal marriage age for males and females respectively, 47% and 88% of female adolescents know the legal marriage age for males and females.

Adolescents seem to have good knowledge of the impact of child marriage. While 71.7% of adolescents said that early pregnancy and child delivery is caused by child marriage, 23.3% of them said they do not know or it is not caused by child marriage. Regarding premature birth of babies, 64.62% of adolescents said that it is caused by child marriage, while others said that it is not caused by child marriage or they do not know.

**Table 6.9.2:** Adolescents' knowledge regarding health risks of child marriage, segregated by sex

| **Cause of premature birth of baby** | | | **Early pregnancy and child delivery problems** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Do not know | 27.4 | 12.81 | 28.64 | 16.99 |
| Not because of child marriage | 11.08 | 10.23 | 12.83 | 15.25 |
| Because of child marriage | 61.52 | 76.96 | 58.53 | 67.76 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | **2684** | | | |

Similar to the legal age of marriage, female adolescents have better **knowledge of the impact of child marriage.** In the survey, 61.52% of male adolescents said that premature childbirth is caused by child marriage, while the rate is 76.96% for female adolescents. In the case of early pregnancy and child delivery problems, 58.53% of male adolescents said that it is caused by child marriage and 67.76% of females said that it is caused by child marriage.

Very few adolescents know about the **legal working age.** While 4.75% of adolescents said that the legal working age for males is 15 in Bangladesh, 6.19% said that it is 15 for females. Meanwhile, 93.14% and 89.42% of adolescents said that the legal working age for males and females, respectively, is more than 15, which is incorrect.

Adolescents have considerable knowledge of the **impact of child labour**. At least 71% of adolescents said that frequent accidents, injuries, and illnesses are caused by child labour, 68%

of adolescents said that they felt depressed due to child labour, while 60% of adolescents said that sexual harassment is caused by child labour. On the other hand, 16% of adolescents do not know whether sexual harassment is caused by child labour, while almost 23% of them think that it is not caused by child labour.

**Table 6.9.3:** Knowledge regarding the impact of child labour by age group (percentage of responses)

| | Hurt frequently | | Getting sick frequently | | Feeling frustrated | | Sexual harassment | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 12–14 | 15 | 12–14 | 15 | 12–14 | 15 | 12–14 | 15 |
| **Do not know** | 14.63 | 8.88 | 14.63 | 8.38 | 16.98 | 10.89 | 19.4 | 12.06 |
| **Due to being a child** | 66.58 | 77.81 | 66.38 | 77.72 | 65.1 | 74.12 | 56.24 | 67.67 |
| **Not due to child labour** | 18.79 | 13.32 | 18.99 | 13.9 | 17.92 | 14.99 | 24.36 | 20.27 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | **2684** | | | | | | | |

Older adolescents hold more knowledge regarding the impact of child labour. More than 70% of adolescents above 15 years old said that getting hurt, ill, and feeling frustrated are caused by child labour. In the case of sexual harassment, the rate went down, but it is still higher for those above 15 years old compared to adolescents aged 12–14 years.

**Table 6.9.4:** Knowledge regarding the impact of child labour by sex (percentage of responses)

| | Hurt frequently | | Getting sick frequently | | Feeling hopeless | | Sexual harassment | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| **Do not know** | 17.21 | 9.42 | 17.21 | 9.09 | 21.05 | 10.78 | 22.37 | 12.92 |
| **Due to being a child** | 71.49 | 71.61 | 71.82 | 71.22 | 65.57 | 70.94 | 59.76 | 62.13 |
| **Not due to child labour** | 11.29 | 18.96 | 10.96 | 19.7 | 13.38 | 18.28 | 17.87 | 24.94 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | | | | | | | **2684** | |

There is no significant difference between males and females in terms of their response to the cause of frequently getting sick and hurt. However, in terms of feeling frustrated and sexual harassment, a higher rate of female adolescents indicated these as the cause of child labour

compared to male adolescents. While 59.76% of male adolescents said that sexual harassment is caused by child labour, the rate is 62.13% for female adolescents.

## 6.9.2. Adolescents' knowledge and experiences of access to services

Adolescents usually know about local government and certain government services, although their experiences of accessing these are limited. They are aware of relief provided by government agencies during the COVID-19 period, although not all had received it. They are aware of the possibility of going to the UP chairman and members as well as local *matabbars* or school teachers for conflict resolution or to report violence, crime, drugs, child marriage, or such problems. They would prefer to first go to their community leaders and then only to the elected representatives. They also know about the possibility of going to the police or courts if necessary but feel that they will not be given any importance by these agencies. It was also encouraging to know that many of the adolescents know about the various government helpline numbers and had learned about it in school through textbooks or through the efforts of various government officials (visits by the police and other officials) who had come to talk to them. This might be about early marriage or drugs. In general, older adolescents seemed to have more knowledge about available helplines.

### *6.9.2.1. Local Administration*

Some of the adolescents have family experience of approaching the local administration, such as the Thana Nirbahi Officer (TNO), for help or services. A 14-year-old boy from Cumilla who is a school dropout mentioned that he personally never went to any intuitions for help but his grandfather went to the TNO of that area for help during the COVID-19 lockdown. He felt that most of the people with problems go to the TNO of that area. Violence, social problems, or illegal activities are dealt with by the TNO, so people usually go to him mostly.

Other adolescents were more critical of government services. A working male adolescent of 17 from Cumilla did not know of any government officials in that area that helped adolescence and felt that government officials do not help them much. However, he felt that the police and government officials take action when someone reports illegal activities.

### *6.9.2.2. Accessing local government representatives/matbars or baro bhai*

Although most adolescents mentioned that it was expected that people would approach their local leaders, matbars, and baro bhai in the case of conflicts, crime, or violence, they were also critical of what kind of response or service they would get. A 15-year-old working girl in Cumilla said that there is no point in going to the commissioner because those who are involved in crime are the ones who hang around with the commissioner. Another 13-year-old school-going girl in Gaibandha was also skeptical of what help she would get from the UP. She knew that for illegal activities one can go to the local chairman or the police but they will not be able to catch the

thief or perpetrator. She would not seek help from them because they are not capable of catching the perpetrators.

Moreover, a 17-year-old girl in Cumilla mentioned that village elders would be resentful if people were to call the police directly. This was elaborated by another 16-year-old female dropout who explained that if they have any problems or are in need they would go to the Chairman for help. They would not go to the police or anyone for legal help. Because if they go elsewhere the Chairman will ask them why they did not go to him and refuse to help them in the future. This creates pressure on them. That is why they do not go to the administration or police. However, the girl mentioned that she would not be able to go to the counselor herself but her parents would have to go.

Adolescents seem to be familiar with the possibilities of calling *shalishes* (village arbitration council) if they have family problems. A married girl of 18 in Gaibandha mentioned that if she even has family problems then she would first call the village people for a *Gram Shalish* (village arbitration council). If that does not solve the problem then she will contact the UP. She also thinks if the situation is as such that she faces even more violence/problems after complaining to the UP then she will call the helpline.

A 17-year-old married girl in Narail mentioned how to seek help or justice in the case of sexual harassment: they usually contact local guardians, such as "*elakar boro bhai"* (big brother of the area). They would tell off the people who disturb the girls.

#### *6.9.2.3. Knowledge of Helplines*

Knowledge of various hotlines was generally common, with very few adolescents claiming that they did not know any numbers.

A married girl from Gaibandha had personal experience of her sister-in-law using a national helpline for domestic violence (DV). Her sister-in-law was badly beaten by her older brother-in-law. The sister-in-law called a government helpline and the police came in a car and arrested the brother-in-law. He is now in hiding. The sister-in-law was taken to the hospital in a car. "The police come if the situation is very serious [*Marattok hole* (police) *ase*]," she mentioned.

However, there were also cases of a married girl in school in Gaibandha knowing about the helplines and what to do in the case of DV (Domestic Violence) but not being able to call or tell anyone because of the shame that would bring to her family as it will harm the honour and reputation of her parents and also neighbours will defame her. She knows about DV (*Nari o Shishu Nirjaton*) helpline from her textbooks but did not use it fearing repercussions.

Another respondent mentioned seeing national hotline numbers on television but she could not tell which number to call for what kind of service. Most adolescents had seen the numbers printed on the back of their school textbooks. Others had heard talks in school where various officials or visitors had told them about the numbers.

A 15-year-old working girl in Cumilla mentioned that she has the police station's number saved on her father's phone. She came across this number when an officer in charge (OC) came to visit her school to talk to them about child marriage. She tells her parents that if her parents try to marry her off, she would call that number and complain against her parents.

#### *6.9.2.4. Accessing the police*

It would seem more difficult or intimidating for adolescent boys to approach the police than for girls (fear of violence and disbelief). An 18-year-old working boy in Gaibandha did not think he would be able to access the police on his own. If he came across illegal activities, he would think of going to the police but he did not think they would listen to adolescents. If he needs the police, he will ask older people or his older "brothers" to talk to them. He mentioned that elders only listen to them when they have a good reason to support their decision and opinion. His feelings were echoed by another 18-year-old married adolescent in Gaibandha. A male school dropout in Narail mentioned that no adolescent in his area ever reported any crime to the police.

Several adolescents mentioned that they would be afraid of the repercussions if they complained to the police about child marriage or sexual harassment. A 17-year-old male adolescent in school mentioned that he could report to the police if he came to know about child marriage but he also thought it would be a threat for him if the parents of the bride and groom came to know who reported. A respondent in Narail mentioned that the police are called in the case of sexual harassment but would he would be afraid of calling them as the perpetrators might revenge themselves on him. In one of the FGDs in Narail, it was mentioned that people would prefer to solve drug issues by themselves and not involve the police for fear of revenge. People would seem to value community relationships more than the law and there would be a risk of resolving criminal complaints at the community level without recourse to the law.

However, if there is a personal relationship with the police, it is easier to approach them and they will be more helpful. A 17-year-old married girl in Narail mentioned that if the problem of violence or sexual harassment is severe then they will contact the police. Filing a legal complaint to the police station is easy (maybe it is easier for her because of her father's social and economic status) and they can also be contacted over the phone. She has a cousin through whom she can easily make a complaint to the police or ask for justice.

Interestingly, it seemed that having access to a phone or better, having a phone of one's own would facilitate adolescents accessing the police over the phone. A 15-year-old boy in Cumilla, when asked if he would ever complain to anyone about any illegal activities he saw, he said that he would not. He implied that someone else's stealing is not his business. But he also said that he would have complained if he had his phone.

#### *6.9.2.5. Access to relief and social protection*

There were both positive and negative experiences of accessing relief during COVID-19 and social protection programs. A 15-year-old working girl in Cumilla mentioned that her family did not receive any relief from the government. Her family received food and *iftar* from their neighbours during Ramadan in 2020. Another respondent from a peri-urban area in Cumilla knew about the different helplines. She called the emergency COVID-19 helpline (333) and received government relief. However, a married girl of 17 in rural Gaibandha complained about having to pay bribes to access social protection schemes. In another case, a 15-year-old school-going girl in Gaibandha mentioned that she knew about the government helpline number for COVID-19 relief but could not call because she did not have access to a phone. But she knew that others in the village called the helpline and received relief goods.

#### *6.9.2.6. Steps taken by victims against offenses*

In the survey, 24.15% of respondents reported facing some kind of abuse. Of them, 60 adolescents had taken certain steps, either before or after COVID-19. Most adolescents used to consult their families and elders, a pattern that is common before and during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

**Table 6.9.5:** Steps taken by victims against offences before COVID-19 (multiple responses allowed)

| | All | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|---|
| Informed family members | 47 | 13 | 34 |
| Informed friends | 7 | 0 | 7 |
| Informed elders | 8 | 4 | 4 |
| Requested help from law enforcement | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Lodged a case to the district court | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Requested help from Union Parishad/village court | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Informed UNO | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Number of observations (N)** | 50 | | |

Table 6.9.5 lists the steps taken by victims for offences they faced before COVID-19. As was the case during COVID-19, the top choice was informing family members, where a higher percentage of females reported to their family members compared to their male counterparts. This is followed by informing friends, a choice not favoured by males at 5% compared to 42.5% for females. Regarding informing elders, males have a higher value at 40% compared to 5% for females. For the other choices, very low reports are observed, which was also the case during COVID-19.

Of those who took some kind of action, most of them only consulted with their family. At least 72% of adolescents only consulted with their families to deal with any violence they faced; 9.3% of them consulted with family and friends, while 6.98% consulted with family, friends, and respected elders of their living area. Moreover, 2.33% of adolescents consulted family, a

respected elder person of the area, and the village court, and 4.65% of them only consulted with respected elders of that area. Only 2.33% of adolescents consulted respected elders and the village court. None of the adolescents took/got any help from any NGOs.

#### *6.9.2.6. Opinion on the likelihood of proper justice*

Respondents were asked about their opinion on how the possibility of getting justice for these offences has changed during COVID-19 compared to before the pandemic. The majority consider that the possibility has remained the same, with 90.35% of females opting for this answer compared to 59.76% of males. Among the 13.75% that think the possibility has decreased, 27.96% of males consider this in contrast to 6.43% of females. Only 6.30% think the possibility has increased, whereas 12.28% of males share this view with 3.22% of females. Figures 6.9.3 and Table 6.9.6 highlight the reasons for those who responded that the possibility has increased or decreased.

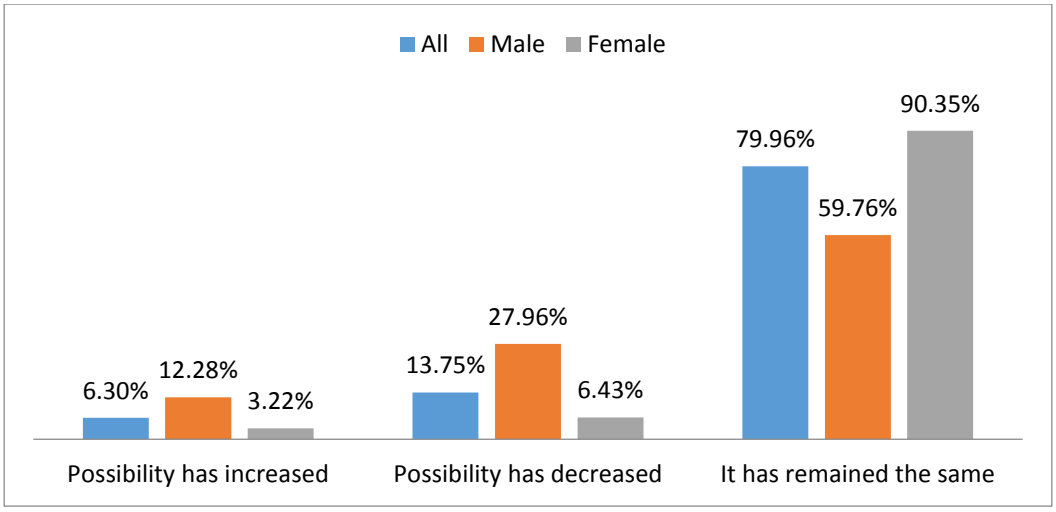



**Figure 6.9.3:** Opinion on the likelihood of proper justice during COVID-19 compared to before COVID-19 (N=2,684)

**Table 6.9.6:** Reasons why the possibility of justice has decreased (N=369)

| | All | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|---|
| It has become harder/more expensive to travel to the justice providing institution | 9.76% | 10.98% | 7.02% |
| The institution is functioning at a reduced capacity | 64.5% | 66.27% | 60.53% |
| The cost of proceedings has increased | 5.69% | 4.71% | 7.89% |
| The justice providing institution is closed | 23.31% | 18.82% | 33.33% |
| My family's financial solvency has decreased | 5.69% | 3.53% | 10.53% |
| My place in the family has changed | 4.34% | 3.92% | 5.26% |
| My place in the society has changed | 6.23% | 7.06% | 4.39% |

**Table 6.9.6:** Reasons why the possibility of justice has increased (N=169)

| | All | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|---|
| The judiciary process has become easier than before due to COVID-19 | 52.66% | 50% | 57.89% |
| The judiciary process has become easier than before naturally | 42.6% | 48.21% | 31.58% |
| The cost of proceedings has decreased | 10.06% | 6.25% | 17.54% |
| My family's financial solvency has increased | 2.96% | 2.68% | 3.51% |
| My place in the family has changed | 5.92% | 3.57% | 10.53% |
| My place in the society has changed | 8.28% | 3.57% | 17.54% |

## 6.9.3. Key informants' perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on adolescent conflict with the law

The key informants felt that the number of adolescents involved in crimes, especially illegal drug-related crimes, had increased in the COVID-19 period. From their experiences, the key informants found that underprivileged and poor adolescents are generally involved or "used" in crimes related to illegal drugs and theft, whereas the adolescents from rich families are involved in the assault, gang culture, and even murder.

All (privileged or underprivileged) children who are under the age of 18 are equally treated at the court. Usually, children who come in conflict with the law get many benefits from the court under the law. There are however issues with the implementation of the law. As pointed out by the district judge, Cumilla, one of the biggest loopholes of the Shishu Ain is that whenever any child and adult are implicated in the same offence, the *Nothi* (record/documentations) of the case splits up. The trial of the adult accused is conducted by the regular court, while the trial of the children accused is conducted by the Shishu Adalat. Since the offence was the same, the investigation officer, witnesses, evidence, and all other relevant materials remain the same. However, everything is repeated in this case. A witness has to give his deposition in two courts on separate dates and usually, both cannot be identical and then contradict prior depositions. Two judges are conducting a trial of the same offence having two separate "mindsets."

### *6.9.3.1. Children Act, 2013*

**Box 6.9.1:** Key Provisions of the Children Act, 2013

| |
|---|
| The Children Act (the Act) is enacted in 2013 and given overriding effect to the other laws for the time being in force. The Act has been effective since 21 August 2013. By repealing the Children Act, of 1974, the present Act has been enacted to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1990. The Act also incorporated some provisions in response to directions of the Supreme Court as well as other international instruments. |

To bring uniformity in the age of the children, Section 4 of the Act defines a child as anyone up to the age of 18 years. However, the minimum age of criminal responsibility is nine years of age, which may be extended up to 12 years of age who have not attained sufficient maturity of understanding to judge the nature and consequences of their conduct on that occasion (Sections 82 and 83 of the Penal Code, 1860).
Sections 5 and 6 of the Act make provisions for probation officers' appointment, responsibilities, and duties about children in greater detail. However, dedicated probation officers are yet to be appointed under this Act and probation officers who have been appointed under the existing Probation of Offenders Ordinance, 1960 continued working as probation officers under the Act.
A child affairs desk has been set up in every police station and a female officer working (if available) in the concerned police station has been assigned with the duties of Child Affairs Police Officer.
A judge in the rank of Additional District and Sessions Judge was the judge of a Shishu Adalat in every district before 2018. By the amendment to the Shishu Ain in 2018 (22 October 2018), the Nari O Shishu Nirjaton Daman Tribunal (presided over by a judge with the rank of district judge) is stated as/acts as Shishu Adalat within its jurisdiction. There are some excellent provisions in the Act in respect of the environment and facilities of the Shishu Adalat which includes decoration of the courtroom in a different manner, presence of limited designated persons, special sitting arrangements, and appearances of lawyers, police, and court staff without their official uniform, interpretation services, and maintaining confidentiality. The Shishu Adalat is empowered to release the child in conflict with the law with or without surety irrespective of if the offence is bailable or non-bailable. The Adalat cannot sentence a child to death or imprisonment for life and while passing an order, the Adalat shall not use the regular legal terms like "offender," "sentenced," and "found guilty" rather it shall use synonymous easy terms as deemed appropriate.
Children in conflict with the law may be diverted from the formal criminal justice system at any time after arrest and during the trial, and are rather assigned to probation officers. Alternative dispute resolution (ADR) in cases of less serious offences is also provided. If a child is found guilty of an offence punishable with death or imprisonment for life, the Adalat may sentence the child to detention for a term ranging from three to ten years. If a child is found guilty of an offence not punishable with death or imprisonment for life, they may be ordered to be kept in a CDC for up to three years.
There are procedures of periodic review by the Adalat where the Adalat may review its order and may release the child with or without conditions. Moreover, the government may release a child from detention, for example, following a recommendation from the CDC.

The Children Act, of 2013 has been the biggest step towards careful dealings with the children who either come in contact with the law or come in conflict with the law. The provisions of this Act, in maximum cases, have met the world standard. However, the implementation remains a big challenge, because of infrastructural problems, shortage of human resources, lack of awareness, as well as an uneven commitment of the people involved in the process. As pointed out by the District Judge of Nari o Shishu Domon Ain Tribunal and Shishu Adalat, Cumilla, there is

no separate courtroom for the trial of children. Often the judge would arrange the trial at their *"khas kamra"* (personal chamber).

Some of the respondents raised the issue of considering everyone under 18 as a child as it does not allow for harsher punishments for those who would seem to require harsher punishments. The sub-inspector (SI) of the Women, Child, Elderly, Disabled Desk in the Cumilla Kotwali Model Thana mentioned that those under 18 often commit very serious crimes and are not deterred by the police or court. The District Judge of Gaibandha also felt that there should be scope for giving adolescents above the age of 13 harsher sentences.

The provisions of a dedicated probation officer and their duties exist in the Children Act, 2013. However, no dedicated probation officers have been appointed yet under this Act and probation officers who have been appointed under the existing Probation of Offenders Ordinance, 1960 continued working as probation officers under the Act (see 6.9.1 on key provisions of Shishu Ain/Children Act).

#### *6.9.3.2. Provision for probation*

Under the 2013 Act, it is encouraged that children and adolescents not be sentenced to jail or sent to correction homes. The Shishu Adalat, in appropriate cases, may, instead of directing any child to be detained in a CDC, order them to be discharged after due warning or may order their release on probation under the supervision of a probation officer subject to good conduct. Alternatively, the child may be committed to the care of their parents; a caregiver, lawful guardian, or member of their extended family; or any other competent person. And these persons may be awarded the custody of the child for up to three years on the condition that they shall be responsible for their good behaviour. There is a provision that if the Adalat receives a report from the probation officer or otherwise that the child has not been of good behaviour during the period of probation, the Adalat may order the child to be detained in a Certified Institute for the remaining period of probation.

Upon consideration of their familial, social, cultural, financial, ethnic, psychological, and educational background, diversionary measures may be taken for a child in conflict with the law at any time after their arrest and during any stage of the trial. The Social Welfare Department is mandated to adopt programs for the implementation of diversionary measures.

The rationale behind this diversion is that there is a fear that first-time offenders if sent to jail might be influenced by "hardened criminals" and instead of being reformed, they would be more likely to continue with crimes. Instead of sending them to jail, the court can decide to release the person under the supervision of an authorized person who will follow up on their behaviour over a while to see if they have reformed themselves. Police then generally let the adolescent go after putting them under the care of their parents subject to certain conditions. A "diversion" is made and the child is released under a *muslekha* (bond) or a family *jimma* (custody). "We don't want to send them to correction homes, we would rather send them to their own homes," said a DSS Officer from Gaibandha. While it was agreed by the respondents

that this is a good provision, there are difficulties in implementing it. The adults and adolescents on probation are supposed to be followed up and reported on quarterly by the probation officer from DSS. However, the shortage of human resources and transport makes it difficult for a thorough follow-up to be done. The probation officer interviewed in Gaibandha was the acting probation officer and had other responsibilities such as the Urban Community Development Programme and was also in charge of the DSS office in Sundarganj Upazila. He also has 125 probationers to follow up over seven upazilas. While the law provides for a probation officer in each upazila, he does not seem to have this support.

At present, the Cumilla District Probation Officer was supervising 70 offenders who have been awarded probation as an alternative to the sentence by the court. At one stage in 2020, the number of probation cases reached 141. In Narail, the probation officer had 40 closed probation cases and 34 ongoing ones.

The child does not seem to have access to counselling, either before being put on probation or during. If they are sent back to their family and the family is the source of the problem or unable to guide them, there is a chance that they might become a repeat offender. While the DSS officer in Gaibandha mentioned that the *Jimminama* (custody bonds) has his name and the children could contact him if they wanted to, there did not seem to be a system of giving out the probation officer's number as a contact person.

#### *6.9.3.3. Elopements and rape*

The District Judge of the NSNDA Tribunal and the Shishu Adalat of Gaibandha commented on the prevalence of false cases and felt that cases of rape, violence against women (VAW), and elopement were more prevalent than in other places. People and lawyers file unnecessary cases and use/abuse their children and adolescents to take revenge on others by falsely accusing them of abuse of adolescents. The respondent emphasized the difficulties of proving rape cases. When interviewed in mid-October 2021, he mentioned that he had only two convictions for rape out of the 90 cases he had dealt with in the last four to five months. The rest of the cases were dismissed for lack of evidence, lack of witnesses, and contradictory evidence and testimonies. Either way (false cases using children or lack of conviction in the cases where rape has occurred), this is a matter of serious concern in terms of psychological, physical, and or sexual abuse of children and adolescents.

**Box 6.9.2:** Difficulties of convicting rape cases

| |
|---|
| In cases of rape against children, he gave the example of the case being brought after a delay—they had perhaps tried for a settlement first. A nine-year-old was raped by a 30-year-old man. However, the evidence after a month and a half were inconclusive. The medical report mentioned that there were signs of force-ruptured hymen and faint bruising. The evidence given by the alleged perpetrator showed that she had been to school that day, had played with her friends after the incident was supposed to have occurred, etc. The judge felt that there should have been more mental distress if she had been raped, and so she should |

not have been able to go to school. The perpetrator's lawyer argued that the rupture could have been due to sports.
This example given by the District Judge of the NSNDA Tribunal and the Shishu Adalat of Gaibandha raises some questions. Without a psychologist examining the child, we cannot say how she might have handled the shock of rape. She might have been in denial and had a delayed reaction. There could be many reasons that she was able to go to school even after the rape occurred. Should the judge have used other evidence? Or did he do the best with the evidence he had? Can such cases be reviewed?

The District Judge of the NSNDA Tribunal and the Shishu Adalat of Gaibandha also felt that the closure of schools for COVID-19 had resulted in a larger number of elopements by underage girls and boys. Although the relationship was consensual, as the parties were underage, if the parents did not accept the relationship or the marriage, they would file a case with the police and accuse the boy of kidnapping. This is criminalizing an underage boy.

The DSS Probation Officer in Narail gave the example of child marriage through elopement where the parents did not agree to the marriage and charged the boy with abduction. His presentation brings out the assumption that the girl lacked agency and was misled by the boy into marrying him and leaving with him.

> *"In most cases, we see that the girl is underage. The boy or man is held responsible and is accused of kidnapping by the girl's family. This becomes a legal case. Then it is no longer in our hands. In most cases, the marriage has taken place and a case is ongoing. No girl's family is going to give up easily. At that age, girls are crazy about love. Then the court asks the girl. The boy/man is then accused. He has seduced the girl. He is now accused. If his age is less than 18 he will be put into a youth rehabilitation centre. If he is older he will be in jail. The girl will be told to go back to her parents and stay with them till she is 18. Most girls then refuse to go back to their parents. They want to go back to the safe home".*
>
> —DSS Probation Officer in Narail

The District Judge of the NSNDA Tribunal and the Shishu Adalat Narail also mentioned that rape, attempt to rape, kidnapping, and sexual harassment were the most common complaints he dealt with for female adolescents; for male adolescents, the cases involved fighting, stabbing, minor theft, and, in exceptional cases, murder.

The police key informants and the DSS probation officers in all three locations raised the prevalence of elopements. The police SI in Gaibandha mentioned that they were able to trace the teenagers who would run away anywhere in the country using the police network and could bring them back home. They would be kept in the *Nari Shishu Protibondhi Special Cell* (apart from other prisoners and with a guard so that they would not harm themselves) before being returned to their parents with the undertaking that they would not run away again. They would be given counselling by the probation officer that they should wait to come of age before getting

married. The district education officer in Gaibandha also mentioned that such elopements where the adolescents got married on their own generally did not last as the parents did not accept the marriage.

#### *6.9.3.4. Manipulation of age*

An issue that arose in a number of the KIIs was the manipulation of the age of adolescents: increasing it to "legalize" child marriage and reducing the age to reduce the punishment. The certificates produced by the UP chairman are unreliable. The date of birth and age are inconsistent. The court might be confronted with various documents of different ages (e.g., school certificates, marriage certificates, etc.) (mentioned by the district judge, Gaibandha). The judges and probation officers interviewed mentioned the tendency of using reduced age for the accused to avoid harsher punishment. If the age is shown less than 18 years, then they are more likely to be discharged on bail more quickly and be released under parental custody. Lawyers and guardians also want to reduce the age of the victim, as sexual intercourse (even if consensual) with an under 16 girl is rape in the eye of the law. If the victim can be shown a reduced age of 16 or less, there is a higher chance of detaining the accused for a longer period.

#### *6.9.3.5. Nari, shishu, protibondi, boyoshko desk at police stations*

This kind of specialized desk has been set up all over the country. Each police station is supposed to have one. There should be a female SI or at least an ASI heading it and another ASI or constable assigned for it. They have two rooms—one where the officer sits and another room with beds where victims can rest and recover and can also be provided with a secure place for one or two nights. Victims and their families can come directly to the desk, they can go to the OC or they can call the various help numbers and be referred to the thana and the desk. The people at the desk listening to the complaints. Depending on the seriousness of the complaint, the police will file a case. The investigation of cases is done by various police officers/constables, not necessarily those assigned to the desk. The persons assigned to the desk have to deal with the children in conflict with the law—they have to accompany them to the court or other offices. They have to keep them separately in the victim's room. The police stations have an assigned Children's Affairs Police Officer (CAPO).

Various respondents (DSS Probation Officer, Gaibandha, and District Judge, Gaibandha) mentioned that the 2013 Act has increased the accountability of the police. They cannot do whatever they want. They have to inform the probation officer. The police are now also more active and "don't want the children to be in trouble."

The probation officer of Narail also mentioned that the "culture" of the police was changing and they would no longer take action against underage offenders (beat or torture them?) but inform the DSS probation officer. The possibility of police violence on adolescents is recognized by DSS Probations Officers, and one of the reasons to involve them is to prevent this violence.

> *"You know what it is like in the police stations. They are a bit too aggressive. They might even beat up children. And you know their*

*background is a problem. That is why social Welfare is involved with them. We have been involved to look after the children so that they do not face any abuse or any such thing".*

Under Section 47 of the Children's Act, the police can release a child on bail from the police station itself.

#### *6.9.3.6. Government programs for adolescents*

The Department of Social Services has various types of programs for the children who come in contact or are in conflict with laws. However, DSS cannot enroll the children directly, unless they have been referred by the court or the police. The Cumilla Probation Officer mentioned that he had dealt with cases in which the children re-engaged themselves with the crime once enlarged on bail or otherwise taken benefits of the Shishu Ain. Children who come in conflict with the law are usually referred to DSS by the court, but in some cases, the police directly refer child victims to DSS. Upon receiving the children, DSS follows the court orders and submits reports periodically or it takes care of the children by choosing the appropriate care program.

DSS has a scheme for a Shuborno Nagorik Card for disabled children. Cardholders receive a monthly allowance, education allowance, benefits at admission to government schools, quota in the service, discount on a government transport, and other benefits.

The UP chairman in Bhorotkhali Union, Saghata Upazila, Gaibandha mentioned that a long-term program called Samriddhi implemented by PKSF was in operation. In his area, 198 adolescents are active members of ward committees and the majority of them are girls. Program activities include outdoor health care services, raising awareness about child marriage, menstrual hygiene, eve-teasing, and center-based education program for poor school-aged children, and vocational training.

There are three homes/Shishu Unnayan Kendro, one in Pulur Haat, Jessore, and two in Tongi. There are also non-government centres in other parts of the country. There are safe homes for girls in Bagerhat and Rajshahi, and a Kishori Unnayan Kendro in Gazipur.

There are provisions for the alternative care of differently-able children left by poor families. DSS would place them to care centres of Ahsania Mission, Mother Teressa, and Sajida Foundation.

#### *6.9.3.7. Access to Courts*

In response to COVID-19, the promulgation of the "Use of Information and Communication Technology in Court Ordinance, 2020" has been helpful. Under this, the court system has started working virtually, opening a new dimension in the administration of justice and bringing huge success. One of the main functions of virtual courts has been to dispose of the applications for bail. Granting bail to the children who come in conflict with the law was one of the top priorities. However, as was mentioned by the District Judge, Gaibandha, while they did carry out virtual proceedings, these were difficult as lawyers are not used to this. The judges and lawyers did not have access to records and they had to use their phones. The Narial District Judge of Nari Shishu

Special Tribunal and Shishu Court and DSS probation officer in Narail also mentioned that court proceedings were hampered during COVID-19.

Although the virtual court proceedings did ensure that children in conflict with the law were given bail during the Corona period, the access to courts and justice was reduced. Courts cannot reach adolescents unless they or with help of others contact for legal services either through the police or directly to the court. Government has a legal aid program run under the Legal Aid Services Act, 2000. Legal advice, mediation, and legal representation before the court are free services available under the government legal aid program, and children are automatically eligible to receive these services. Legal aid committees are also available at the union and upazila level, involving the chairman as head of the committee. However, due to a lack of awareness among the citizens, children needing legal aid do not often approach DLAC. An NLASO report shows that from 2009 to October 2021, a total of 300228 persons have received legal aid from DLACs, among them 1265 are children. In 2021 (till October) total of 46 children have taken legal advice from district legal aid offices. Moreover, from 2018 to October 2021, a total of 1536 children have received services through the national call centre.

As seen in the responses of the adolescents in section 6.9.2 and also shown in the Justice Audit carried out by the Rule of Law program, people are more comfortable approaching locally influential people and local government representatives to mediate conflicts, including legal or criminal issues related to adolescents, which should not be addressed outside court. This also creates a barrier to access to legal institutions. As pointed out by the District Judge, Gaibandha, it also means that poor people are having to pay large amounts of money to access justice: they would first go to the *chowkidar* (watchman), then the UP member, then the UP chairman, then the OC, and finally the court. At each stage, they would have to pay money.

Lawyers can only file cases directly to the Nari o Shishu Court if the police do not take the case. However, this provision may also be abused. The District Judge, Gaibandha complained that he was getting so many of these applications that he started checking whether the police had refused to take those cases. He found that many of these claims were false. Better off people can go directly to the SP or the court, in which case, they spend less money.

Another abuse of the system is the filing of unnecessary cases: the District Judge, Gaibandha felt that NGOs are responsible for people filing unnecessary cases. "*Manush ke court kacharite anse* (brought people to court)," he said. "Wives are filing cases against their husbands."

In the three districts, the judges and the DSS officers mentioned the district legal aid office and the possibility of government support for those too poor to afford legal aid and services. However, it was acknowledged that knowledge about the availability of government legal aid services is limited, and he mentioned a lack of awareness and a lack of publicity as the causes for this.

#### *6.9.3.7. Access to local government*

The UP chairman in Bhorotkhali Union, Saghata Union, Gainbandha mentioned that domestic violence, child marriage, and eve-teasing-related issues are usually solved by the UP representatives and local leaders. Adolescents are not used to reporting their problems officially and they also do not know where to report such problems. He felt that elders usually listen to adolescents' problems if they are reasonable enough. The UP member in Narail (Joypur Union, Lohagora Upazila) also highlighted his role in ensuring justice for the inhabitants of his ward. He would be able to sort out problems and conflicts in his area. If he could not then he would approach the chairman of the UP. If the UP chairman could not solve the problem then they would approach the local *matbars* (leaders). If that also did not work, they would take the problem to the police or the courts. He explained,

The UP member in Narail (Joypur Union, Lohagora Upazila) also mentioned that they had a role in "keeping an eye" on the young men of the area to ensure they were behaving and not getting into trouble, not having *gaja* (weed)*,* alcohol or *phensedyl* (popularly abused drug). And not going "out of line". The UP Law and Order Committee meetings would also have a role to play in ensuring local security and that there was no drug abuse or trafficking. They have regular meetings to create awareness about the use of drugs and gambling.

The UP member in Narail (Joypur Union, Lohagora Upazila) emphasized the role of the UP in distributing relief during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 6.10. Elicited parental perception

In the case of adolescents, parental aspirations play a vital role in shaping their futures and their aspiration is very much relevant to our research. However, questions about aspirations tend to have a social desirability bias where people tend to hide their true responses and state the more socially desirable response. Hence, to elicit their true response, we used a list experiment method in this study. We attempted to elicit their perception and aspiration through 4 statements eliciting 4 aspects of aspiration i.e. Female education, Female employment, Gender Roles, and Child Marriage.

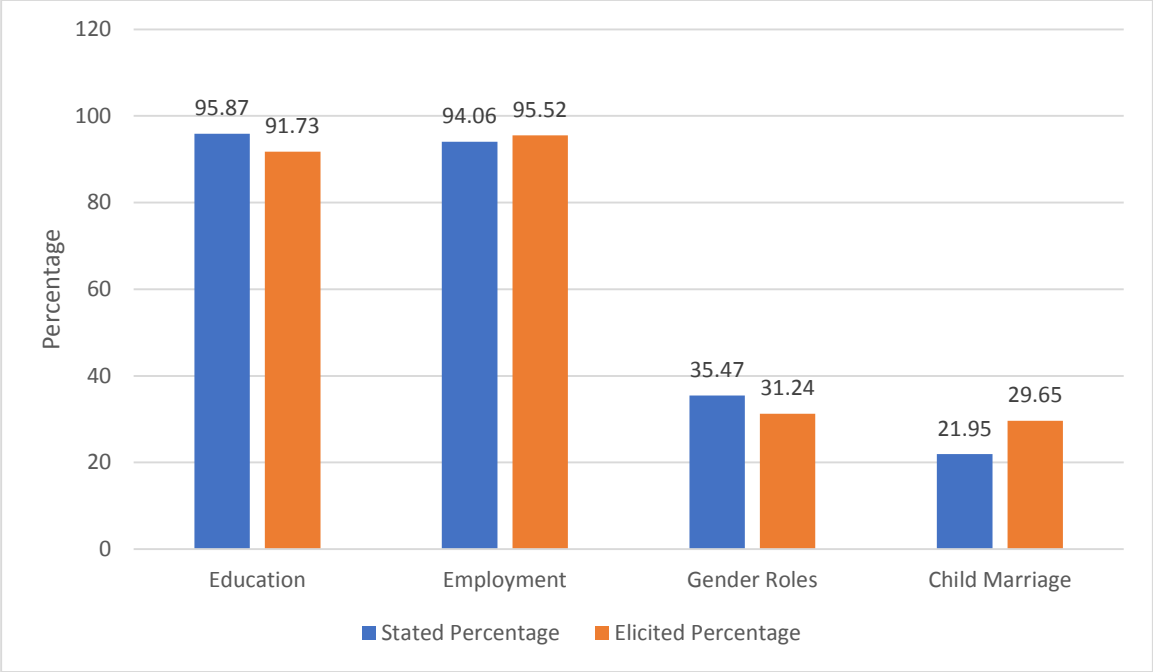



**Figure 6.10.1:** Stated vs elicited responses for statements with potential social desirability bias

The first statement was "লেখাপড়ার প্রয়োজনীয়তা ছেলে এবং মেয়ে উভয়ের ক্ষেত্রে সমান" which translates to "Education is equally important for both girls and boys". The percentage of people agreeing with the stated and elicited responses was close, but still, when elicited, the percentage of parents supporting this statement decreased. This implies that some parents are still skeptical about the importance of female education. Almost 42% of the household heads of this study had education up to primary level, half of which have never been to school. Therefore, parents' education levels may have been an important factor in deciding their aspirations for their children, especially girls.

The second statement was "চাকুরীর প্রয়োজনীয়তা ছেলে এবং মেয়ে উভয়ের ক্ষেত্রে সমান" which translates to "Jobs are equally important for both girls and boys". The percentage of people agreeing with stated and elicited responses were almost the same. Therefore we can confer that parents believe that both their sons and daughters need jobs or need to be financially independent.

The third statement was to know the parents' perception of traditional gender roles. They were asked whether they think that it was usual or fine if the traditional gender roles are challenged. The statement was "একজন পুরুষ সন্তানদের দেখাশোনা করছেন এবং তার স্ত্রী বাইরে চাকুরী করছেন" which translates to "A man looking after his kids and his wife working outside the home". We see from the figure only a small percentage of parents agree with this statement to begin with, but still, when elicited, the percentage of parents supporting this statement decreased. This implies that the societal norms of the country are still not very welcoming to changes in traditional gender roles.

The final statement was "আর্থিক সঙ্কটের মুহূর্তে ভালো প্রস্তাব পেলে, সন্তানকে বাল্য বিবাহ দেয়া যেতে পারে" which translates to "At the time of financial crisis, child marriage is fine if a good enough proposal is received." It is apparent from the figure that when elicited the response to whether child marriage is acceptable changes significantly. This implies that almost 30% of parents still believe that child marriage is justifiable. They believe that financial crisis, a good marriage proposal, or even opportunities for financial gain are justifiable reasons for marrying their children off, especially their daughters.

# 7. Conclusions and recommendations

## 7.1. Conclusion

In conclusion, in terms of the risks and vulnerabilities faced by adolescent girls due to the COVID-19 pandemic, security considerations are more important than poverty for early marriage and withdrawal from school. Perceived reputational risks are an additional significant consideration for girls. Decisions to put boys in work are not only driven by economic considerations but out of security considerations as well with boys more likely to join work, even while studying (even without COVID-19).

Some of the choices made by parents and female adolescents, which lead to greater vulnerability included the choice of early marriage which led to increased risks for reproductive health complications and domestic violence. The decision to migrate for work by underage boys led to going through informal and potentially unsafe channels and the kind of work they were going into was not safe either. COVID-19 also led to increased phone and internet access for adolescents, especially boys, although parents and adolescents, again mainly boys, had very little knowledge of cyberbullying, harassment, or cybercrimes.

Family and friends were the main sources of support with adolescents being fearful and doubtful of sources such as the UP, police, or courts. There was only partial support for economic needs, educational support was lacking as teachers could not maintain contact and the lack of privacy and the fear of being identified were constraints to adolescents complaining to outsiders.

## 7.2. Recommendations

### 7.2.1. Recommendation one: Addressing vulnerabilities to make adolescent lives safe and secure

- Increasing opportunities for education and providing "anti-fragile" equal access through vocational education, use of technology for online alternative classes, enabling continuation by married and working adolescents (inclusiveness).

- Expansion of safe and age-appropriate work opportunities that would counter gender stereotypes and enable greater choices for girls that will be productive and provide life skill training and EIG support for adolescents by NGOs and respective government agencies.
- Preventing early marriage of girls by promoting alternative aspirations and opportunities for young girls and ensuring implementation of existing mechanisms to provide reproductive health education (including issues of the consent) as well as health care for both young girls and boys with due consideration of confidentiality.
- Strengthening the role of school teachers and Child Marriage Prevention Committees in preventing early marriage and encouraging social interactions among genders.
- Recognising the mental health needs of adolescents and increasing the provision of support as envisaged in the Adolescent Health Strategy (face-to-face and online).
- Orientation to be provided to students in secondary schools on risks of online violence and abuse, how to protect oneself, and access to complaints mechanisms.

### 7.2.2. Recommendation two: Strengthening responsive and adolescent-friendly support mechanisms

- Greater dissemination of information about emergency and legal services available on online platforms and expansion of essential, online, and teleservices to overcome adolescent fear of law enforcement agencies.
- Training in child psychology and communications to be provided for all government staff, judges, lawyers, and law enforcement staff involved in juvenile justice.
- Treating every court as Shishu Adalat whenever it deals with the children. For example, if a magistrate deals with children, call it a Shishu Adalat, by amending the law.
- Reform of the CMRA to ensure that in cases of elopement and consensual relationships and marriages the parties are not penalized or criminalized as perpetuating abduction or rape.
- Increase accessibility to complain mechanisms and ensure the privacy of persons complaining (victim privacy protection and informant protection). Increase knowledge about school-level sexual harassment complaints committees and strengthen the role of UP/ward level elected women representatives in hearing and resolving sexual harassment complaints.
- Enable greater access to social protection and relief for adolescents during disasters such as COVID-19 by ensuring transparency about services available in all offices and charges at all levels.

### 7.2.3. Recommendation three: Strengthening governance and ensuring accountability of government mechanisms and personnel

- Holding those with a formal role in child marriage prevention such as Kazis and UP members and Chair and Child Marriage Protection Committees to account, for allowing child marriage

- Holding local government representatives/law enforcement/school authorities to account for ensuring the safety and security of girls and boys and freedom from harassment in public spaces, during a commute, in schools, and at work.

- Strengthening digitalisation of birth, marriage, and death registration nationwide to eliminate manipulation and ensure data is used.

- Data gaps to be addressed: e.g. no data on trafficking, contradictory data on child marriage

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# Appendix

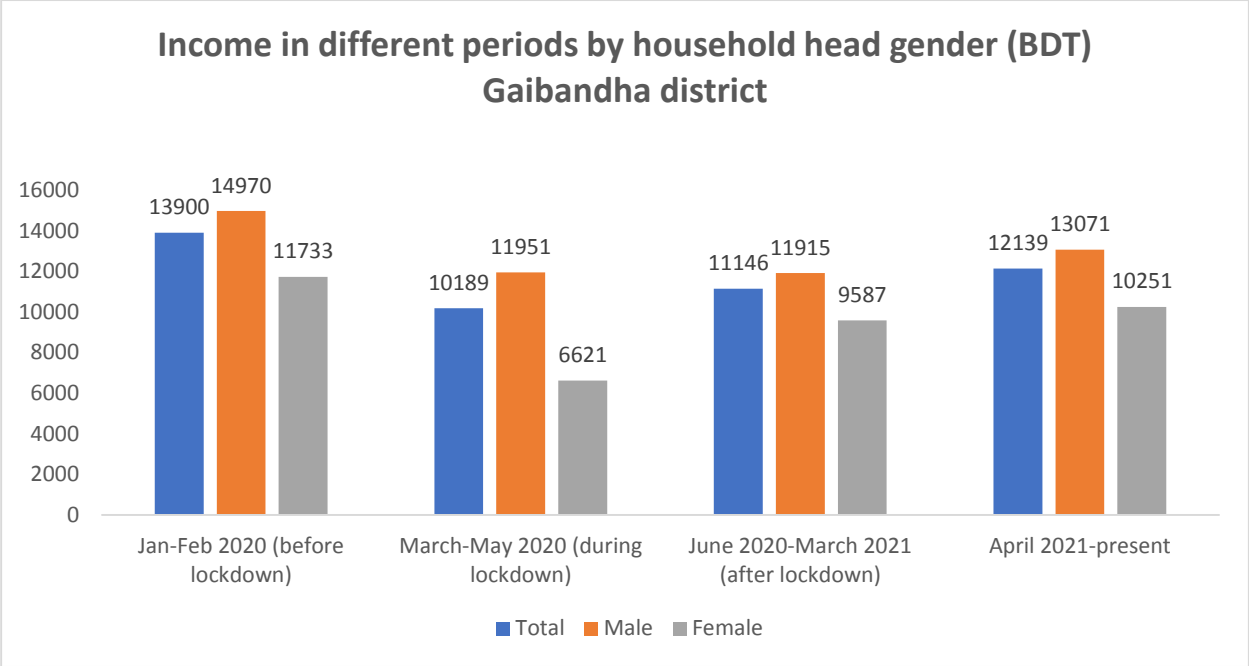


**Figure A1:** Difference in income (BDT) of household heads in different periods segregated by sex of Gaibandha district (N=711)

**Table A.2:** Number of respondents using social media, segregated across usage time, sex, districts, and for different periods (number of respondents)

| | | Cumilla district | | Gaibandha district | | Narail district | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Male** | **Female** | **Male** | **Female** | **Male** | **Female** |
| Jan–Mar 2020 (before lockdown) | Less than or equivalent to 1 hour | 43 | 18 | 35 | 5 | 18 | 14 |
| | Between 1 and 2 hours | 11 | 3 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 2 |
| | Between 2 and 3 hours | 25 | 4 | 7 | 1 | 6 | 2 |
| | More than 3 hours | 19 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 5 | 4 |
| Number of observations (N) | | 204 | | | | | |
| Apr–May 2020 (during lockdown) | Less than or equivalent to 1 hour | 36 | 15 | 41 | 10 | 13 | 10 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Between 1 and 2 hours | 24 | 6 | 7 | 2 | 5 | 5 |
| | Between 2 and 3 hours | 18 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 4 | 0 |
| | More than 3 hours | 29 | 9 | 9 | 1 | 11 | 6 |
| Number of observations (N) | | 245 | | | | | |
| Jun 2020–Mar 2021 | Less than or equivalent to 1 hour | 54 | 22 | 52 | 11 | 19 | 17 |
| | Between 1 and 2 hours | 37 | 7 | 11 | 3 | 11 | 5 |
| | Between 2 and 3 hours | 25 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 5 |
| | More than 3 hours | 30 | 8 | 10 | 4 | 12 | 7 |
| Number of observations (N) | | 327 | | | | | |
| Last month | Less than or equivalent to 1 hour | 34 | 6 | 9 | 6 | 13 | 10 |
| | Between 1 and 2 hours | 30 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 4 |
| | Between 2 and 3 hours | 18 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 4 | 0 |
| | More than 3 hours | 34 | 7 | 10 | 7 | 14 | 7 |
| Number of observations (N) | | 399 | | | | | |

**Table A3:** Sleep deprivation percentage in each period segregated by age (1828)

| **January 2020–March 2020** | **Age** | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **12–14** | **15–18** | **Total** |
| Did not affect at all | 80.52 | 74.88 | 77.95 |
| Affected a little | 12.75 | 15.67 | 14.08 |
| Affected moderately | 2.71 | 5.14 | 3.82 |
| Affected strongly | 3.01 | 2.63 | 2.84 |
| Affected very strongly | 1.00 | 1.67 | 1.31 |
| | | | |

| **April 2020–May 2020** | **Age** | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **12–14** | **15–18** | **Total** |
| Did not affect at all | 78.61 | 72.25 | 75.71 |
| Affected a little | 8.43 | 11.36 | 9.77 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Affected moderately | 4.32 | 7.06 | 5.57 |
| Affected strongly | 5.62 | 5.86 | 5.73 |
| Affected very strongly | 3.01 | 3.47 | 3.22 |
| | | | |

| **June 2020–March 2021** | **Age** | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **12–14** | **15–18** | **Total** |
| Did not affect at all | 79.02 | 71.53 | 75.60 |
| Affected a little | 9.74 | 12.92 | 11.19 |
| Affected moderately | 4.82 | 9.45 | 6.93 |
| Affected strongly | 4.82 | 3.95 | 4.42 |
| Affected very strongly | 1.61 | 2.15 | 1.86 |
| | | | |
| | | | |

| **Last month [September 2021]** | **Age** | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **12–14** | **15–18** | **Total** |
| Did not affect at all | 79.52 | 70.57 | 75.44 |
| Affected a little | 13.05 | 18.78 | 15.67 |
| Affected moderately | 3.41 | 6.22 | 4.69 |
| Affected strongly | 3.11 | 3.11 | 3.11 |
| Affected very strongly | 0.90 | 1.32 | 1.09 |
| | | | |

**Table A4:** Sleep deprivation percentage in each period segregated by area (N=1828)

| **January 2020–March 2020** | **Name of district** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Cumilla** | **Gaibandha** | **Narail** | **Total** |
| Did not affect at all | 72.31 | 85.23 | 83.25 | 77.95 |
| Affected a little | 17.46 | 9.09 | 11.56 | 14.08 |
| Affected moderately | 4.03 | 4.55 | 2.59 | 3.82 |
| Affected strongly | 4.24 | 0.91 | 1.65 | 2.84 |
| Affected very strongly | 1.96 | 0.23 | 0.94 | 1.31 |
| | | | | |

| **April 2020–May 2020** | **Name of district** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Cumilla** | **Gaibandha** | **Narail** | **Total** |
| Did not affect at all | 71.28 | 78.41 | 83.02 | 75.71 |
| Affected a little | 10.02 | 12.05 | 6.84 | 9.77 |
| Affected moderately | 5.37 | 6.82 | 4.72 | 5.57 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Affected strongly | 8.06 | 1.82 | 4.48 | 5.73 |
| Affected very strongly | 5.27 | 0.91 | 0.94 | 3.22 |
| | | | | |

| **June 2020–March 2021** | **Name of district** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Cumilla** | **Gaibandha** | **Narail** | **Total** |
| Did not affect at all | 71.49 | 75.68 | 84.91 | 75.60 |
| Affected a little | 11.26 | 13.41 | 8.73 | 11.19 |
| Affected moderately | 7.44 | 8.18 | 4.48 | 6.93 |
| Affected strongly | 6.92 | 2.05 | 1.18 | 4.42 |
| Affected very strongly | 2.89 | 0.68 | 0.71 | 1.86 |
| | | | | |

| **Last month [September 2021]** | **Name of district** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Cumilla** | **Gaibandha** | **Narail** | **Total** |
| Did not affect at all | 71.69 | 76.82 | 82.55 | 75.44 |
| Affected a little | 17.98 | 14.77 | 11.32 | 15.67 |
| Affected moderately | 4.96 | 5.45 | 3.30 | 4.69 |
| Affected strongly | 4.13 | 2.50 | 1.42 | 3.11 |
| Affected very strongly | 1.24 | 0.45 | 1.42 | 1.09 |

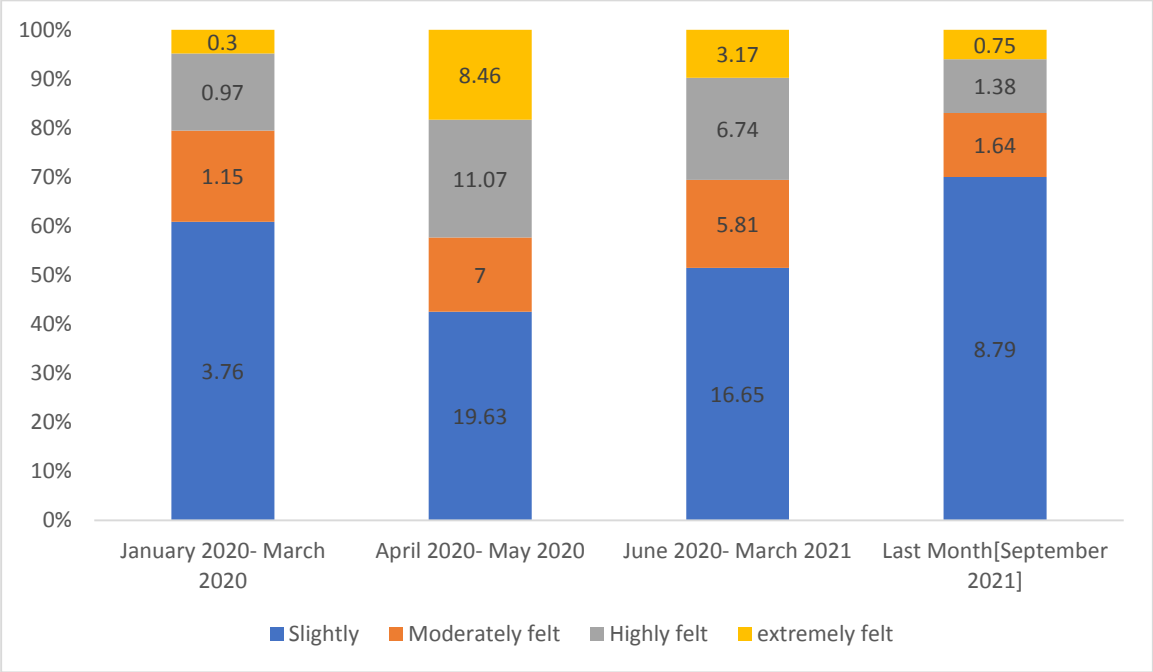


**Figure A5:** Percentage of individuals who felt loneliness (N=1828)

**Table A6:** Feeling of loneliness by locality

| **January 2020–March 2020** | **Name of district** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Cumilla** | **Gaibandha** | **Narail** | **Total** |
| Did not affect at all | 95.04 | 88.64 | 94.58 | 93.40 |
| Affected a little | 2.79 | 7.05 | 3.07 | 3.88 |
| Affected moderately | 0.93 | 2.27 | 0.94 | 1.26 |
| Affected strongly | 1.03 | 1.59 | 0.71 | 1.09 |
| Affected very strongly | 0.21 | 0.45 | 0.71 | 0.38 |
| | | | | |

| **April 2020–May 2020** | **Name of district** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Cumilla** | **Gaibandha** | **Narail** | **Total** |
| Did not affect at all | 60.02 | 49.55 | 40.09 | 52.89 |
| Affected a little | 14.77 | 23.41 | 25.94 | 19.43 |
| Affected moderately | 6.82 | 10.68 | 6.13 | 7.59 |
| Affected strongly | 10.33 | 9.55 | 16.75 | 11.63 |
| Affected very strongly | 8.06 | 6.82 | 11.08 | 8.46 |
| | | | | |

| **June 2020–March 2021** | **Name of district** |
|---|---|

| | Cumilla | Gaibandha | Narail | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Did not affect at all | 70.04 | 65.91 | 60.61 | 66.87 |
| Affected a little | 13.12 | 20.91 | 21.46 | 16.92 |
| Affected moderately | 5.06 | 7.73 | 7.55 | 6.28 |
| Affected strongly | 7.64 | 3.41 | 7.31 | 6.55 |
| Affected very strongly | 4.13 | 2.05 | 3.07 | 3.38 |
| | | | | |

| Last month [September 2021] | Name of district | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Cumilla | Gaibandha | Narail | Total |
| Did not affect at all | 87.29 | 87.05 | 88.21 | 87.45 |
| Affected a little | 9.09(Neu meister et al., 2021) | 8.86 | 8.25 | 8.84 |
| Affected moderately | 1.65 | 1.14 | 1.65 | 1.53 |
| Affected strongly | 1.34 | 1.82 | 0.94 | 1.36 |
| Affected very strongly | 0.62 | 1.14 | 0.94 | 0.82 |
| | | | | |