

# Impacts of the Pandemic on Vulnerable Households with Children in Bangladesh



The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global challenge that has affected the health and livelihood of billions worldwide. Citizens of low-income countries have been affected by the pandemic in nearly all areas of life, and the impacts have been particularly challenging for those with limited access to social safety nets. Bangladesh is especially susceptible to the negative economic impacts of the pandemic due to its strong ties to the global economy, and these negative demand shocks are likely to persist throughout and after the pandemic.

Researchers conducted two rounds of phone surveys in July 2020 and December 2020 with 3,125 vulnerable households with children across seven regions of Bangladesh. Across the two rounds of surveys, we find that the negative economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have persisted at least six months after the lifting of the general economic lockdown at the end of May 2020. Collectively, these findings point to several areas of need for vulnerable households, particularly in the area of education, mental health, and gender-based violence.

## Key Findings

- Already vulnerable households have faced significant economic hardships due to the pandemic, which has also jeopardized food security.
- These changes have been accompanied by changes in women's decision-making power and increased their reported incidence of intimate partner violence.
- By December 2020, economic insecurity has lessened but negative mental health impacts on mothers persist.
- Most children (71 percent) are continuing educational activities in some way. Few watch government-provided lessons, and fewer use online resources. Instead, those that can, rely on the help of family members, neighbors, and paid tutors.
- This persistent negative economic impact highlights the need for continued assistance for vulnerable households, which may also have cross-cutting benefits on other dimensions of household wellbeing.
- Continued economic hardship may also pose a challenge for the return to in-person schooling. Additionally, the wide variation in educational supports available to students suggests that policymakers should anticipate substantial variation in the distribution of learning losses, when developing outreach efforts or remedial programs.
- The pandemic appears to have harmed women's mental health and increased intimate partner violence, which makes the need for strengthening systems to support women's mental health and reduce intimate partner violence even more pressing.

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### DONORS

Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office  
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### COUNTRY

Bangladesh

### TIMELINE

July 2020, December 2020

### STUDY SAMPLE

3,125 households

## Background

Across low- and middle-income countries, the COVID-19 pandemic led to immediate, massive reductions in income, employment, and food security (Egger et al. 2021). This has been especially true across multiple sub-national samples in Bangladesh (Barker et al. 2020; Genoni et al. 2020; Ahmed et al. 2020). Schools closed nationwide on March 17, 2020 and remain closed through February 2021). These closures and economic hardship have disrupted children's education; what is unknown is the extent to which children have been able to continue their education and what the longer-run impacts might be. Additionally, these economic shocks and ongoing uncertainty may affect women's decision-making power, mental health, strategies for disciplining or supporting their children, and risk of intimate partner violence.

This study examines the multi-dimensional impacts of COVID-19 on household well-being at two distinct points in time: July 2020, two months after the end of general lockdown in Bangladesh, and December 2020, five months later. These two survey waves permit examination of the persistent impacts of the pandemic after the immediate lockdowns. Our study sample consists of relatively vulnerable, semi-urban households with children across seven regions of Bangladesh. This sample allows us to focus on the experiences of mothers and their children over the past year.

## Research

The research team conducted two rounds of phone surveys with vulnerable households across seven regions of Bangladesh. These households were identified because in January 2020, they had enrolled or intended to enroll one or more children at a non-profit school that targets students who have left school or are at risk of dropping out during the 2020 school year, prior to the pandemic. The main survey round targeted mothers of these children and asked about the impact of the pandemic on their households' economic and food security, their own mental health, use of child discipline, and experience of intimate partner violence. We also surveyed fathers about their own earnings. In the second round, we reinterviewed the initial set of respondents and added a set of families with children who had progressed further in school and were interested in enrolling in grades 5 through 8. We employed the same strategy as the first round, with a main survey targeting mothers and a short survey with fathers, but in the second round we add modules on children's education and fathers' mental health.

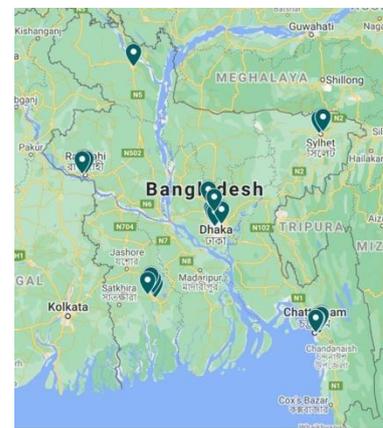
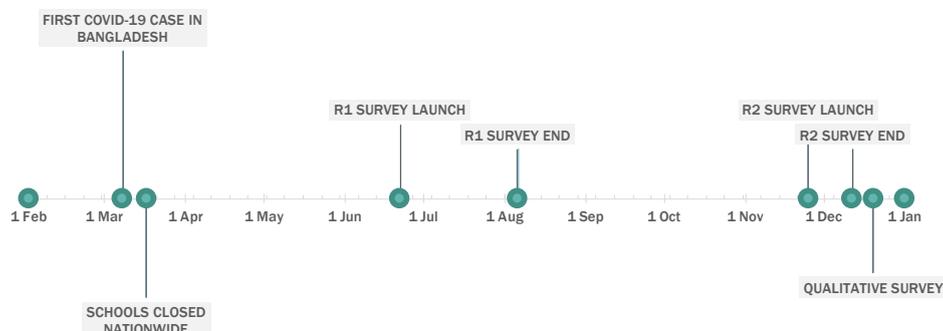


Figure 1. Study locations

Figure 2. Project Timeline



The first round yielded 1,816 responses (92 percent are mothers), with a response rate of 67 percent. Among mothers surveyed, we were able to survey 1,130 fathers (67 percent). The second round yielded 2,263 responses (90 percent are mothers), with a response rate of 57 percent. Among mothers surveyed,

we reached 1,353 fathers (67 percent). We successfully interviewed 1082 first-round respondents, for a re-contact rate of 59 percent. We supplemented these two rounds of surveys with qualitative interviews of 30 mothers conducted in December 2020.

## Findings

1. Already vulnerable households have faced significant economic hardships due to the pandemic. More than three-quarters of mothers (77 percent) and nearly all fathers (90 percent) in our study reported a reduction in earnings since the pandemic began.

*"My husband's income reduced due to Corona. We had to take a loan from one of our relatives to manage the household. Also, some days my child cried [for more delicious food], but we couldn't afford that."*

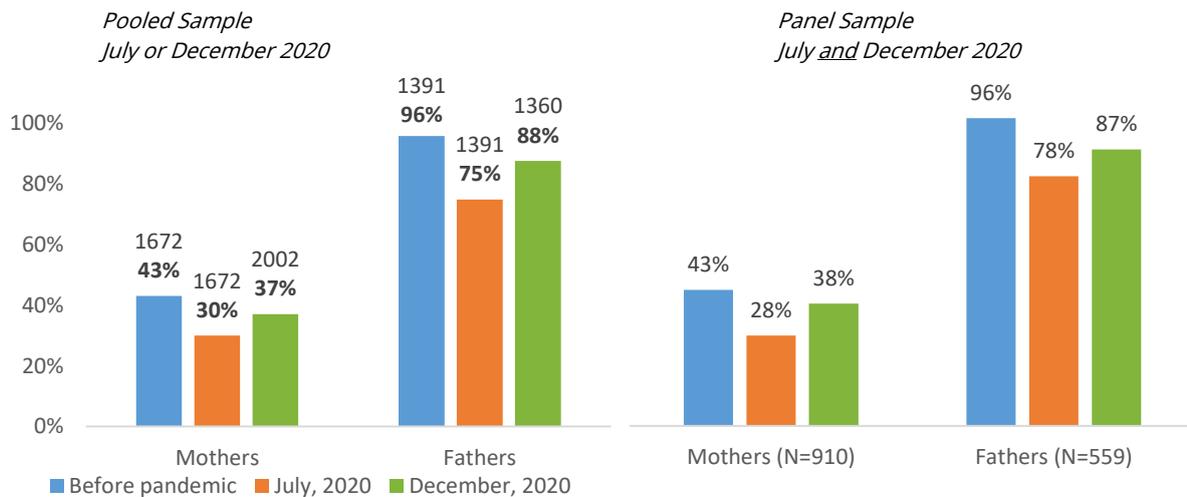


Figure 3. Work status of mothers and fathers

2. The pandemic has jeopardized food security among vulnerable households. Over 90 percent of households in our study reported eating less preferred foods, and nearly the same number reported reducing meals or meal sizes. While mothers reduced their own food consumption significantly, children were also reported to eat less than they did prior to the pandemic.

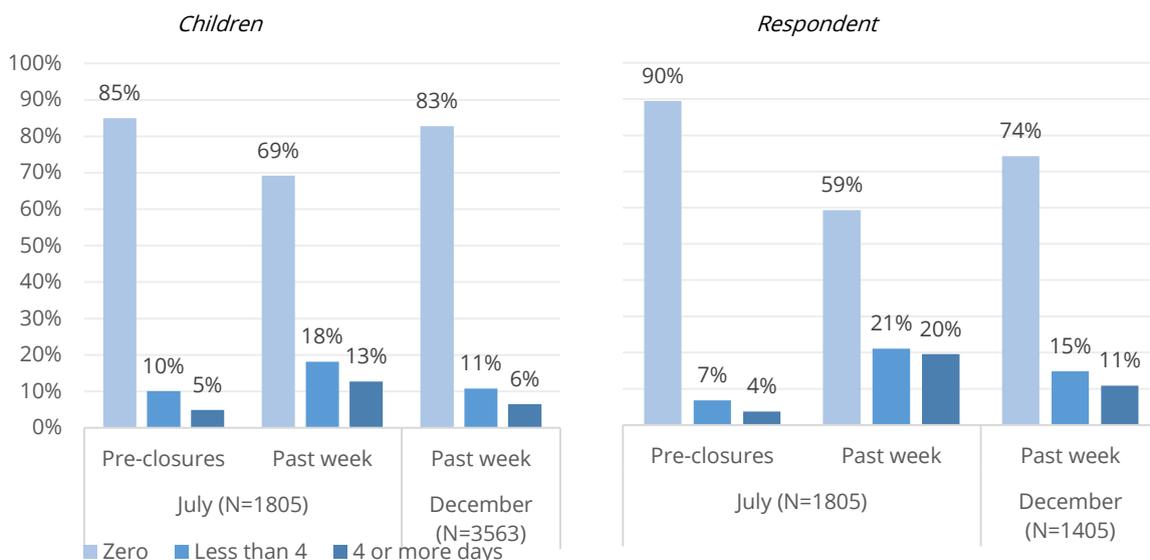
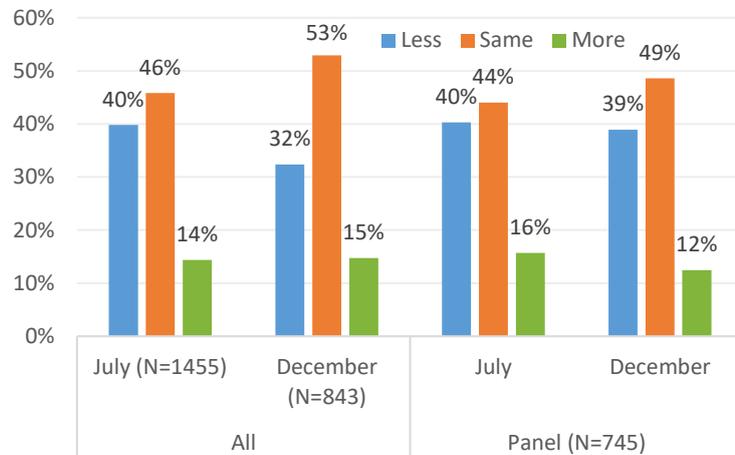


Figure 4. Number of meals skipped in the past week

*“When I had a job before, I could do anything I want.  
But now my husband is the only earner, I have to listen to him.”*

3. These changes have been accompanied by changes in women’s decision-making power and increased their reported incidence of intimate partner violence. While 40 percent of mothers report having less decision-making ability relative to before the closures, another 14 percent report having more decision-making power. Nearly 40 percent also report facing more violent or abusive behavior from their husbands. In qualitative interviews, women cite husbands’ job loss and increased stress due to financial hardships as drivers of increased discord.



**Figure 5: Changes in mothers' decision-making since pre-COVID**

*“Since lockdown, we moved to the village with our in-laws.  
After coming here, I have to follow their decision and even my husband dominates me a lot.”*

4. Women report symptoms of depression and anxiety at high rates. Two-thirds of mothers report at least mild depression, based on their responses to the PHQ-9 inventory, while one-third report symptoms consistent with moderate, moderately severe, or severe depression. This hardship has not been confined to the households we interviewed; women reported feeling that both they and others in their community were stressed due to economic hardships and uncertainties brought about by the pandemic.

Across these outcomes, we see similar patterns persist in the second survey round.

5. By December 2020, economic hardship has slightly lessened. Specifically, fewer households are relying on less preferred foods or reducing the size or frequency of meals (from 92 percent and 87 percent to 75 percent and 59 percent, respectively).
6. Households’ coping strategies have shifted as well. While only 6 percent had recently borrowed money from a microfinance institution or NGO to cope in July and August, 17 percent had by December. Households were less likely to use savings (perhaps because they had already been depleted) or to receive assistance from extended family members, but they were more likely to be looking for additional ways to find money.

**Table 1. Household coping strategies**

*Did you do any of the following over the last 30 days to pay for food, healthcare, or other expenses?*

	July	December
Eat less preferred and less expensive food	92%	75%
Reduce the number/size of meals	87%	59%
Borrow money/food from friends or family	57%	58%
Use cash or bank savings	33%	14%
Skip making loan payments	20%	13%
Receive government assistance	19%	2%
Receive family assistance (wife's side)	19%	14%
Receive NGO assistance	18%	2%
Borrow from moneylender	14%	11%
Work more hours/jobs	11%	17%
Sell assets	10%	7%
Receive family assistance (husband's side)	8%	5%
Borrow from microfinance/NGO	6%	17%
None of the above	2%	9%
<b>N</b>	<b>1810</b>	<b>2180</b>

7. Despite a reduction in economic stress, we see self-reported mental health worsening among mothers surveyed in both July and December 2020. Comparing depressive symptoms reported by mothers and fathers, we see that mothers self-report depressive symptoms at much higher rates than fathers: the average PHQ-9 score for mothers is 8 (mild depression), while the mean for fathers is 3 (none/minimal depression)

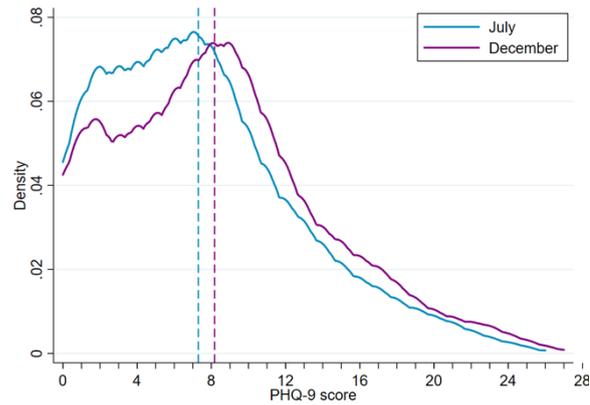


Figure 6. PHQ-9 scores, mothers' panel

In this second round, we also collected information on children's educational activities and mothers' aspirations.

8. Although school closures persisted countrywide, most children (79 percent) had done some form of educational activity at home. However, in qualitative surveys, the poorest households reported being much more worried about the health of their children than about their ability to continue with educational activities
9. Currently, students spend an average of 11 hours per week on education, and more than half received some form of tutoring in the past month. Students were most likely to receive help from family members or tutoring from neighbors. Extremely few were using television or online resources to support their education (4 percent and 2 percent, respectively), and in qualitative surveys, most mothers described multiple barriers to continuing remote education for their children, including not being able to afford at-home investments that were needed for remote learning.

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*"My children suffered the most due to Corona as ... everything is closed. They couldn't study properly as no one was there to help them. The time they have lost this year is really precious for their careers. "*

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10. Among respondent households, girls were more likely to be engaged in educational activities than boys, though it should be kept in mind that households in this study could be differentially more likely to value girl's education, as they were selected because they had planned to enroll a child in a UCEP school, which strives for an equal gender balance in its enrolment.
11. Most parents report that their children will "definitely" return to school when they re-open, and these rates are higher for girls (82percent) than for boys (75percent). While parents have long-run educational aspirations for their sons, boys are more likely to have taken on extra work to support their families during this crisis.

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*"Though we married off our elder daughter, we are trying to educate our younger daughter. Since our income is unstable right now, my son is also working, he doesn't go to school. "*

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