

December 2021

Adolescent lives in Bangladesh: what are we learning from longitudinal evidence?

GAGE consortium

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in social and economic development in recent decades, which contributed to the country attaining middle-income status in 2015. While the country's educational advancements are noteworthy – net enrolment rates in school have converged towards gender parity and literacy rates have improved – entrenched obstacles related to educational transitions for adolescents persist. Some 42% of adolescent girls drop out of school before completing grade 10 because of intersecting factors that include poverty and harmful gender norms, with child marriage rates still among the highest in the world. There are also substantial regional disparities in adolescents' access to education and, as of 2019, the national attendance rate for higher secondary school stood at 48% nationally, falling to 44% and 37% in Chittagong and Sylhet, respectively.

Background to our research

The FCDO-funded Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme is generating evidence about the diverse experiences of adolescents (10–19 years) living in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). It is exploring the myriad challenges and opportunities young people are facing, identifying the supports they have and need, and highlighting ways in which international and national actors can better promote adolescent agency and voice and fast-track adolescent well-being. The GAGE sample includes those most at risk of being left behind, including girls who are (or have been) married and young people who have been forcibly displaced or have disabilities. As the world's largest longitudinal study focused on adolescents in LMICs, which is simultaneously evaluating a range of programmes aimed at supporting the development of adolescent capabilities, GAGE is contributing to the practical evidence that FCDO and its partners need to meet core development objectives, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and to build back better after the covid-19 pandemic.

In Bangladesh, [GAGE has collected mixed-methods baseline data](#) from a school-based sample in Chittagong and Sylhet divisions, as well as virtual data collected at various intervals during the covid-19 pandemic. Quantitative baseline data was collected from 2,220 adolescents attending grades 7 and 8 in



Young adolescent girl in Chittagong, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE

109 public (government) and semi-private (monthly pay order (MPO)) schools in February and March 2020; and qualitative baseline data was collected by phone from 100 adolescents, parents and teachers between August and September 2020. The baseline is part of an ongoing impact evaluation, with programming supported by the World Bank. In exploring the impact of covid-19 on the well-being of adolescents, we also report survey data from 2,156 of the original baseline adolescents surveyed virtually in May to June 2020 (covid-R1) and again from February to March 2021 (covid-R2); and 39 adolescents engaged qualitatively between August and September 2020. In Chittagong and Sylhet, GAGE's work is carried out in partnership with Innovations for Poverty Action Bangladesh (IPA), the BRAC University Institute of Governance and Development, and the BRAC James P. Grant School of Public Health.

What are we learning?

» Girls' educational aspirations, experiences and earning potential are shaped by household wealth and gender norms

GAGE data finds that although 86% of grade 7 and 8 adolescents in Chittagong and Sylhet aspired to achieve at least some university education, [some notable differences](#) arise. Vulnerable adolescents from households with below median wealth are less likely to aspire to university degrees compared to non-vulnerable adolescents (79% versus 91% respectively), suggesting that household income impacts educational aspirations. GAGE data also highlights that although 91% of adolescents aspire to a professional career, 43% mention constraints to achieving their career goals: 23% say that education and skill acquisition could be a constraint and 16% see financial constraints being a deterrent to achieving their professional goals. To meet aspirations, [qualitative interviews](#) demonstrate that both girls and boys rely on the support of parents, siblings and extended family, although entrenched gender differences in securing family support exist. Adolescent boys (in particular) believe that parents prioritise boys' education over girls' and survey data demonstrates that 29% of adolescents agree with the statement 'if a family can only afford to send one child to school, it should be the boy' with boys 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 notion 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 STEM subjects, with boys more likely to agree than girls (14% versus 8%).

Socially, friendships are cultivated at school and the GAGE survey finds that 90% of adolescents say they have at least one friend outside of their household that they trust. Qualitative data underscores that adolescent girls especially value school, as it offers peer socialisation networks that are

less accessible to them outside school hours. Conversely, schools are not well-serviced to meet girls' broader needs and GAGE data reveals that girls have predominately [negative experiences of menstrual hygiene management](#) (MHM) provision at school due to the lack of appropriate facilities and infrastructure. Less than half (46%) of girls attend schools that have facilities or resources they can use when they are menstruating, with adolescents in rural areas significantly less likely to have access than those 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.'*

I take everything that I will need to school.
There's no arrangement for [menstrual
management] in school, but I still go.
(A 13-year-old girl from Sylhet urban district)

» Adolescent attitudes around child marriage are shifting but the practice remains pervasive and truncates educational and employment aspirations

[GAGE data in Chittagong and Sylhet](#) reveals that the average age at which adolescents aspire to marry is in their mid-twenties. Once married, [GAGE qualitative data](#) found that while a married girl may be offered employment, her educational trajectory is likely to end abruptly upon being wed. A 14-year-old boy in grade 8 from Chittagong rural district explained, *'She will not be able to attend school after marriage ... but they can work. Most girls work in garment factories. I have seen many instances.'* While adolescents overwhelmingly agreed that child marriage should not occur and girls should negotiate postponing marriage until the legal age (18 years) so as to complete their education, there is a mismatch between this view and what occurs in practice; only 25% of adolescents feel they have a significant say about when they marry. GAGE data finds poverty drives child marriage, as does household composition. Families with more than one daughter and no sons (or sons that are too young) often consider their daughters as a *'burden'*.

While adolescent views towards child marriage seem to be shifting, entrenched gender attitudes persist vis-à-vis gender-based violence (including sexual harassment). While a minority of adolescents (6%) report having experienced sexual harassment (girls are more likely to report this than boys (10% versus 1%)), 59% of adolescents agree or partially agree that girls are also to blame for being sexually harassed (63% of boys compared to 56% of girls). In qualitative interviews, many adolescents mentioned that it is girls' responsibility to avoid capturing boys' attention and that girls should remember to act properly, as stated by a 13-year-old girl in Chittagong rural district: *'No one says anything to a polite girl.'*

» Covid-19 impacts have significantly impacted adolescent education and mental health

The results of GAGE's virtual data collection from May to June 2020 (covid-R1) and from February to March 2021 (covid-R2) help us to [understand changes in mitigation response and the impact on adolescent lives](#). As school closures became more prolonged, learning support from schools increased in both government and MPO schools (from 10% in covid-R1 to 36% in covid-R2 from MPO schools and from 14% to 50% from government schools) and, consequently, self-study reports fell and learning through school-based assignments increased from 5% in covid-R1 to 23% in covid-R2. There was a gender disparity in the learning support received from schools and families, however, potentially widening skill gaps between male and female adolescents. Girls reported receiving less online support than boys (57% vs 84% in covid-R2) and more assignments than boys (41% vs 23% in covid-R2). Likewise, boys were more likely than girls to have access to mobile learning apps (10% vs 4%), television or radio time for learning (33% vs 21%), and books or learning materials to use at home (43% vs 38%). Moreover, boys reported more frequently than girls (44% vs 39%) that their families had reduced the number of chores they had to do to allow them to study.

GAGE data shows that the [economic impacts of covid-19 have been severe](#). Half of the sampled households in covid-R1 reported losing employment permanently or temporarily due to covid-19, with 83% of households reporting some income loss. As described by a 13-year-old girl in Chittagong rural district, *'We had to get by with a lot of struggle. During the lockdown, my dad couldn't ride his rickshaw so he couldn't manage our household expenses.'* Economic concerns were widespread in covid-R1 – 65%

We had to get by with a lot of struggle. During the lockdown, my dad couldn't ride his rickshaw so he couldn't manage our household expenses

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

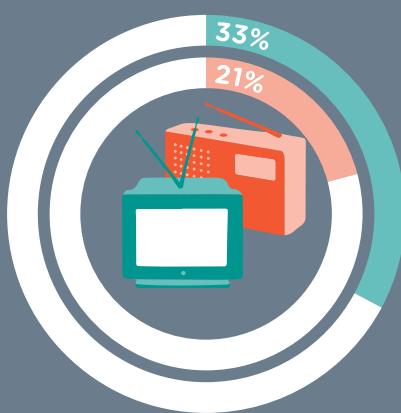
of households worried that they would not be able to meet basic household needs and only 58% of households reported being able to buy essential food items in the week before the virtual survey. These negative impacts were concentrated among households that were already more vulnerable before the onset of covid-19. Moreover, as the pandemic became protracted, more adolescents identified financial constraints as a challenge to achieving their career goals, pointing to the economic toll of the pandemic. Boys appear to have been particularly affected: although a higher proportion of girls reported that financial constraints were a primary barrier to aspirations in covid-R1 (31% of girls vs 24% of boys), the proportion of boys reporting financial constraints nearly doubled in covid-R2 (increasing to 42%) and surpassed the proportion of girls reporting this challenge (34%).

Finally, stress and worry also increased as a result of covid-19. Eighty percent of adolescents reported that household stress had increased since the onset of covid-19, with over 75% of adolescents reporting that they were at least moderately scared about covid-19 or worried about it. Qualitative data points to the fact that mobility restrictions during lockdown and restrictions affected boys more, as girls are more accustomed to staying at home. A 14-year-old girl from Sylhet urban district explained, *'Boys go out, they always go out. But girls don't go out much. [Boys went out before the lockdown] ... girls go much less.'*

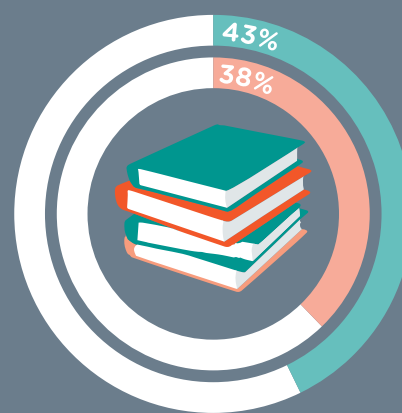
Girls were less likely to have access to :



mobile learning apps



television or radio for learning



books or learning materials to use at home

● Girls

● Boys

» Poor and rural adolescents are slipping behind in education

Across the GAGE school-based sample in Chittagong and Sylhet divisions, data reveals that there are [learning gaps between rural and urban areas](#), and between households with different purchasing powers, which could perpetuate and exacerbate future inequalities. These findings stemmed particularly from data collected during the covid-19 pandemic, where GAGE data found adolescents from better-off households were most likely to continue learning through online resources than adolescents from economically vulnerable households (13% vs 7%), as a 13-year-old girl from Chittagong rural district explained: *'I couldn't study properly because of my dad's struggles.'* Adolescents from urban households are also more likely than adolescents from rural households to be learning through online resources and TV programs (23% vs 11%). During the prolonged school closures across Bangladesh (schools shut in March 2020 and resumed in September 2021) adolescents in urban areas were also more likely to receive learning support from schools compared to rural adolescents (46% vs 32%) and the same holds true for adolescents in better-off households (44% compared to 35% of worse-off households). Adolescents from more vulnerable households, who are receiving less support for learning, are also less likely to report wanting to return to school when it reopens than adolescents in better-off households.

» Climate change-related risks exacerbate pre-existing adolescent vulnerabilities

Bangladesh remains one of the countries most vulnerable to climate-related hazards, including sea-level rise, landslides, monsoons and cyclones. This was evident in our qualitative findings, particularly in Chittagong, where there were multiple examples of adolescents [who lost their homes](#) due to these events. A 12-year-old boy highlighted: *'I used to have a bicycle but it was destroyed during the landslide. [My home] it was gone.'* Those working in agriculture have also been affected by climate-related hazards and GAGE findings suggest that crop production has fallen in recent years. The father of an adolescent from Chittagong explained: *'Now, there is shortage of land. Crop production is not good also.'* Our findings suggest that this could be linked to land shortages and overpopulation as a result of climate-related migration. High migration to safer or unaffected regions is a result of climate-related hazards in Bangladesh, resulting in overpopulation of certain areas. GAGE qualitative data also suggests that [land disputes are acute](#) in certain pockets of the country, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where climate hazards have intensified.

Now, there is shortage of land. Crop production is not good also.

(A father of an adolescent from Chittagong)

What are the implications of GAGE findings for international actors?

In building on the UK's legacy in championing adolescent girls' education, reaching and supporting marginalised populations and achieving the SDGs, GAGE data in Chittagong and Sylhet highlights sector-based priority actions:

- **Education actors:** Ensure that timely, rigorous research into contextual drivers leading to school dropout – including risks of child marriage and unintended pregnancies – drives programming and policy. Moreover, the sector should seek to promote social protection mechanisms informed by a mapping of gender- and age-specific vulnerabilities to ensure that the specific needs of adolescent girls are met, and that families may offset the costs of keeping girls in school. Schools should be encouraged to prioritise what matters most to adolescents, including provision of separate functional toilets and distribution of sanitary products; dedicated workshops on adolescent-sensitive topics; and awareness-raising on the implications of child marriage. Finally, the implementation of educational improvements should be uniformly available across urban and rural districts, and government and MPO schools.
- **Protection actors:** 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. It is equally critical to invest in income-generating initiatives and skills building opportunities for girls, to foster their

economic empowerment and earning capabilities which can provide alternatives to early marriage practices. Awareness campaigns and gender-transformative interventions should also 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.

- **Covid-19 recovery actors:** Government and international actors should promote and implement re-enrolment campaigns to bring adolescents, especially girls, back to school following the covid-19 closures. Such campaigns should target students who are at risk of not returning, particularly girls who are pregnant or married; include awareness-raising in the community and re-engagement of parents into school governance; and provide financial incentives for re-enrolling both to offset education-related costs and to provide additional economic support to vulnerable households. Investment should be made into strengthening blended learning modules – including in low-tech environments – to support the most marginalised girl learners and facilitate their return to school, should there be a need to pivot to virtual learning as other emergencies emerge. Efforts to rebuild should consider developing counselling programmes for families and adolescents who may have developed anxiety or depression during the pandemic following loss of employment, restrictions to mobility and the absence of interactions with friends and loved ones, and possibly even the death of friends and family from the disease.

Further background

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year (2015–2024) mixed methods longitudinal research and evaluation study. It follows the lives of 20,000 adolescents in six low- and middle-income countries in Africa (Ethiopia and Rwanda), Asia (Bangladesh and Nepal) and the Middle East (Jordan and Lebanon).

The GAGE consortium, managed by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), includes 35 partner organisations from around the world known for their expertise in research, policy and programming in the fields of adolescence, gender and social inclusion. GAGE is funded by UK aid from the UK government.

- » Find out more about GAGE at <https://www.gage.odi.org/>
- » Find out more about our work in Bangladesh at <https://www.gage.odi.org/countries/bangladesh/>
- » Keep up to date with our work: follow us on Twitter [@GAGE_programme](#), or sign up for our newsletter [here](#).