



Adolescent experiences in Chittagong and Sylhet divisions, Bangladesh

Baseline report

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Introduction

There are 36 million adolescents currently living in Bangladesh, making up 22% of the population (UNICEF, 2019). While adolescence is known to be a critical time to combat poverty, inequity and discrimination and lay the foundations for economic growth, major challenges remain for Bangladeshi adolescents to fulfil their potential and for the country to accelerate progress towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (GAGE consortium, 2019). While the country's educational advancements in the last decades are noteworthy – net enrolment rates in school have converged towards gender parity and literacy rates are rising – entrenched obstacles related to educational transitions for adolescents persist. Some 42% of adolescent girls drop out of school before completing grade 10, due to intersecting factors that include poverty and harmful gender norms (Trines, 2019). Child marriage rates remain amongst the highest in the world: of Bangladeshi women aged between 20 and 24, over 51% were married before the age of 18 and over 15% before the age of 15 (BBS and UNICEF, 2019). Pockets of inequality and vulnerability, particularly in rural areas, also plague the country and this report focuses on Chittagong and Sylhet divisions which demonstrate lower secondary school outcomes rates compared to national averages..

Objectives of the report

To address adolescent-specific obstacles, including high female drop-out rates in secondary school, the government of Bangladesh (GoB) is implementing a comprehensive Adolescent Student Program (ASP) with World Bank support, and seeks to scale the most successful elements of the intervention to all schools in Chittagong and Sylhet regions in 2022. This report draws on mixed-methods evidence from the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme, a unique, longitudinal mixed-methods research and impact evaluation study that explores 'what works' to support the development of adolescent capabilities, to support the evaluation of the ASP. This research aims to identify effective, scalable and sustainable strategies for improving school retention and overall well-being, including safety, voice, agency and empowerment of Bangladeshi

adolescent girls and boys. By engaging with a cohort of school-going adolescents across urban and rural areas of Chittagong and Sylhet, ongoing GAGE research aims to distil the determinants of educational continuity and attainment for adolescent girls and boys.

This report draws on quantitative data collected from 2,220 adolescents in February and March 2020 through face-to-face interviews and qualitative interviews with 100 adolescents, their parents and key informants between August and September 2020 via virtual, telephone-based semi-structured interviews. We present findings on adolescent transitions, particularly how adolescent lives are shaped by intersecting socio-economic characteristics, including gender, age, vulnerability and geographical location, and gender norms. We present quantitative and qualitative findings organised according to the six key capability domains that shape adolescents' experience, in line with the GAGE Conceptual Framework (GAGE consortium, 2019): (1) education and learning; (2) bodily integrity and freedom from violence; (3) health, nutrition, and sexual and reproductive health; (4) psychosocial well-being; (5) voice and agency; and (6) economic empowerment. The report concludes with policy and programming implications..

Background

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in social and economic development over the past three decades. It has reduced poverty from 44% in 1991 to 15% in 2016 (based on the international poverty line of US\$1.90 a day), while increasing life expectancy, literacy and food production (World Bank, 2020) – all of which contributed to the country attaining middle-income status in 2015. In 2019, the World Bank estimated that Bangladesh would maintain its 7% growth in the medium term, a testament to its continued robust economic performance (World Bank, 2019). Bangladesh has also witnessed remarkable progress in education. Indicators such as net enrolment rates (NER) for boys and girls have converged towards gender parity (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), 2018) and national average attendance at primary school (for boys and girls)

currently stands at 86% (BBS and UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019). The country has also built hundreds of schools in recent years, predominantly in rural areas, to boost access and lower teacher-student ratios (Trines, 2019). As a result, ambitious policies geared towards learning outcomes have seen levels of attainment and literacy rise (ibid.).

However, net enrolment in secondary education is low, with 68% of adolescents enrolled in 2019 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). While the proportion of girls who enroll in secondary school is higher than that of boys (74% and 62% respectively) – most likely due to government tuition waivers and stipend programmes for girls – their dropout rates are staggering. Some 42% of girls drop out before completing grade 10¹ compared to 34% of boys, due to intersecting factors that include poverty, harmful gender norms, and risks of sexual harassment and child marriage (Trines, 2019). Around 50% to 60% of girls in Bangladesh are married before the legal age of 18, and while child marriage rates have been declining in South Asia over the past two decades (UNICEF, 2020), progress remains slow in Bangladesh. Moreover, as of 2015 approximately one-third of Bangladeshi adolescent girls start childbearing as teenagers, and the fertility rate is 84.4 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19 (World Bank, 2016). The onset of puberty and the forming of sexual identities poses age and gendered risks to violence, particularly for adolescent girls who are vulnerable to harassment and harmful gender norms that can perpetuate gender inequality in educational access and attainment (BBS and UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019). Furthermore, the covid-19

pandemic and related school closures (from March 2020 until the time of writing this report, April 2021) are set to have devastating impacts on educational access and attainment, and on adolescent well-being, particularly for girls and students in hard-to-reach areas (Baird et al., 2020; Rahman and Sharma, 2021). For other implications of the covid-19 pandemic, see Box 1.

There are also substantial regional disparities in Bangladeshi adolescents' access to education. While, as of 2019, the national attendance rate for lower secondary school stands at 58%, rates are lower in Chittagong and Sylhet divisions (55% and 54% respectively). This disparity increases for higher secondary school attendance, which stands at 48% nationally, falling to 44% and 37% in Chittagong and Sylhet respectively (BBS and UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019). Unique geographical regions (Haor and Tea Estates), lack of widespread awareness about education, lower number of educational facilities at secondary level (Sylhet contains 7.8% of national primary level educational institutes and only 3.9% of secondary level educational institutes in the country) are all factors that result in low performance in education in Sylhet division compared to other divisions of Bangladesh (Education Watch, 2011). School attendance and completion rates at all levels are also determined by geographical location (urban or rural), with rural students most disadvantaged. Finally, there are stark differences between wealth quintiles, with children and adolescents from the poorest families least likely to enrol and to complete school at all levels (BBS and UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019.)

Box 1: Covid-19 implications

Covid-19 has severely impacted Bangladesh. Notwithstanding low testing rates, confirmed cases remain high and the health system has struggled to keep up with the virus's spread. By 7 April 2021, Bangladesh had registered 651,652 cases and 9,384 deaths (WHO, 2021) and covid-19 mitigation measures have interfered with the country's economic growth (UN Bangladesh, 2020). Moreover, adolescent girls are more likely to have limited access to learning during the school shutdown. Reasons for this include increased time spent by girls on household chores and care work, less access among girls to the digital technology needed for distance learning, and possible increases in child marriage in response to family financial struggles (Ahmed et al., 2021; Alam, 2021; Baird et al., 2020; Government of Bangladesh and UN Women, 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Afrin and Zainuddin, 2021; UNICEF, 2021).

1 The system of formal education in Bangladesh consists of pre-primary education, primary education, secondary education, and higher education. Grades 1–5 fall under primary education, with children's age ranging from 6 to 10 years. Secondary education is divided into three stages: (1) junior or lower secondary (grades 6–8, with adolescents typically aged 11–13); (2) secondary (grades 9–10, with adolescents typically aged 14–15); and (3) higher secondary (grades 11–12, with adolescents typically aged 16–17). To pass primary education, students in grade 5 are required to sit the Primary Education Completion (PEC) examination. Under junior or lower secondary education, students in grade 8 are required to sit the Junior School Certificate (JSC) examination. After completing grade 10, students are required to sit the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination for the completion of secondary education. For higher secondary education, students of grade 12 are required to sit the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination.

Methodology

Data collection and sample

This mixed-methods baseline report draws on quantitative data collected from 2,220 adolescents in February and March 2020 and qualitative data collected between August and September 2020.

Quantitative data was collected from 2,220 adolescents through face-to-face interviews with a random sample of adolescents attending grades 7 and 8 in 109 public and semi-private (monthly pay order (MPO)) schools² in Chittagong and Sylhet divisions. In each school, six adolescents of each gender (male, female) were randomly selected from each grade (7, 8) based on school registration lists. Interviews were also conducted with female primary caregivers of the sampled adolescents. See Table 1 for details of the quantitative sample.

Qualitative data was collected via virtual, telephone-based semi-structured interviews using interactive tools to understand adolescent experiences across the six GAGE capability domains (GAGE consortium, 2019). The qualitative sample was selected purposively from the quantitative sample. Qualitative data collection was undertaken with 76 students from grades 7 and 8 across 20 schools, selected on the basis of: (a) geographic distribution (11 schools from Chittagong and 9 schools from Sylhet; 9 urban schools and 11 rural schools); (b) type of school, to mirror realistic ratios in the divisions (four government schools and 14 MPO schools. Additionally,

one non-MPO school and two madrasa (religious) schools were approached, in order to identify potential similarities and differences between the different types of school or educational institution (note that we do not have a quantitative sample from these types of schools); and (c) school performance (a mixture of high-performing and low-performing schools, as calculated by Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exam performance).

Adolescents participating in the qualitative research were also selected on the basis of their gender and grade level. When possible, priority for selection was given to older adolescents in the grade group, as it was believed that they would be better suited to telephone interviews than the younger cohort. Finally, qualitative interviews were conducted with 11 parents and 13 teachers (key informants) to better capture adolescents' experiences through a wider, intergenerational lens. See Table 2 for details of the qualitative sample.

For quantitative and qualitative data collection, additional demographic characteristics of the adolescent, including their working status, disability status, and belonging to a female-headed household were also captured. See Table 3 for additional characteristics of the sample.

Although not the focus of this report, it is notable that while the quantitative data was collected just prior to the covid-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures,

Table 1: Quantitative sample

	Chittagong urban	Chittagong rural	Sylhet urban	Sylhet rural	TOTAL
Adolescent girls - grade 7	204 (9.2%)	240 (10.8%)	72 (3.2%)	84 (3.8%)	600 (27%)
Adolescent girls - grade 8	204 (9.2%)	240 (10.8%)	72 (2.3%)	84 (3.8%)	600 (27%)
Adolescent boys - grade 7	156 (7.0%)	234 (10.5%)	42 (1.9%)	78 (3.5%)	510 (23%)
Adolescent boys - grade 8	156 (7.0%)	234 (10.5%)	42 (1.9%)	78 (3.5%)	510 (23%)
TOTAL	720 (32.4%)	948 (42.7%)	228 (10.3%)	324 (14.5%)	2220 (100%)

² Monthly pay order (MPO) schools are private schools that receive funding for payroll from the government and follow the official curriculum. The plan for quantitative data collection was to survey a random sample of 4,932 adolescents across a representative sample of 251 schools (160 MPO schools and 91 government schools). The schools were randomly selected from a full list of both school types operating in each division provided by the Ministry of Education. However, data collection was interrupted on 18 March 2020, when schools were closed as part of a broader government shutdown. At this point, data had been collected from 45% of the intended sample. See Baird et al. (2020) for more detail on the sample and survey instruments.

Table 2: Qualitative sample

	Chittagong urban	Chittagong rural	Sylhet urban	Sylhet rural	TOTAL
Adolescent girls - grade 7	4 (4%)	7 (7%)	4 (4%)	5 (5%)	20 (20%)
Adolescent girls - grade 8	5 (5%)	6 (6%)	4 (4%)	5 (5%)	20 (20%)
Adolescent boys - grade 7	5 (5%)	5 (5%)	3 (3%)	5 (5%)	18 (18%)
Adolescent boys - grade 8	5 (5%)	5 (5%)	3 (3%)	5 (5%)	18 (18%)
Mothers of adolescents	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	2 (2%)	5 (5%)
Fathers of adolescents	1 (1%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	6 (6%)
Teacher key informants	4 (4%)	3 (3%)	3 (3%)	3 (3%)	13 (13%)
TOTAL	720 (32.4%)	948 (42.7%)	228 (10.3%)	324 (14.5%)	2220 (100%)

Table 3: Additional sample characteristics

Adolescent characteristics	Quantitative sample	Qualitative sample
Working adolescents		4
Adolescents with disabilities		9
	Including those with assistance devices: 213	
Adolescents from female-headed households		8

the qualitative data coincided with the covid-19 school closures. For this reason, in some cases where it was salient, particularly in relation to education, there is some discussion of the impact of covid-19 in the qualitative quotes. These qualitative data around the pandemic are complemented with quantitative data from this same sample of adolescents that was collected during May and June 2020. More detail on the latter sample can be found in Baird et al. (2020), which also provides in-depth discussion of the impact of covid-19 on these adolescents.

Measures and analysis

Quantitative

In the quantitative analysis, we explore heterogeneity by gender, household wealth, school type (government vs MPO), and location in Chittagong vs Sylhet and urban/rural location. To measure household wealth we construct an asset index using principal components analysis following Filmer and Pritchett (2001). We then generate a binary indicator for having an index score above the median. All summary statistics are constructed using survey weights to make adolescents representative of adolescents attending their respective schools, and standard errors are clustered at the school level for tests of mean differences.

Qualitative

The qualitative tools used for virtual in-depth interviews (IDIs) with adolescent girls and boys for were adapted from

the GAGE baseline qualitative toolkit (Jones et al., 2018) and included three sections. The first section explores the six capability domains and establishes rapport with the adolescent by asking them about their favourite things. The second section uses two vignettes (see Annex 1) to discuss the adolescent's worries and allows adolescents to open up about sensitive topics such as sexual violence, puberty, menstrual hygiene management and child marriage. The third section discusses role models and the respondent's favourite person. For parent interviews, the qualitative tool discusses parents' life histories and parenting practices, probes about their background, experiences and attitudes, as well as their thinking and behaviour as parents. The tool used to interview key informants (school teachers) broadly discusses the challenges faced by adolescents in the community, while discussing adolescent experiences of schools more broadly.

A team of GAGE analysts and field researchers undertook qualitative data gathering, data management and data analysis. Interview transcripts were translated from Bangla into English. Raw transcripts were read and coded using the qualitative analysis software package MAXQDA, following a codebook shaped around the GAGE conceptual framework and the research tools. During qualitative data analysis, care was taken to identify cross-cutting themes while also allowing space for unique voices more specific to individual experiences. Gender, age, household wealth and geographic differences are captured by the data and highlighted as relevant.

Findings

Education and learning

Adolescent aspirations and parental support for learning

Our quantitative data found that 90% of year 7 and 8 adolescents in Chittagong and Sylhet aspired to achieve at least some university education. Across gender, household wealth, location and school type, aspirations for university education are above 80%; however, some notable differences do arise. Adolescents from households with below median wealth are less likely to aspire to university degrees compared to non-vulnerable adolescents (84% versus 94% respectively), and adolescents attending government schools are more likely to aspire to university education than those at MPO schools (96% vs 87%).

In qualitative interviews, adolescents aspired to a range of professions, commonly mentioning wishing to become a doctor, teacher, police officer or engineer – all of which were mentioned by girls and boys alike. This is reflected in the quantitative data, where 91% of adolescents aspire to a professional career, which encompasses the aforementioned professions. Both quantitative and qualitative data highlights that adolescents in Chittagong and Sylhet largely understand the practical steps that need to be enacted in order to realise their aspirations. This is striking compared to other GAGE research contexts where adolescents have big dreams, yet few concrete ideas on how to realise them (Presler-Marshall, 2021). In the quantitative data, while 53.2% of adolescents report seeing no constraints to achieving their career goals, 25% say that education and skill acquisition could be a constraint and 17.3% see financial constraints being a deterrent to achieving their career goals. In qualitative interviews, adolescents discussed the importance of academic performance in order to realise their professional aspirations, and are thus very preoccupied with their school grades and achievement. A 13-year-old boy in grade 7 from Sylhet rural district explained:

I have to study in science groups [to become a doctor]. I have to receive A+ in all subjects, in class 8, 10 and HSC

[Higher Secondary Certificate] exam... Pray for me, sir. My father and family will help me in this regard.

While the aforementioned professions were most commonly mentioned, there were some innovative outliers, testament, again, to adolescents' understanding the concrete steps necessary to fulfil their aspirations: noted:

I [want to] learn hacking. There's this new app, and I'll learn with the help of that after growing up a bit. My brain won't be able to capture it all now as I'm too young... Hacking can be learned, being able to do it is great. I can defend and also attack. The country can be saved, in cyber terms... I can defend myself from cyber assaults if someone attacks... I can be a computer software engineer... the salary [is high]. (14-year-old boy in grade 8 from Sylhet urban district.)

Qualitative interviews show that both girls and boys rely on the support of mothers and fathers (as well as siblings and extended family) to help them with homework, perform well in school and reach their dreams. Most parents echo this, wishing to provide the best support for their children to complete their education, and our qualitative data finds no significant gender differences in parental support. The father of an adolescent boy from Sylhet urban district said: 'Well, everyone needs support to continue his or her studies. You see, my sons are going to school... However, I can't always provide them with everything they need. Yet, I try my best to support their studies.' The quantitative survey supports this as well, with over 98% of primary female caregivers reporting personally helping the adolescent with school work, that household members reduce chores to allow the adolescent to study, and that adolescents are provided light and a place to study. However, the quantitative data also reveals entrenched

■ I have to study in science groups [to become a doctor]. I have to receive A+ in all subjects, in class 8, 10 and HSC [Higher Secondary Certificate] exam...

(A 13-year-old boy in grade 7 from Sylhet rural district)

D Well, everyone needs support to continue his or her studies. You see, my sons are going to school.... However, I can't always provide them with everything they need. Yet, I try my best to support their studies.

(The father of an adolescent boy from Sylhet urban district)

gender differences in that adolescent boys (in particular) believe their parents prioritise boys' education over girls'. Nearly a third (30%) of adolescents agree with the statement that 'if a family can only afford to send one child to school, it should be the boy'. Boys were more likely to agree with this statement than girls (38% versus 23%). Moreover, 22% of adolescents agree or partially agree that girls should be sent to school only if they are not needed in the home, and boys were more likely to agree with this statement than girls (25% versus 20%). Finally, gender differences also appear to be subject-driven, albeit for a minority of adolescents: 11% agree that only boys should learn science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, with boys more likely to agree than girls (14% versus 8%).

Quality of teaching and learning trajectories

Data from qualitative interviews suggests that teachers are by and large viewed as unyielding yet approachable adults: *'I like the teachers. They are very affectionate. They solve our problems'* (13-year-old girl, grade 7, Sylhet urban district). The quality of teaching and learning, however, appears to vary greatly and while most adolescents were satisfied with the quality of education in their school – largely gauged by the depth of teachers' knowledge and their ability to explain concepts thoroughly – others

D I like the teachers. They are very affectionate. They solve our problems.

(13-year-old girl, grade 7, Sylhet urban district)

complained about the poor quality of instruction, which creates anxiety about their future: *'A good education is very much needed. Getting a job depends on that'* (16-year-old boy, grade 8, Chittagong rural district). A 13-year-old boy in a grade 8 MPO school from Sylhet rural district explained:

There isn't a single good government teacher³ in this school... I am not in a good situation. I am really anxious because there are no good teachers in my school. The teachers don't explain the lessons properly and there is no science teacher... I am really afraid. Sir, we don't have any government teachers. There are many in the other schools but we don't have even one.

Other interviews found adolescents complaining that non-permanent teachers do not take proper care in assigning and checking homework, and they simply read out of books instead of explaining properly and engaging the students in classwork.

In addition to teachers themselves impacting quality of teaching and learning, our qualitative data found that some adolescents who live in rural settings and attend village schools are worried about the effects of child marriage on the educational trajectories of girl classmates. We discuss this in more detail in the discussion on bodily integrity and freedom from violence below, but students did point out that it undermines commitments to girls' education in the community. A 13-year-old boy in grade 8 from Sylhet rural district explained that harmful practices perpetrated in his community – child marriage, primarily – impact girls' school progression and generally spoil the school atmosphere. He states:

Girls in the village are usually married off as soon as they pass class 10. It is considered that class 10 is enough education for girls. There aren't many options

D Girls in the village are usually married off as soon as they pass class 10. It is considered that class 10 is enough education for girls. There aren't many options for village girls.

(13-year-old girl, grade 8, Sylhet urban district)

3 On 15 December 2015 the government of Bangladesh issued a gadget notification for MPO school teachers about their monthly payment. The government set to provide the monthly MPO teacher salary upon fulfilling quality and experience criteria (e.g. to be an assistant teacher under the monthly payroll order a teacher must have subject related Honors degree or BEd. or a degree from a reputed university), which were set by the education ministry of Bangladesh. Those who fulfil these criteria and thus receive a government salary are considered 'government teachers' in an MPO school.



Adolescent boys at school in Chittagong © Nathalie Bertrams

for village girls. Sir, many bad practices are prevalent here. This school is not good, sir, [it should be] a place where you study and gain knowledge. But the people of the school are not good – I [mean] the students.

School life and extracurricular activities

Friendships are typically cultivated at school and the survey finds that 90% of adolescents say they have at least one friend outside of their household that they trust. Girls in particular claim that school is a fun place to be around their friends. A 15-year-old girl in grade 8 from Chittagong urban district summed it up: *‘Yes, I like going to school because I can have very much fun with my friends.’*

In qualitative interviews only a few adolescents shared experiences of sports, clubs and extracurricular activities organised at school, and spoke positively of their experiences of school life beyond the classroom. This is matched by survey data showing that only 9% of adolescents are members of either coed or single-sex clubs, and 3% are members of sports clubs. Adolescents most commonly spoke of recreational games organised

during ‘tiffin’ time (break time) including ‘badminton, cricket and there is football for both boys and girls. Oh, there is basketball and carom board [board game] too’ (13-year-old girl, grade 8, Sylhet rural district). Both rural and urban school-going adolescents mentioned school-wide competitions, including ‘drawing competitions’ (14-year-old boy, grade 8, Sylhet rural district) and ‘debate competitions... We get books in these competitions [as prizes]. The students who are first or second are presented with geometry boxes, dictionaries, calculators’ (13-year-old girl, grade 8, Sylhet rural district). A 13-year-old boy in grade 7 from Chittagong urban district recounted travelling to other parts of Bangladesh to participate in ‘a physics Olympiad organised by Prothom Alo and Dutch Bangla Bank... In that Olympiad, I got a medal in Cox’s Bazar and went to Dhaka [to compete].’

School infrastructure: menstrual hygiene management

In both the quantitative and qualitative findings, girls shared predominately negative experiences of menstrual

hygiene management provision at school, and many felt uncomfortable attending school during their periods due to the lack of appropriate facilities and infrastructure. While nearly all adolescent girls (and boys) mentioned the need for girls to continue attending school during their periods – unless they were physically too sick with stomach cramps or headaches to attend – many mentioned the obstacles they face in managing menstruation at school. The survey finds that less than half (46%) of girls attend schools that have facilities or resources they can use when they are menstruating. Access to menstrual facilities at school is also linked to rural location – adolescents living in rural areas are significantly less likely to have access to menstrual facilities than those living in urban areas (36% compared to 53%). A 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Sylhet urban district explained:


I take everything that I will need to school. There's no arrangement for [menstrual management] in school, but I still go. In many schools there's pads... or places to keep [and] share [sanitary napkins in a private space]. There's nothing like that in our school.

While schools have promised additional provisioning of menstrual hygiene material and practices, progress has been slow. Another 13-year-old girl from Sylhet rural district explained that teachers and school staff go so far as to tell girls to go home if they have their period at school:

The chairman told us that he would provide us with sanitary pads but he still hasn't. He promised us when we were in class 6 but we still haven't got it. It's been two years. If [you get your period at school], they tell us there is nothing for us to do. [We] have to go home.

Finally, for some girls, managing periods at school seems an insurmountable part of a larger problem of lack of privacy and cleanliness in toilets and latrines – something that is not well-managed and leads to hesitancy and discomfort in using school toilets. A 13-year-old girl in grade 8 from Sylhet rural district stated:

... There should be a madam designated for [distributing sanitary napkins] because this can happen any time. Plus our bathrooms are in no fit state. They stink, [they aren't cleaned everyday]. There is only one bathroom for girls. Actually, there are two latrines and one bathroom inside the enclosure. They are so dirty that you don't feel like entering them. I don't go ever to the bathroom.

 The chairman told us that he would provide us with sanitary pads but he still hasn't. It's been two years. If [you get your period at school], they tell us there is nothing for us to do. [We] have to go home.

(A 13-year-old girl from Sylhet rural district)


Bodily integrity and freedom from violence

Sexual harassment

Our survey data reveals that a minority of adolescents (6%) report having experienced sexual harassment and girls are more likely to report this than boys (10% versus 1%). Among those reporting sexual harassment, the most common forms are: staring or winking (38% had experienced this); stalking or following (50%); insulting comments (33%) and vulgar gestures (15%). None of the respondents who reported experiencing harassment mentioned that this took the form of cyber or phone harassment.

While agreeing that sexual harassment should not occur, rigid gender norms become more salient as adolescents age, and abiding by these norms was a notion that came across strongly in both quantitative and qualitative data. Our quantitative data shows that 59% of adolescents agree or partially agree that girls are also to blame for being sexually harassed (63% of boys said this compared to 56% of girls). In qualitative interviews, many adolescents mentioned that it is girls' responsibility to avoid capturing boys' attention. A 15-year-old boy in grade 8 from Chittagong urban district explained:

[Responsibilities of adolescent girls are] to take precautions to protect themselves, to concentrate on their studies and observe 'purdah' [to cover oneself appropriately in accordance with Sharia law] ... So they should be careful not to put themselves in a position where they will be exposed to such unwelcome attention... She should make up her mind to lead her life in a certain manner and not to go down a path that will show her up in a bad light and cause predatory boys to consider her fair game.

 No one says anything to a polite girl.
(A 13-year-old girl (grade 8, Chittagong rural district))

This sentiment was confirmed by a 13-year-old girl (grade 8, Chittagong rural district) who noted, *'No one says anything to a polite girl.'*

When discussing how to address sexual harassment, adolescent boys and girls predominately felt that anyone experiencing it should report to 'elders' such as their parents, teachers or head teachers. Avoiding reporting the problem was thought to harm only the individual who had experienced harassment, while potentially leading to a perpetuation of the aggressor's behavior, since the aggressor was left unpunished. Girls who keep silent about it are *'adversely affected... [it is a] huge mistake to keep silent about it'* (13-year-old boy, grade 8, Sylhet rural district). When responding to a vignette depicting a fictional character who avoided going to school after she was teased for having her period, most adolescents felt that the girl was making a mistake truanting from school for that reason. Adolescent respondents in the qualitative interviews believed the girl had the right to stay at home for physical reasons to do with menstruation – heavy cramping or headaches – but agreed that these should not be used as pretexts for missing school while hiding the real reason. That said, one 15-year-old girl in grade 8 from Chittagong urban district expressed strong views about the vignette, stating that the girl might miss school because of *'suicide... She didn't go to school the next day by saying [she had a] headache... She could say things like this [and make excuses, but actually] commit suicide... because the boys bothered her, that's why.'* Some adolescents in the qualitative interviews also stated that they had been subject to sexual harassment but had not reported it to anyone.

Sexual harassment on the way to school

Responding to a vignette with fictional female characters who are harassed on their way to school, qualitative findings were mixed as to whether this occurs in adolescents' day-to-day lives. Most girls and boys stated that this does not happen in their localities, because boys and girls understand how to act appropriately while on their way to school, and only 3% of adolescents saying they do not feel safe travelling to school. Adolescents in the qualitative data agree that when boys engage in bothersome behaviour it is wrong and they are 'bad boys' or 'spoiled boys' who act inappropriately towards girls. However, other adolescents believe that girls who act properly are able to avoid drawing such attention to themselves on the streets, and are not harassed. In essence, some adolescents (both boys and

DD Boys tease girls when they are on their way to school and the girls don't tell anyone about it. Then the girls don't attend school for two or three days because they were traumatised.

(A 16-year-old boy in grade 8 from Chittagong rural district)

girls) believe girls are partially to blame. A 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong rural district explained:

[The girl's parents] tell me to move consciously on the road, don't talk with anyone on the road, don't go to any shop... I am just maintaining the veil [meaning to dress according to Islamic rules such as wearing a hijab or covering the entire body except for face and hands]... That girl [in the vignette] doesn't maintain a veil.

A similar sentiment was echoed by a 14-year-old boy in grade 7 from Chittagong urban district:

She should not mingle with random men, she should abide by the Islamic rules so that the other men cannot see her face. She should use a scarf to cover... people respect cover. They will not understand beneath her cover if she is a young girl or an old woman. Cover makes you hide your face and body.

Under-reporting of harassment on the way to school emerged as an issue in the qualitative interviews. According to a 16-year-old boy in grade 8 from Chittagong rural district, *'Boys tease girls when they are on their way to school and the girls don't tell anyone about it. Then the girls don't attend school for two or three days because they were traumatised.'* Adolescents agree that keeping silent about experiencing harassment is problematic, as parents or teachers can take no action and the problem is perpetuated. In fact, some adolescents mentioned that when harassment is avoided, it is only due to the very strong consequences from teachers and headteachers should they hear about such incidences. A 14-year-old boy in grade 8 from Sylhet rural district explained:

No, it's never happened because our head[teacher] is very strict [and] if he notices anything like this then he'll hit strongly by stick. I can't remember [exactly when] but a boy and girl were walking and talking in public [and he questioned and hit the boy] ... 'Are you a girl, why do you gossip with a girl, you must mix with the boys.' After this conversation, he beat him with a stick.



Other adolescents also mentioned that boys risk expulsion if the school comes to know about acts of harassment: '[If the teachers find out] they will judge them [the boys], punish them [and] then they would be expelled from the school!' (15-year-old boy, Chittagong urban district).

While most adolescents in qualitative interviews reported positive experiences on the way to school, 'No one disturbs anyone' (15-year-old girl, Chittagong urban district), some noted that harassment does occur. A 13-year-old girl (grade 7, Chittagong urban district) mentioned that in her town, one girl risked being raped on the streets on her way to school:

One day my mother told me that a girl from the other school, which is a bit away from here, had to go through such trouble. A girl was [almost] raped... Some senior students were about to hold her. But the girl immediately cried out for help in order to catch the attention of people nearby. But the boys tried to shut her up by covering her mouth. [Surrounding] girls bit those boys in the hand and screamed loudly so people gathered. In the end, the girl wasn't harmed that much.

Finally, a 13-year-old girl in grade 8 from Chittagong rural district recounted her experiences of being teased on the way to school. She also had clear ideas about what girls can do to deal with it, noting one strategy that works and one that does not:

Yes this happens a lot here [boys disturbing girls on their way to school]. Whenever it happens [to me] I try to explain to [the boys] that 'I am your little sister... You have many small sisters at home. If they were like me what would you do?' So I explained to them like this then they said, 'Sorry apu (Miss). Let it be.' Mostly they are [boys] from the same school [that tease]. When [some female friends or other people don't explain to the boys directly but rather complain to [teachers at school], then it escalates. If I don't complain to sir [teacher] but rather make them understand, then it is better. I told one of my friends, 'Instead of complaining to sir, make them understand'. Because they get angrier if we complain to sir and they try to do more harm. They complained to sir and... afterwards he did exactly the same thing. He started teasing her again. So it doesn't decrease. They [boys] get beaten up, okay, but it doesn't decrease.

Whenever it happens [to me] I try to explain to [the boys] that 'I am your little sister... You have many small sisters at home. If they were like me what would you do?... If I don't complain to sir [teacher] but rather make them understand, then it is better.

(A 13-year-old girl in grade 8 from Chittagong rural district)

Teacher violence

In the quantitative data, 50% of students (42% of girls and 62% of boys) report having been physically beaten by teachers and 70% (65% of girls and 76% of boys) have witnessed a teacher beating another student. Notably, teacher violence occurs at higher rates in Chittagong than Sylhet, with 58% of adolescents reporting being physically beaten by a teacher in Chittagong compared to 33% in Sylhet.

Likewise, teacher violence – mostly hitting and beating – featured extensively in the qualitative interview, with adolescents also recounting numerous forms of punishment. These included teachers '*mak[ing] them hold their ears and go around the whole field [as punishment]*' (13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong urban district); '*scold[ing] and swear[ing] at me... she hits with a stick*' (13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong urban district); '*[the teachers] keep us standing up for 5 to 10 minutes*' (13-year-old girl in grade 7, Sylhet urban district); '*[the teacher] pulled our ears*' (14-year-old boy in grade 8 from Chittagong urban district); and '*sometimes [they hit us] with the duster and sometimes [they] use their hands. Yes [it hurts]*' (13-year-old boy in grade 8 from Sylhet rural district).

Adolescents noted various reasons behind teacher violence: '*They beat you up when you bunk classes*' (13-year-old boy, grade 7, Sylhet rural district); '*if we are naughty then they punish us*' (13-year-old girl, grade 7, Sylhet urban district); and '*[teachers punish] those who do not do homework or don't study properly*' (13-year-old girl, grade 7, Chittagong urban district). Student behaviour and poor academic performance were both seen to warrant teacher violence against pupils, and most adolescents seem resigned to this. Some also think it can help them get on the right track and avoid mischief or lazy study habits. While this was the most common sentiment that emerged from qualitative interviews, there were also some dissenting voices. After being forced to go around

the school field while holding her ears for '*many times*', one student explained, resignedly, '*I can't do maths. I'm dumb at maths*' (13-year-old girl, grade 7, Chittagong urban district). A 12-year-old boy also told us that he had followed the classroom rules but was punished anyhow – prompting a feeling of injustice that stayed with him for years after:

I went to drink water once and I told our class captain about it. Teachers told us that if someone needs to go outside, they should take permission from [the] class captain when teachers are not in the classroom... After I came back, our headteacher beat me a lot. It also created an impact on my body. I told my mother [and she] was worried about it. Why did he beat me even though I [did what I was supposed to]? Nothing happened. It was a long time ago but I will never forget it.

Awareness of the right to be free from violence

Survey data found that 19% of adolescents experience violence in the community from adults other than family members or teachers. Notably, boys are twice as likely to experience violence in the community than are girls (26% compared to 13%). Moreover, adolescents living in rural areas are more likely to experience violence in their communities (23% compared to 16% in urban areas), and adolescents from poorer households are more likely to experience violence in their community than better-off households (17% vs 22%), and adolescents living in Chittagong experience more violence in their communities than those living in Sylhet (21% vs 13%).

In qualitative interviews, the adolescents who spoke about their right to be free from violence were strongly aware and forthcoming about their rights, and the rights of girls in particular to be free and protected from gender-based violence. Adolescents mentioned that the vignette characters should go to great lengths to protect their rights, and many agreed that the police should be consulted. See Box 2 for an 11-year-old boy's eloquent understanding of the issue.

The right to be free from violence seems correlated with the right to study – which adolescents believe to be unalienable. In the vignette, Shahida stayed home from school after being harassed on the road and teased at school. Adolescents harshly judged the fictional incident and appealed to the right to be free from violence as it hampered Shahida's ability to study and safely do her schoolwork.

Box 2: The right to be free from violence

Adolescent boys and girls largely acknowledged the unfairness in being subject to acts of violence or for one's self-respect to be jeopardised. They believe perpetrators should be punished for their wrongful actions and stopped from re-offending. An 11-year-old boy in grade 7 from Sylhet urban district explained his beliefs on equal gender rights and the right to be free from violence:

My advice to Shahida [fictional character] would be to not be afraid in such situations. A woman deserves respect. She should give herself respect. When a boy comes to harass her, she should question why he is doing that and not be weakened by them. She needs to maintain her spirit and remain strong, and strive for equal rights. Women should also strive for justice. She should be able to protest to the people around her and [she] should not miss school and should go to school everyday. Changes during puberty are natural, nothing to worry about. Maybe [the boys] were brought up in slums, or may have grown up in colonies (low-cost housing societies), you know, bad places. And what they went through while growing up, they eventually became spoiled. They, too, have to be made to understand and be provided with different sorts of support. They should be sent to adolescent correction centres where they should be corrected, not just beaten... They have to amend their habits. The teachers have to make them understand that men and women have equal rights. Women are mothers. After the Prophet Muhammad was ordained by God, the first person who became a Muslim was a woman. They [boys] have to be inspired and motivated towards studies while also being taught the consequences of doing bad things. They should be convinced that girls are like their sisters.


Family violence

Parental violence

In the quantitative survey, 65% of adolescents report experiencing violence within their home. There is variation by gender (70% of boys compared to 62% of girls) and by region (71.7% of adolescents in Chittagong compared to 50.1% of adolescents in Sylhet).

Our qualitative data is mixed regarding the degree and severity of parental violence that adolescents face in the household. While all adolescents in the qualitative sample agree that parents are strict and scold their children when they are naughty, when they get into mischief or when they fail to study properly, some also get hit and 'beaten up' (13-year-old boy, grade 7, Sylhet rural district). The severity with which parents treat their children can translate into a break in communication between adolescents and their parents, causing adolescents to retreat within themselves to avoid being shouted at, punished or reprimanded. A 14-year-old boy (grade 8, Sylhet urban district) told us, 'No [I don't like my parents]. They scold me... I don't have the courage to tell them anything [about my wishes] because they scold me' – a sentiment that was echoed by a 14-year-old girl (grade 8, Chittagong rural district):

No, I can't [express my feelings at home]. I'm afraid. My father is a very angry man. If I go to say something, he will scold me. Like, I borrowed some money from my friend, which I could not repay. When I told my father, he was

 No, I can't [express my feelings at home]. I'm afraid. My father is a very angry man. If I go to say something, he will scold me.

(A 14-year-old girl (grade 8, Chittagong rural district))

so angry with me. He asked me, 'Why have you taken that money, didn't I give you money?' [I told him it] was raining... and that's why I borrowed money from her. I paid the rent of the car [to go home because of the rain].

Sibling violence

While many adolescents in the qualitative interviews talked about their siblings as supportive and helpful figures in their lives, some (particularly girls) noted tensions in sibling relationships. Some girls described being fearful of their brothers and being reprimanded or hit when they fail to confirm to their prescribed gender roles. Two quotes illustrate this:

[My] big brother... he will beat me directly. I am afraid of him basically... I mean, he told me not to use FB [Facebook] but I still used it... I don't know why my brother prohibits me from using it... [Maybe] he does it for my own good. I mean he will just give me a slap. Yes, I feel bad, I feel like dying. (15-year-old girl, grade 8, Chittagong urban district.)

I only watch videos... My brother will scold [me] if I make the videos. Sometimes I also think of making videos for TikTok. But if I do this, then my brother will beat me. He said, if I do something like that, it may become viral. If I do that, he will beat me. That's why I don't do that. I'm afraid. I'm afraid of my mother and brother, but not my father. (14-year-old girl, grade 8, Chittagong rural district.)

While the quantitative data does not disaggregate sibling violence from peer violence, 48% of adolescents reported experiencing peer violence (which could include violence perpetrated by siblings).

Child marriage

Across the sample, the average age at which adolescents would like to marry is 24.5 years. There is gender variance, however, with 23.6 years as the mean age for girls and 26 years the mean age for boys. While boys' expectations are in line the average age of marriage of males in Chittagong


(25.7 years) and Sylhet (27 years), the average age for girls in Chittagong and Sylhet are significantly lower at 18.6 years and 20.8 years, respectively (BBS 2018). In urban areas, adolescents' desired age of marriage is a year older than that of adolescents in rural areas (25 compared to 24), and adolescents attending government schools aspire for older age at first marriage than those at MPO schools (25.6 years vs 24.2 years). Finally, reflecting the role that poverty plays in early marriage, adolescents from poorer households have lower aspirations for age at marriage – 23.8 years compared to 25 years among adolescents in richer households.

While a married girl may be offered employment, her educational trajectory is likely to end abruptly upon marriage. In our qualitative data, a 14-year-old boy in grade 8 from Chittagong rural district explained what would happen in this case:

She will not be able to attend school after marriage. Nowadays, they [girls] are kept home [from school]



Adolescent girls at a madrasa in Rangamati, rural Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams

 She will not be able to attend school after marriage. Nowadays, they [girls] are kept home [from school] after marriage.

(A 14-year-old boy in grade 8 from Chittagong rural district)

after marriage. Everyone has jobs. Most girls work in garment factories [they can work after marriage]. I have seen many instances.

A few married girls may be offered the prospect of continuing education; however, all decisions are made by the girls' husband and in-laws, who decide her fate. A 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Sylhet rural district stated, 'If her husband wishes, then she can continue her study. Otherwise she doesn't.' Some husbands or in-laws may decide to allow the girl to continue her education but in most cases, according to adolescents, her main duties will revolve around housework and childcare, and possibly employment. A 14-year-old boy in grade 8 from Chittagong urban district noted that 'After the marriage her parents [and] in-laws tell her that, "no need to study, do the household chores". [Most married girls don't continue their studies after marriage]; and a 14-year-old boy in grade 7 from Chittagong urban district echoed this: 'No, [girls cannot continue studying after marriage] in our society, it is not possible because everybody thinks that girls are born only to take care of her family.' Some adolescents also mentioned that married girls are not allowed to continue education as that would bring shame on the couple, and the lax attitude of in-laws who would allow this would be seen to break with social tradition. Some adolescents reported that a married girl who continues with her education would be ridiculed and the subject of gossip.

Some adolescents mentioned that poverty is one of the main reasons why parents tend to marry their daughters off as soon as possible. Sometimes, having more than one daughter and no sons (or sons that are too young) can also lead parents to consider their daughters as a 'burden'. As a 14-year-old boy in grade 7 from Chittagong rural district explained:

Let's say there is a family with one boy and seven girls. The parents are old and the son is the only earning member of the family. Their situation is precarious; they cannot afford to wait [for the girls to reach 18]. That is why they are marrying off girls at 16.

A few parents of girl adolescents also shared their concern about not being able to continue their children's education because of economic hardship, which would leave them little option but to marry their daughter off. The mother of an adolescent girl from Chittagong urban district said:

I can't afford to send her to school any further than her intermediates. So if she is able to get a job after that and can pay for further studies, then she can do that. Otherwise, if I find a good suitor for her, then I will marry her off.

In nearly all the qualitative interviews, adolescents agreed that child marriage should not occur and girls should negotiate postponing marriage until the legal age (18 years) in order to complete their education, although only a quarter of adolescents (25%) feel they have a great deal of say about when they marry. When responding to a fictional vignette about a brother being concerned his parents are marrying off his sister far too young, adolescents widely agreed that the brother should speak to his parents and seek postponement of the marriage. A 14-year-old boy in grade 8 from Sylhet rural district stated:

I would tell Monir [fictional character] to go to his parents and tell them his sister doesn't want to marry. She would marry after she finishes her studies [and] I would advise her to study. She should tell her parents. She should explain in this manner. She could [also] talk with her friends. She could tell that she doesn't want to marry but her parents are forcing her to.

Adolescents value the right to education for girls and boys, and believe that girls have as much right to continue their education as boys do. Moreover, completing education is associated with personal growth, autonomy and respecting the law – all things prized by boys and girls alike. As a 13-year-old girl in grade 8 from Chittagong rural district stated:

In my area... marriages at early age don't happen much now... because everyone gets married at 18 years. It doesn't happen before that. Girls shouldn't be married off before they are 18 years old, because they are still small then. [Girls] can't continue their studies after marriage... If she marries after the age of 18 or after getting established then she can live and think independently.

Girls shouldn't be married off before they are 18 years old, because they are still small then. [Girls] can't continue their studies after marriage... If she marries after the age of 18 or after getting established then she can live and think independently.

(A 13-year-old girl in grade 8 from Chittagong rural district)

I am proud of my own health... I do physical exercise daily after waking... [I] run on the roads every morning [to keep fit].

(A 13-year-old boy in grade 7 also from Sylhet rural district)

Health and nutrition

General health

Quantitative survey data shows that 84% of adolescent boys and girls report their health to be good or very good, with no significant differences by gender or household vulnerability status. These perceptions of generally good health were matched in our qualitative dataset, with most adolescents reporting sound health, no chronic conditions and a detailed awareness of how to maintain a healthy, balanced lifestyle. Many adolescents commented on the importance of regular exercise in order to maintain a fit body and mind, finding creative ways to exercise during lockdown (for example). A 13-year-old boy in grade 8 from Sylhet rural district said, *'I exercise [to keep fit and healthy]. I have a mobile app for exercise. I follow that. It's helping me*

a lot [especially as I can't go out of the house now because of coronavirus]; while another 13-year-old boy in grade 7 also from Sylhet rural district recounted, *'I am proud of my own health... I do physical exercise daily after waking... [I] run on the roads every morning [to keep fit].'* Adolescent girls and boys also commented on the importance of staying neat and clean, taking daily showers, carefully washing their clothes and making sure they are free from germs and dirt.

Nutrition

From qualitative interviews, it emerged that adolescents have reliable knowledge of nutrition and what food habits promote a balanced diet. All adolescents mentioned eating rice, alongside fish, meat, vegetables, pulses, eggs and dairy. Parents and teachers both instructed adolescents on how to maintain a balanced diet, and some mentioned avoiding eating food from stalls or markets as it tends to be healthier than home-cooked food. A 13-year-old boy in grade 7 from Sylhet rural district explained:



Young adolescent girl in Rangamati, rural Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams

When my father can't earn, he can't bring food.

(A 16-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong rural district)

[I mostly eat] fish. [Also] meat and vegetables. I eat eggs. [I know what keeps the body fit and healthy and what is nutritious]. Nothing should be eaten excessively.

While having regular, healthy meals was the most common result from interviews, our quantitative data underscores that this is not always the case. In the survey, 12% of adolescents reported that their household had cut back on food in the month preceding the survey, with adolescents from poorer households more likely to report this compared to those from non-vulnerable households (22% and 5% respectively). Reflecting that MPO schools serve more marginalised populations than government schools do, 14% of households of adolescents attending MPO schools report cutting back food to adolescents in the last four weeks compared to only 5.2% of households of adolescents attending government schools. Qualitative data suggests that cutting back on food is associated with income cuts and lack of financial resources, as stated by a 16-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong rural district, 'When my father can't earn, he can't bring food.' In qualitative data, food cuts typically translated to skipping meals and having little nutritious food in the meals that are served. As a 16-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong urban district said, '*[I don't eat] three times [a day]. In the morning I have a bit of tea and in the afternoon if I get anything, then I eat it. If I don't, then I do not have it.*'


Puberty and sexual and reproductive health

On average adolescents seem knowledgeable about puberty and broadly aware of the bodily changes that girls and boys go through. Quantitative data reveals that 97% of adolescents have a source of information about puberty, with most adolescents naming their main source being either their parents (58% from mothers, 3.5% from fathers) or their teachers (16%). Qualitative data also finds that many discussed chapters in books dedicated to physical

changes and maturity linked to adolescence. Adolescent girls in particular reported that their mothers or older sisters told them how to handle menstruation only when 'I was of age' (14-year-old girl from Sylhet rural district). This led some girls to feel ill-prepared for handling menstruation and, '*it happens suddenly... I was terrified the first time it happened. I first thought there is a disease, isn't there? I was very scared at first*' (14-year-old girl from Chittagong urban district). While a basic understanding of puberty was a commonly recurring theme in qualitative interviews, adolescents seemed to lack in-depth knowledge of exactly what changes would occur (or already were occurring) in their bodies, what emotional changes take place, and if there is anything specific they should do. An 11-year-old boy in grade 7 from Sylhet urban district explained that:

Our teachers don't tell us anything about it [puberty]. We don't have much idea about it. Actually the book has stuff about it, the changes that happen. But it does not advise on what happens and how to deal with it. The mental change, nothing clear about it... When I grow up I will get to know more about it from my parents. But that's all I know now.

More in-depth teaching on puberty and sexual and reproductive health does appear to be offered at school – albeit sporadically and to older age groups. A headteacher in Sylhet rural district explained that an organisation conducted a session on sexual health rights for students in grades 9 and 10 at his school, which was well-received. Similarly, one madrasa headteacher from Chittagong rural district recalled an initiative on adolescent girls' reproductive rights, which was a big success throughout the school. While such positive initiatives exist, they appear to be sporadic in nature, rather than provided on a division-wide or rolling basis throughout the academic year⁴. In the quantitative data, 38.8% of adolescents report learning

 [Menstruation] happens suddenly... I was terrified the first time it happened. I first thought there is a disease, isn't there? I was very scared at first.

(A 14-year-old girl from Chittagong urban district)

⁴ According to a report by Rutgers (2016), Bangladesh's policy framework for adolescents' reproductive health is fragmented and has not been fully and effectively implemented in the education system due to adverse political climate, notably conservative religious opposition, and socio-cultural stigma. In 2013, the Education Board of Bangladesh introduced sexual and reproductive health topics in the school textbooks of grade 6 to 10 (Ali et al., 2020). However, in response to backlash from parents, teachers and senior officials of the Ministry of Education, the topics of SRH were edited in the textbooks (Nazme, 2016).

about puberty in school, with adolescents in Chittagong being more likely to report learning about puberty in school (41%) compared to adolescents in Sylhet (33%).

Some negative experiences with puberty and menstruation emerged in the qualitative findings, with adolescent boys and girls alike mentioning that puberty brings shyness and mental and physical changes associated with a reticence in speaking. Life appears less carefree than in childhood, and while boys and girls both mentioned this, girls mentioned it more frequently. A 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong urban district said:

[When puberty changes happen] adolescents feel lonely. They don't want to talk to anybody. They sit alone... The way they used to mix with others and play, they don't want to play like that anymore. They read books alone and sit in the class alone when everyone is playing.


Girls also mentioned their mothers prohibiting them from mixing with boys once they have their periods because 'Girls' bodies change, so then boys look badly at them. Perhaps... they take girls and rape them, right?' (13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong urban district).

Psychosocial well-being

Psychological distress and emotional resilience

Overall Patient Health Questionnaire 8 (PHQ-8) scores⁵ are low in the survey findings indicating minimal or no depression (average score of 2.6, and 1.3% of adolescents classified as being moderately to severely depressed). Nevertheless, girls are significantly more likely to exhibit signs of moderate to severe depression (1.9%) than boys (0.4%).

Qualitative data points to a variety of factors underlying adolescent distress, including education and exam-related worry, facing punishment by their parents, and economic hardship of the family. A 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from


 My father is very weak; he can't work properly. If he could work properly then he could fulfil all of our wishes.

(A 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong rural district)

Chittagong rural district stated, 'I feel sad because of my father's economic hardship, we can't eat properly. My father is very weak; he can't work properly. If he could work properly then he could fulfil all of our wishes.'

Other negative emotions stemming from the qualitative data related to not being able to play outdoors for a variety of reasons (boys mentioned this more than girls), and suffering from any physical malaise (girls mentioned the pain of menstruation as making them feel poorly both physically and emotionally). Separation from parents was also found to be a cause of distress among adolescents. Some adolescents – three of whom live in female-headed households – reported living with one parent only because of marital separation or death, which had led to stress and unhappiness. One 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong urban district said, 'I feel bad about one thing that my dad isn't here. Everyone's dads are here. Like when you go to school, my friend's dads go to school. My dad isn't here.' Loneliness mixed with education, poverty and health-related worries also emerged as major causes of adolescent distress, and were exacerbated due to covid-19. For data on covid-19 related tensions, see Box 3.

Setting independent aspirational goals and boosting emotional resilience for most adolescents in our qualitative research, was correlated to doing well in school (particularly in academic exams) and getting their parents' appreciation as a result. This is what makes adolescents feel best and most worthy. Many also discussed activities such as listening to music, writing daily journals and spending time with friends as pastimes that make them intrinsically happy and a few adolescent boys mentioned playing with their friends and winning at cricket or football games as positively impacting their well-being. On the other hand, a small minority of adolescent girls in the qualitative research explicitly reported that they feel good when they buy new dresses, and both boys and girls mentioned buying toys or gadgets as making them happy.

 At present, I feel I would be the happiest if I could go to school but I feel like I am on house arrest. I can't communicate with anyone properly. I feel bad about this.

(A 13-year-old girl in grade 8 from Chittagong rural district)

⁵ PHQ-8 is a modification of the PHQ-9 clinical diagnostic questionnaire that excludes the question about suicidal ideation. A score of 10 or higher characterises moderate-to-severe depression

Box 3: Covid-19 related distress in adolescents' lives

Qualitative data reveals that many adolescents correlated distress with the covid-19 school closures and missing their friends as a result. The ongoing school shutdown has forced them to live a home-centred life and hampered their daily communication with friends. One 14-year-old boy in grade 8 from Chittagong urban district said, *'I missed my friends and for the first three months, I couldn't reconcile myself with this separation.'* Findings also reveal that girls are more depressed during the pandemic compared to boys, as boys could still go out after lockdown was lifted whereas girls were not able to. One 13-year-old girl in grade 8 from Chittagong rural district explained, *'At present, I feel I would be the happiest if I could go to school but I feel like I am on house arrest. I can't communicate with anyone properly. I feel bad about this.'*

Adolescents also commonly mentioned education-related worries, and most respondents were anxious about the ongoing pandemic affecting their future education. Major sources of stress revolve around grades and exams, as crystallised by a 14-year-old boy in grade 8 from Chittagong urban district asked, *'When [will] the school open? When will the exam be scheduled? Do I get my A+ as I'm continuously studying? It's a worry.'* A 13-year-old girl in grade 8 from Chittagong urban district echoed his concerns: *'I will be taking the JSC [Junior School Certificate] exam this time... they are sometimes saying the exam will be held and then they are saying it won't. So I am very tense about this. We had an opportunity to score a good result... probably we won't be able to do that [anymore].'*

Poverty was another common source of tension among adolescents. Most reported that their families were facing economic hardship, forcing them to compromise certain needs. In qualitative interviews, parents of adolescents also acknowledged the pervasiveness of financial worries that affect them and their children, with the situation being particularly difficult because of covid. Not only have incomes gone down but prices of food and other essentials have increased. Some parents were worried about not being able to provide food for their children, as the mother of a young girl in urban Chittagong explained:

We could eat comfortably before. Prices [of groceries] were lower too, and now because of coronavirus, everything is more expensive. If we want to eat fish, we are unable to because of the high prices. Same goes for vegetables. We are just managing... but we haven't been able to have a proper meal as comfortably as before... I haven't been able to feed my daughter with the proper nutritious food she needs. As much as I would like to, I can't, due to my economic condition right now.

Many adolescents from rural areas also expressed worries about food shortages and lack of clothes as a result of covid-related financial constraints. A 13-year-old boy in grade 7 from Sylhet rural district said, *'We are out of money most of the time. So the financial crisis is my main issue... My father's earning is not enough to run this whole family.'* A 14-year-old boy in grade 8 from Chittagong rural district mentioned that he has taken up agricultural work for others, to earn money for his household.

Health-related tensions also emerged in the qualitative interviews, mainly around covid-19, with some adolescents fearful for their parents' health – referring both to covid-19 and chronic conditions. As an 11-year-old boy in grade 7 from Sylhet urban district noted, *'I had worries about my father, he was supposed to go to the doctor in Sylhet [and] I was a bit worried about coronavirus.'*

Support systems

Support from parents

Parental support for adolescents can be divided into two different forms: practical support and emotional support.

Practical support

Practical support from parents broadly encompasses the provision of basic necessities such as education, food, clothing, shelter, healthcare and catering to adolescents'

financial needs. Most adolescents reported that their parents are the ones who support their education-related costs, including paying for school fees and private tuition classes, buying materials and equipment for study, and giving pocket money to cover food and transportation expenses when going to school. An 11-year-old girl in grade 7 from Sylhet urban district noted that *'My father and sister inspired me, my mother and father bought me the equipment for the school's science project.'* A handful of adolescent boys said they received financial support

My father and sister inspired me, my mother and father bought me the equipment for the school's science project.

(A 11-year-old girl in grade 7 from Sylhet urban district)

for their education from their uncles as their fathers had passed away. In the quantitative data, over 98% of parents report paying for books and uniforms for schooling, as well as providing space and time for adolescents to study, as discussed in the section on education and learning.

Aside from education, most adolescents also mentioned that they receive money from their parents to buy their favourite things like bicycles, new dresses and journals or stationery. It was evident from the qualitative findings that the father plays the key role in ensuring monetary support for children because, for most adolescents, their father is the only member of their family who is earning.

Mothers provide practical support during girls' menstruation, since culturally menstruation is still associated with shame, and older females typically provide the support needed by a menstruating adolescent girl. The father of an adolescent girl from Chittagong urban district said, *'My daughter talks about this [periods] with her mother. Her mother helps her. I don't talk about this with her. I only ask her about what she ate and food and that is all.'*

Emotional support

Both quantitative and qualitative data suggest that adolescents are more likely to talk to their mothers than their fathers. In the quantitative data, for example, 94% of adolescents report talking to their mothers about religion, 31.5% of adolescents talk to their mothers about harassment at school, and 24% of girls and 8% of boys talk to their mothers about romantic relationships. In contrast, 79% of adolescents speak to their fathers about religion, 15% talk to fathers about harassment at school, and only 5% of girls and 3.5% of boys talk to their fathers about romantic relationships. Qualitative data shows that adolescents share their good or bad news with their mother first.

While explaining the reasons why they are closer to their mothers, adolescents reported that their fathers are often unavailable but their mothers are typically at home and open to listening to them. The father of an adolescent from Chittagong urban district said, *'My children are more*

My children are more close to their mother and they talk to her. I don't know about that. I don't spend much time at home.

(A father of an adolescent from Chittagong urban district)

close to their mother and they talk to her. I don't know about that. I don't spend much time at home.' Similarly, most fathers also stated that their children are closer to their mothers and are often afraid of sharing their feelings with the father. The father of one adolescent girl said, *'They haven't shared any fear or personal choice with me yet. They feel fear of sharing with me, so they don't.'*

A few adolescents, however, (mostly from urban areas) mentioned sharing their emotions with both parents, perhaps reflecting a more 'middle-class' lifestyle. Most rural fathers are more involved in earning money for the family and, as a result, mothers are the ones who take greater care of their children's emotional needs. Some adolescents, on the other hand, reported that they avoid sharing their worries with parents and rather preferred opening up to their friends. A 13-year-old boy in grade 8 from Sylhet rural district said, *'I am not free with my parents. We can't share everything with parents. We can share everything with our friends. We can frankly say anything to them.'* On average, adolescent boys mentioned sharing their emotions with their friends more than girls did.

Support from teachers

Most adolescents reported that they received support from their teachers (whether in schools or through private classes) whenever they face study-related problems. This finding about willingness on the part of teachers to assist their students was reinforced during key informant interviews. A female teacher from urban Chittagong stated that they organise a student-teacher dialogue twice a month:

In our school, we gather our students once in every 15 days. Then we discuss (in groups) about students' good and bad sides in school. All of our teachers discuss these in the first 5–6 minutes, when we enter the class.

Aside from studying help, teachers reported that they do not have any professional counsellors (e.g. psychologists) in school and so they tried to counsel their students themselves. One teacher from Sylhet urban district said:



No counselling programmes here. We try to solve each problem with our caring. We try to solve these as soon as possible. Suppose a girl gets senseless inside the school compound or starts acting crazy, we immediately send them to the doctors without delaying a second. We summon the parents as soon as possible. We care for our students but have no counselling for them.

Voice and agency

Making decisions and sharing opinions

In the qualitative data collection, most adolescents (both boys and girls) stated that they are able to share their thoughts and opinions with their parents and other family members. The quantitative data supports this, with 77% of adolescents reporting that they are comfortable sharing their opinion with elders such as parents, and girls being slightly more likely to feel comfortable doing so (79% vs 74%). A 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong urban district said:

I am very free with my parents. It is better to have a friendly relationship with one's parents. If I am afraid of my parents, I won't be able to share my inner thoughts and feelings with them. And that may have a very negative effect on my life.

However, analysis of the qualitative data highlights that on average, boys get more opportunity than girls to share their

opinions and desires with their family. A 12-year-old boy in grade 7 from Sylhet rural district explained:

Boys are freer than girls with parents. Most parents listen to their son because they think their son will earn money for the family after getting older. But their daughter will go to her in-laws' house after getting married, that's why they give importance to their son. According to Bangladesh's constitution, both boys and girls are supposed to have equal rights but not in real life. In real life, boys are getting more importance than girls.

Although four teachers interviewed stated that adolescents' opinions and thoughts are being valued more now compared to when they were adolescents, this was also found to be gender-biased, as a few teachers stated that parents do not value girls' opinion as much as boys'. A female teacher from Sylhet rural district said, 'Maybe 2% or 5% of girls can talk about their opinion. But boys can say more. Previously, boys used to marry the girls according to their family's decision, now they choose for themselves. Family also agrees.'

DD According to Bangladesh's constitution, both boys and girls are supposed to have equal rights but not in real life. In real life, boys are getting more importance than girls.

(A 12-year-old boy in grade 7 from Sylhet rural district)

Decision-making about oneself

Most adolescents reported that they are able to make decisions about what they prefer doing, including education-related decisions. In our quantitative data, 91% of adolescents report that they have a great deal of say in how much education to complete. This notwithstanding, qualitative data reveals that girls have significantly less voice when it comes to continuing their studies and marriage is a dominant factor that impacts girls' ability to make decisions about her education and life (this has been discussed in more detail in an earlier section of this report – see child marriage subsection).

On the topic of taking up employment, a 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong rural district stated: *'Boys can do whatever jobs they want, girls can't. If the girls study too much then... they say, "what can you do with that much study, you better get married.'*" In a few cases, the parents of adolescent girls also stated that they don't want their daughter to get a job. The mother of an adolescent girl from Sylhet urban district said:

It is embarrassing to even think about girls going for jobs. They will work in the kitchen, not more than that. Suppose I am sending my boy to work, but it will be shameful if I send my daughters for jobs too.

In qualitative interviews, adolescent boys and girls alike reported that boys get more opportunity to make decisions about their life than girls, a finding confirmed by survey data, which shows that 69% of adolescents agree or partially agree with the statement 'culture makes it harder for girls to achieve their goals'. To understand the reasons why boys have more decision-making opportunity than girls, most adolescents reported that boys had more courage than girls to express their opinion to family members.

Qualitative data also highlights that, when it comes to decision-making about oneself, girls from rural areas faced more discrimination than girls from urban areas. In the quantitative data, adolescents in rural areas are less likely to have a great deal of say on what they do in their free time than those living in urban areas (56% vs 63%). A few female respondents even mentioned not having any say when it comes to choosing which dress to buy: *'I wear long dresses because my father doesn't like short dresses. He doesn't like women wearing any short dresses. I like short kameez but I wear these very rarely'* (13-year-old girl, grade 8, Chittagong rural district). Furthermore, one male teacher from a madrasa in the Chittagong rural area mentioned that

There are differences in the families. In the elite class, girls can make their own decisions. But in the middle class and lower class, girls cannot make their own decisions.

(A male teacher from a madrasa in the Chittagong rural area)

social class and education might be the most critical factors to ensure adolescent girls' voice and agency in a community:

There are differences in the families. In the elite class, girls can make their own decisions. But in the middle class and lower class, girls cannot make their own decisions. Firstly, parents are their guardians, and they don't have the scope to go against their parents' will. Secondly, education plays a role here too. I think education and financial matters both are involved here.

Decision-making related to mobility

Decision-making related to mobility was also discussed in qualitative interviews, and most adolescents reported that they can go out of the house provided they receive permission from their parents. However, obtaining parental permission was easier for boys than girls. Although many adolescents mentioned time restrictions and curfews, these rules were found to be more stringent for girls. Gender differences in mobility did not come out as strongly in the quantitative data, with 60% of adolescents reporting leaving their house every day, with no differences by gender. Despite this, attitudes in the quantitative data support qualitative findings, with 79% of adolescents agreeing or partially agreeing that girls need their parents' protection more than boys, with girls more likely to claim this compared to boys (82% versus 74%). Girls seem to secure parental permission to go out if they stay close to their homes and promise to be accompanied by parents or friends if they go further away. While still seeking permission, boys are much freer to venture beyond the immediate vicinity of their home. Mobility seems to diminish with age for girls. A 14-year-old girl in grade 7 from Sylhet rural district explained how her mobility became restricted as she aged: *'I could move anywhere when I was a child. I could travel to some places. Now I can't go anywhere being grown up. I can't play outside.'* Most parents of adolescent girls also stated that they took extra precautions when their daughters were going out. A 54-year-old father of two



adolescent girls from Sylhet rural district explained how he was selective when his girls wanted to go out:

I permit them in some specific programmes where there is no risk for them. Like, in events which gather many people. I let them go there. Because people are going there. So there is no risk.

In key informant interviews, female teachers confirmed the gender and age differences related to freedom of mobility. A female teacher from Sylhet rural district said:

Boys usually get whatever they want, but girls do not. Parents allow their sons to roam around with friends, give money for tours. But they worry a lot when these things come to their daughter. Sometimes girls are not allowed to go to tours even if the teachers are going. Sometimes if the daughter-in-law is a teacher, even she cannot get permission to go on a study tour.

Very seldom in qualitative interviews did we capture dissenting voices speaking out against rigid gender norms mandating that girls stay indoors to maintain social decorum. Only one girl (aged 14, grade 8, Chittagong urban district) seemed to break with society's expectations for

her mobility, and lamented the differences in behaviour allowed for her and her brother:

People comment when I walk around the village. Am I expected to stay cooped up in the house all day long!? They make snide comments such as: 'She is a big girl now but she still goes out of the house.' They are completely silent when a boy does the same thing. For instance, when my brother stays out until 10 pm my mother doesn't say anything. But if I [do anything]... they scold me profusely.

Household decision-making

Most adolescents in the qualitative study did not report any kind of participation in household decision-making. Only a few reported that though their father is the one who makes decisions in the family, they are often able to share their opinion. However, the quantitative data does point to some realms in which adolescents have some decision-making power about their role in the household. The vast majority (90%) of adolescents have at least a little say in how much time they spend helping around the house, and 48% report that they have a great deal of say in this. Moreover, quantitative survey data highlights gender differences in adolescent voice and agency in the

Parents allow their sons to roam around with friends, give money for tours. But they worry a lot when these things come to their daughter. Sometimes girls are not allowed to go to tours even if the teachers are going.

(A female teacher from Sylhet rural district)

household. The survey shows that 41% of adolescents agree or partially agree that a man should have the final word on decisions in the household, with boys more likely to agree with this than girls (46% versus 38%). Similarly, a few teachers in the qualitative study stated that decision-making in the household has increased for boys nowadays. A female teacher from Sylhet rural district said:

Previously they [adolescent boys] used to follow the tradition by obeying their elders' decisions, only the grandfather or father had the power of decision-making. Now they [boys] want to do things by themselves. They can make decisions. Those decisions are being valued but not very much.

Expressing voice in school settings

Most adolescents reported that they are able to express their opinion and share their thoughts without any gender discrimination in school settings, where girls and boys are given equal opportunity for participation. However, a few adolescents recounted that girls receive additional opportunities for expressing opinions in school – such as school field trip destinations or in deciding classroom rules. This is reflected in the quantitative data. Overall, 46% of adolescents feel that they can speak up in class often, and 51% feel they can speak up sometimes, with no gender differences. The quantitative data also reveals there may be some differences by household wealth, with adolescents from poorer households less likely to feel they can speak up in class often (39% compared to 51% of adolescents from better off households). All of the teachers interviewed claimed that they actively try to increase opportunities for all their students to express voice and agency. One of the male head teachers from Sylhet rural district explained how he encourages his students to come to him and share their thoughts:

All the students have been told that they can freely share their problems with me. Teachers generally scold the students, even some teachers of my school.

If a student approaches a teacher to inquire whether they can go on a picnic, they reprimand them. There are teachers like that. I tell my students to come to me whenever they want. I tell them that I am their guardian, they can come to me with any kind of problems.

Role models

In the quantitative survey, 75% of adolescents reported that they have a role model. Among those adolescents, 42% identified their role model as being within their family and 9% looked up to individuals in their neighbourhood. Overall, 52% of adolescents have a role model outside of their household and boys are more likely to have role models outside of their households than girls (55% vs 49%). Qualitative data confirms this, with adolescents identifying their role models from within their homes, school and community.

In qualitative interviews, adolescents most commonly chose their role model based on an individual's profession, educational attainment, piety, personality or conduct. Most girls promptly mentioned their mothers as their primary role model, mostly because of their nurturing and hardworking qualities. However, one adolescent girl age 12 in grade 7, living in Chittagong rural district emphasised her mother's education: *'[I want to become] like my mother because she is an educated person. I like my mother's behaviour.'* When probed further, girls then mentioned other females within their family or neighbourhood to whom they look up, particularly because of their prestigious profession (e.g. teacher, doctor) and self-sufficiency. One 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong rural district considers her paternal cousin as her role model:

She is a teacher. She is married and stays at her in-laws' house. She manages her own household and teaches school students as well. And then she also teaches in private classes. She does a lot of work. That's why I want to be like her.

Some girls were found to admire other women who are perceived as religious and polite. As one 14-year-old girl (grade 8, Chittagong urban district) said of her neighbour,

‘[I want to become] like my mother because she is an educated person. I like my mother's behaviour.

(An adolescent girl age 12 in grade 7, living in Chittagong rural district)

'She is very religious and always very helpful. She never denies me anything. She doesn't do anything that might hurt or pain someone.' Most adolescent girls, therefore, were found to admire those female individuals who conform to expectations and to the gender roles demarcated for women. However, a few girls were found to look up to male individuals in professions conventionally dominated by men, such as engineering and banking. A 13-year-old girl (in grade 7, Chittagong urban district) who described her sister's male friend as her role model explained:

Because he prays five times a day and is studying at BUET (Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology) now. He prays and is always busy with his study. If his friends don't understand the subject, he would explain it to them.

Adolescent boys, on the other hand, were found to look up to various male individuals within their family and community who hold socially acceptable and prestigious positions in society such as army or police personnel, teacher, doctor, sportsperson, freedom fighter or politician. One 13-year-old boy (grade 8, Sylhet rural district)

mentioned his father's friend who was a freedom fighter in the Liberation War of Bangladesh:

He was a freedom fighter but he is an aged person now. I like everything in him. He prays five times a day, he never cheated anyone, never does harm to anyone. He is a good man. A freedom fighter, he was ready to sacrifice his life for the country.

Some boys mentioned individuals who are good students, know English well, are pious and well-mannered. *'I want to be like an uncle of mine. He never uses rude or abusive words when talking to others and he doesn't take drugs. He doesn't tolerate any injustice,'* said a 13-year-old boy in grade 7 from Chittagong urban district. Unlike adolescent girls, very few boys mentioned their parents (particularly mothers) as their role models. Boys were more often found to admire the wealthy and influential individuals in their family and locality. As one 14-year-old boy in grade 7 from Sylhet urban district said, *'[I want to be] like my uncle [who works at a tea garden]. He is big [wealthy], works, earns money and helps my parents, that is why.'*



Adolescents at a madrasa in Rangamati, rural Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams

He was a freedom fighter but he is an aged person now. I like everything in him. He prays five times a day, he never cheated anyone, never does harm to anyone. He is a good man. A freedom fighter, he was ready to sacrifice his life for the country.

(A 13-year-old boy (grade 8, Sylhet rural district))

Economic empowerment

Employment

Although most adolescents in both the qualitative and quantitative sample do not work – only 4.2% of adolescents work – they handle small amounts of money (an average of US\$0.10 in the qualitative data). The quantitative data indicates that 56% of adolescents (19% of girls and 52% of boys) have had money they control in the 12 months prior to the survey. Adolescents in Chittagong are less likely to have money they control (51%) than adolescents in Sylhet (68%). While adolescents in secondary school are mostly dependent on their family for economic support for education and buying their favourite things, some are also occasionally given pocket money. Mothers seem to hand out money to children more readily than fathers, with only two adolescent girls reported that their father gave them pocket money directly. One 13-year-old boy in grade 7 from Chittagong urban district said, *‘When I need money I tell my mother not my father. She takes it from my father. I tell my mother and not my father because he is out most of the time.’* A few adolescents also reported that relatives (mostly uncles and aunts) gave them pocket money.

A minority of adolescents in the qualitative sample reported that they were involved in paid work such as agricultural, tuition and workshop jobs. A boy aged 14 (grade 8) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, who is enrolled in school, mentioned that he and his family earn an income working for others: *‘We do various work, including cultivating crops for others.’* Due to the pandemic, however, at the time of the qualitative interviews, adolescents were not able to continue their agricultural and tuition jobs and some started working in different types of shops, with an average daily wage of US\$3. However, there were also reports of more informal sources of income, such as a young boy in grade 8 from rural Sylhet who helps his mother look after and sell poultry.

He mentioned sometimes asking his mother for some of the money from the sales.

Among working adolescents, the most common forms of labour were: non-agricultural wage work (45%); farm work (21%); and other types of employment (19%).

Saving and spending money

Saving patterns vary by gender and location. In the quantitative survey, 22% of adolescents reported having savings in the past 12 months prior to survey, with no difference by gender or division of residence (Chittagong or Sylhet), but adolescents from poorer households significantly less likely to have savings than those from wealthier households (18% vs 26%). Urban adolescents received more pocket money (when they went to school pre-covid-19) than rural adolescents, and they saved more as well. Buying food, books and dresses (especially for girls) were cited as the most common way for adolescents to spend their pocket money. To fulfil their needs, most adolescents reported that they saved money. A 14-year-old boy in grade 8 from Chittagong urban district said:

Ammu [mother] doesn't always give me money to buy story books. She gives me now and then [and] I spend the money I save. I save a portion of the tiffin money that ammu gives me. I reduce my tiffin consumption and save the money.

A few adolescents also mentioned that they spend their savings for household needs if necessary. One 14-year-old boy in grade 7 from Chittagong rural district, who started working during the pandemic, said:

I always give whatever money I get to ammu [mother]. When I first got my scholarship money I gave it to ammu but ammu doesn't keep it so I give it to my apu [elder sister] or abbu [father]. They are used for various household expenses. I don't keep money apart from spending some of the money on snacks, which I have at 10 am.

Another adolescent boy in grade 8 from Sylhet rural district stated that he bought poultry with his savings. He said, *‘I have many hens, ducks too. I can sell them if my mother permits me. She keeps the money and if I want to buy something I can ask for money from her.’* A 13-year-old boy in grade 7 from Sylhet rural district mentioned spending money on friends on shared socialising: *‘Suppose, I can't see my friend for a long time. We met today after a long time. Then I take him to the*

DD I always give whatever money I get to ammu [mother]. When I first got my scholarship money I gave it to ammu but ammu doesn't keep it so I give it to my apu [elder sister] or abbu [father]. They are used for various household expenses
(A 14-year-old boy in grade 7 from Chittagong rural district)

tea stall and eat some food with him.' This behaviour was not mentioned by any adolescent girl in our sample.

Involvement of adolescents in unpaid household work

The quantitative data shows that most adolescents contribute to household work, though there are significant gender differences. On average, adolescents spend about 50 minutes a day on household chores, though girls spend an hour whereas boys spend around 40 minutes. Some parents believe that there is a generational change in practices surrounding household chores from an early age. The father of an adolescent boy from Sylhet urban district stated that the new generation is not as keen to do household chores compared to their generation. He said:

DD I bring water from our tube well, cut vegetables for my family. One of my brothers keeps the shop and another studies. They don't do any household chores. They [would] feel ashamed.
(A 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Sylhet rural district)

Back then, girls would play some important roles in their families. They used to take care of important household chores. Both boys and girls would attend to their respective household chores upon returning home from school. But now, it is hard to find even five or six such dutiful boys or girls among 100.

In qualitative interviews, the mostly commonly reported unpaid household tasks are: helping mothers with cooking, cleaning the house, taking care of livestock, and going to the market for buying and selling goods. Some adolescents also mentioned looking after sick and elderly family members, and older adolescents are expected to look after younger siblings. However, it was evident from the qualitative dataset that girls are more involved in unpaid household works than boys. All of the girl respondents reported that they helped



Young adolescent boy working in a fish factory in Rangamati, rural Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams

their mothers with cooking and cleaning while very few adolescent boys did so. One 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Sylhet rural district explained:

I bring water from our tube well, cut vegetables for my family. One of my brothers keeps the shop and another studies. They don't do any household chores. They [would] feel ashamed.

Traditionally, in Bangladesh, gendered norms dictate that girls do all the unpaid household chores whereas boys do other, paid activities. Adolescents have largely accepted these norms, with a 12-year-old boy in grade 7 from Sylhet rural district confirming that:

Girls will do household chores, they have been doing it since ancient times, and they will raise ducks and chickens in the house. On the other hand, boys will take care of domestic animals, help their father with his work. They [girls] are different because of the division of labour. I mean, what boys can do, girls can't and what girls can do, boys can't.

A 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong rural district explained why her younger brother does not do housework:

▶ Apu [brother], he is a boy. Does a boy do a girl's work? They are busy with their studies.

(A 13-year-old girl in grade 7 from Chittagong rural district)

'Apu [brother], he is a boy. Does a boy do a girl's work? They are busy with their studies.' The qualitative interviews showed that girls from rural areas were found to do more household work than girls from urban areas, with most rural girls reporting that they helped with cooking, cleaning the house, and fetching water. Urban girls' household work, however, seemed limited to helping their mothers do cleaning. While discussing the involvement of adolescents in household chores, the mother of one of the adolescent respondents from Sylhet urban district reported that 'She only does the normal household chores like making the bed or cooking or cleaning'.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

This baseline report has captured quantitative and qualitative research findings that complement each other to shed light on the reasons behind poor learning outcomes and high secondary school dropout rates among adolescents in Chittagong and Sylhet divisions. By using a capabilities framework to understand what factors constrain or facilitate the development of adolescent capabilities, we sought to understand the determinants of educational continuity and attainment for adolescent girls and boys, as well as to inform the forthcoming roll-out of the Adolescent Student Programme (ASP). Below, we provide findings summaries by capability domain, and suggest some priority actions for age- and gender-responsive policy and programming that would support adolescents to develop their full capabilities.



Education and learning

The belief that education is a social good and has intrinsic value has been internalised by adolescents, their parents and their communities. If they are not able to continue to the levels they aspire to, it is because of other conflicting realities or gendered norms that constrain individual choice. As in previous GAGE research with adolescents across Bangladesh (Ahmed et al., 2021; Oakley et al., 2020; Mitu et al., 2019), our data found high educational aspirations among adolescent boys and girls alike, which are reflected in their ambitious professional aspirations. While parents typically support both boys' and girls' educational trajectories, adolescents believe that parents prioritise boys' education over that of girls. School life and studies occupy a very central space in adolescents' lives. Adolescents are aware of and concerned about the quality of education and whether the atmosphere in school is conducive to their studies. They are also concerned about whether they are safe from corporal punishment by teachers and from harassment (sexual or otherwise) by others, both in school and on the way to and from school.

Our findings suggest the following key priorities:

- **Increase the share of female teachers at the secondary level to improve adolescent outcomes.** The GoB should implement teacher-hiring policies conducive to employing female teachers, so that schools are encouraged to have a gender balance or quota within the school faculty. Policies should also incentivise the deployment of female teachers, especially in disadvantaged areas including Haor and Char areas in Sylhet and remote areas in Chittagong.
- **Encourage schools to use grants from the Ministry of Education (MoE) for improving adolescent student outcomes** and streamline the grant application process. When applying for and disbursing performance-based grants, schools should be encouraged to prioritise what matters most to adolescents, including the provision of separate functional toilets; dedicated workshops on adolescent-sensitive topics; and awareness-raising on the implications of child marriage. Grants to schools could be earmarked to fund these items on a priority basis.
- **Further empower educators and administrators.** Teacher training should increasingly incorporate adolescent-specific topics, such as the importance of non-violent discipline and the pedagogy skills required to deliver adolescent-sensitive content.
- **Implement and ensure the uniformity of government initiatives to improve the quality of education in both government and MPO schools, in rural and urban areas.** None of the respondents mentioned that their school was part of a particular quality-improvement initiative, suggesting that coverage of these initiatives is insufficient or uneven.



Bodily integrity and freedom from violence

Violence or the threat of violence (including sexual harassment) – in school, on the way to school or in the home – has been recognised in the literature and internationally as one of the factors that can result in the loss of motivation to study and can lead parents to feel that it is not safe for their daughters to continue in education (Bondestam, 2020; Nahar et al., 2013; Parvej et al., 2020; UNESCO and UN Women, 2016). Our findings show that adolescent boys and girls alike feel that girls have a degree of responsibility in preventing negative experiences at school, and should modify their behaviour to avoid harassment. It is concerning but not surprising that prevailing social norms make women and girls responsible for any violence they face from men, having internalised this notion at a young age. While there seems to be an awareness of the right to be free from violence, it was only the most confident and outspoken adolescents who were able to speak up and state that experiencing violence would harm a person's self-respect, and that victims of violence should protect their right to bodily integrity and seek punishment for perpetrators. Again, interestingly, our findings show that adolescents correlated the right to be free from violence with the right to study, with one enabling the other. Child marriage remains an area of

concern, both nationally and at the level of individual lives. While adolescents gave the ideal average age for marriage as 24.5 years, national statistics show that this is likely to remain a fantasy, especially for girls. Boys and girls were both able to elaborate on the negative aspects of child marriage such as dropping out of education, risks involved in early childbirth, and the thwarting of individual growth and autonomy.

Another common barrier preventing adolescent girls from continuing their education is the onset of menarche and having to manage menstrual hygiene. While the challenges involved have been known for decades, including the need for physical infrastructure that provides single-sex toilets for girls that are clean, safe and private, our findings show that girls still experience difficulties in managing menstruation in the school setting. While there is some sign of social norm change in that adolescents are less willing to accept this as a reason for missing school, teachers and school authorities still seem to feel that it is girls' responsibility to deal with 'their problem'.

Our findings suggest the following key priorities:

- **Combat sexual harassment of adolescents in school** by raising teacher and student awareness of what constitutes sexual harassment, its prevalence in school and on the way to and from school, and the harm this



Adolescent girl who has a hearing impairment and works in a Handicap School and Rehabilitation Centre in Rangamati as a volunteer assistant teacher © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE

causes. Ensure that mechanisms for complaints and redress are in place, anonymous, functioning and accessible to adolescents. There are High Court directives for the establishment of anti-sexual harassment committees in educational institutions that also detail actions to be taken. Although these have been disseminated to schools, these directives need to be followed up and their implementation monitored, as our research did not find evidence of adolescents' knowledge of such committees.

- **Prevent child marriage by continuing to build awareness among students and at the community level of the harm child marriage brings** and the need for adolescents to complete their schooling, in order to counter the propagation of early marriage practices. Schools should continue to promote improved access to child marriage reporting using government-approved, dedicated hotlines.
- **Enable married girls to continue their education** by promoting and providing flexible, part-time courses they can have access to, with a special focus on SRH education, while boosting community awareness on the importance of continuing education once married.
- **Prioritise menstrual hygiene management facilities at school**, by providing separate and private functional toilets for girls and boys, maintaining the cleanliness of the facilities, and distributing sanitary products to help girls cope with their periods at school. These improvements are particularly necessary in rural schools.
- **Raise awareness among teachers, school committees, parents and education authorities of the need to eradicate corporal punishment in schools.** The MoE issued guidelines to ban corporal punishment in schools (which was also prohibited by law in 2011) and it is imperative that these guidelines are enforced fully to prevent physical and psychological harm to adolescents in school.



Health and nutrition

Adolescents' knowledge of puberty and sexual and reproductive health seemed inadequate (limited to a basic understanding of menstruation for girls) and teaching of the subject is also not timely, since it is provided only when menarche starts. The adolescents in our sample mentioned various negative psychological aspects of puberty such as increased shyness, isolation

and restrictions. While adolescents seem to have good knowledge of general health and nutrition, the advent of covid-19 seems to have been a cause for worry.

Our findings suggest the following key priorities:

- **Provide more comprehensive reproductive health education to adolescents.** Topics such as puberty, sexuality and sexual consent should be covered so that adolescents have enough knowledge to avoid unwanted sexual relations and early pregnancy.
- **Prioritise enhancing food security for vulnerable households** by providing livelihoods and training opportunities for adolescents to catalyse household and self-resilience, and offset income loss resulting in food cutbacks.



Psychosocial well-being

The research brought out important aspects of adolescent psychosocial well-being. Doing well in school and in exams, their parents' appreciation of academic performance, spending time with their friends, buying new clothes, and enjoying activities such as listening to music or playing sports – these are some of the things that make adolescent boys and girls feel good. Although the average PHQ-8 scores are low, girls' scores are higher than boys, demarcating additional levels of sadness and stress for girls. In addition, the survey has shown higher rates of distress among adolescents from vulnerable households. Some of the reasons for feeling sad include being cut off from friends, and worries about poverty and the future of their education. These can be overcome or allayed by practical and emotional support from parents, siblings, friends and teachers.

Our findings suggest the following key priorities:

- **Encourage further collaboration between the MoE and the Ministry of Health at the local level to address adolescent mental health.** In order to facilitate access to mental health support, greater interdepartmental vision and services are required. This could potentially be done through Union Health Complex Centers, as well as investing in dedicated teacher training on responding to student mental health needs.
- **Invest in community-based psychosocial services,** including in para-counsellors dedicated to addressing adolescent needs, particularly in areas where adolescents are receiving limited psychosocial support.

- **Enhance and scale up awareness raising on adolescent psychosocial needs.** At present, recognition of adolescents' psychosocial health needs is extremely limited despite the GoB Adolescent Health Strategy putting this centre stage. Support would include more outreach by providing information to parents, teachers and community leaders about adolescent mental health concerns, and enabling adolescents to access counselling services at school and in the community.



Voice and agency

The continuing prevalence of discriminatory gender norms and how they translate into discriminatory practices at the level of adolescents' voice and agency was very apparent. While most adolescents felt that they could contribute to making decisions for themselves and were consulted by their parents, they also said that boys were able to give their opinions more freely in the family. Findings show that boys also have more freedom of mobility compared to girls, whose freedom reduces as they age. This discrimination is further compounded for girls in rural areas. With regard to making decisions about their lives, adolescent boys and girls both reported that boys get more opportunity to make decisions than girls, and the survey found that 69% of respondents agree with the statement that 'culture makes it harder for girls to achieve their goals'. Both adolescents and adults felt strongly that after marriage a girl's agency would be further reduced (due to her role and age) and that she would not be able to continue her education even if she wanted to. It is only in school settings that girls felt they might have more opportunity to express their opinion than boys. The research did not find any substantive opportunities for adolescents to participate in or contribute to community-level activities or decision-making.

Our findings suggest the following key priorities:

- **Involve adolescents in community-level activities to develop their leadership skills and provide scope to express their voice and agency beyond the household.** Community services such as sanitation, health and cleanliness often use adult volunteers only, with organised groups of adolescents (such as Girl Guides and Boy Scouts) often limited to middle-income groups.
- **Amplify school-level group activities,** for example, the ASP guidelines envisage strengthening existing student cabinet committees to increase student-wide

engagement. Student cabinets are responsible for organising sports, culture and co-curricular activities, and providing opportunities for adolescents to express their voice and agency.



Economic empowerment

Finally, as the adolescents in our sample mostly attended secondary school, only 5% reported being involved in paid work. However, most have experience in managing small amounts of money, administering their savings and buying things on a small scale. They are also aware of the financial situation and constraints of their families. One area where the findings suggest glaring gender differences is the involvement of adolescents in unpaid household work, with girls doing disproportionately more of such work. This is reinforced by gendered norms, which seem accepted by adolescents – boys and girls alike.

Our findings suggest the following key priorities:

- **Improve financial literacy and access to banking services.** There is a need to educate adolescents in financial literacy so that they are better able to manage money and finances, and understand savings. Since many adolescents do not have access to banking services, there is a pressing need for policy dialogue with mobile financial service providers and banking associations to introduce less rigid criteria to allow students to open accounts, especially in rural areas.
- **Provide 'home economics' classes in school so as to raise awareness about the value of unpaid household work.** It is imperative that boys and girls, and men and women, recognise the value of unpaid household and care work to encourage a more equal gender distribution of these tasks. With greater rural-urban domestic migration as well as international migration, adolescents are seeing adult women take on greater roles in agriculture and family businesses. However, traditional gender norms around (unpaid) household work are proving very sticky and resistant to change. A transformative approach to gender norms needs to be introduced for adolescents at the school and family level. Building awareness through formal (e.g. policies and programmes) and informal channels (e.g. role models, the media, community-level dialogues) can help transform gender norms and reduce gender disparity (Leon-Himmelstine, 2020).

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Annex 1: Fictional vignettes used for virtual qualitative data collection and probing questions

Vignette 1: Exploring themes: sexual harassment / puberty / menstruation hygiene management

Shahida is a girl in grade 7 who loves going to school. At school she learns about interesting subjects and gets to be with her best friend. Her older sister also goes to the same school and Shahida sometimes sees her sister gossip with her friends at break time, and wonders what it will be like to be 17. She once saw her sister being teased by a group of boys on the way to school, and this made her very uncomfortable. The next day her sister did not go to school. She also knows that her sister sometimes fakes a headache and stays home from school when she has her period. Shahida decides, however, to keep quiet about these observations and speaks about them to no one.

1. How realistic is this in your school? (Be specific about the various parts of the story: how realistic is the teasing? / the menstrual management?). Probe on why this happens.
2. How does this story make you feel?
3. What would you advise Shahida to do? Why?
4. What do you think Shahida's sister did? Why?
5. Why do you think Shahida's sister stayed home the next day? (Probe on whether it had more to do with the harassment or potential lack of menstrual hygiene management facilities)
6. Why were the boys teasing Shahida's sister? What would a teacher do if he/she saw?
7. What aspects of being 17 do you think Shahida wonders about? What changes happen to an adolescent's body as they grow up? How do most adolescents

feel about these changes? (eg: scared/apprehensive/positive)? Do most teens know that these things will be happening to their bodies? If so, how do they know? (Who helps them learn?) (Probe for school, teacher, club, health worker or clinic, radio, internet)

8. What might worry Shahida about growing up?
9. Thinking about your age, what do people of your age and gender have strong feelings about? How do they express their feelings?
10. What are the responsibilities of girls and boys of your age? Of Shahida's sister's age?

Vignette 2: Exploring themes: child marriage / gender norms

Monir is 13 and goes to secondary school. He lives with his mother, father and two older sisters (14 and 16). He knows that his parents are planning to marry off his 16-year-old sister, Anya, and he suspects the man is much older than she is. Monir's parents say that as she gets older, it is important that Anya marries because that is what is expected. Monir knows that Anya does not want to get married, but he has always felt his sisters are shyer than he is and have a difficult time defending their wishes to their parents. He is not sure what to do.

Questions/prompts:

1. How realistic is this in your community?
2. What would you advise Monir to do?
3. What would you advise Anya to do?
4. Who can Anya speak to?
5. How do you think Anya might be feeling about this arranged marriage? (If she feels bad, what aspects do you think she feels bad about?)



Mohammed Emon (18) has worked in construction in Ran © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE

6. Can she keep going to school if married? (If yes, does this happen often to married girls?)
7. Why do you think Monir is more able to talk freely to his parents? How common is this? Are you to voice your opinions and desires at home? Are you able to voice your opinions and desires outside the home? Where? At school?
8. Who do you talk to about your worries? Who helps you fix them? What worries do you have?
9. Do you feel that boys / girls have the same say in decisions regarding their own life when discussing in their families? What about at school and in class?
10. What would the community think about Anya if refused to get married? What are the implications of marriage?



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About GAGE

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