SMS GIRL
DATA INSIGHTS:

How has COVID-19 affected support for girls’ education in Punjab, Pakistan?

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KEY TAKE-AWAYS

This brief presents initial findings from an ongoing phone survey of families in Punjab, Pakistan designed to assess what is happening to girls’ elementary school education during COVID-19. The data used in this brief describe the experiences of 5,898 families in Punjab between August and October 2020. Data have been weighted to make the sample representative of all schools in Punjab.

1. **COVID-19 has hurt households’ ability to earn.** Over a third of households report that they had lost a substantial share of their income.

2. **Children may not return to school.** Of female students who were enrolled in schools pre-COVID, 2.5 percent in our sample may not return to school after schools reopen. An even greater percentage of boys (4.9 percent) may not return to school.

3. **Knowledge of available options for remote learning is very low.** Less than a third of the families we spoke to had heard of available opportunities for remote learning. Even fewer families had heard of options provided by the government since the start of the pandemic: Teleschool or Taleem Ghar. Even many parents who said they knew of available options reported that their children did not take advantage of opportunities for remote learning.

4. **Parents report that both boys and girls spend almost three hours on average on academic learning.** Girls’ parents are more likely to report that their children are spending time on household chores than boys’ parents. In contrast, boys’ parents report almost twice as much time spent by their children on work outside the household compared to girls’ parents.

5. **While parents report that they have few concerns about school reopening, they expressed lower expectations about their children’s education.** A quarter of households said that their expectations for the highest grade their child will complete have fallen. Overwhelmingly parents cited the fear that their children may not be able to catch up on the learning they have missed as a result of school closures.

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This brief provides information from an on-going survey. Further data is being collected and analyzed. Subsequent briefs will provide updates on these families as we learn more about their experiences. Unless otherwise noted, statistics are based on the full sample of households contacted—90% of which are families with girls in grades 5–7 before the pandemic. Statistics are weighted to make the sample representative of all schools in Punjab and to allow comparisons between boys and girls.
Policymakers are concerned about the effect of school lockdowns on girls’ enrollment and well-being. This concern is particularly salient in Pakistan where there is a high out-of-school population and children seldom return to school once they drop out.

The data reported in this brief were collected as part of an effort to understand how COVID-19 and the resulting school closures are affecting families and how they are responding.

In Punjab, schools closed on March 15, 2020—just two weeks after the 2020 school year began (figure 1). This coincided with the start of exponential growth in COVID-19 cases across the country. As part of its support to students, the government of Punjab launched the Taleem Ghar program on April 2, 2020. On April 13, this was complemented by an initiative of the Federal government called Teleschool. These initiatives provide students in grades 1–8 with lectures and have been rolled out on television and through online means including an app for Android-based devices, a website, and via YouTube.
This brief presents results from a phone survey carried out between August 21 and October 27, 2020. The survey reached 5,898 families—predominantly those with girls ages 10–14 enrolled in grades 5–7. Approximately 10 percent (536 families) had boys in those grades (figure 2). The survey respondents are from 6 districts in Punjab. The students about whom we present information below are predominantly enrolled in public, private and Punjab Education Foundation schools.

This phone survey is the first in a series of such surveys planned to evaluate whether phone-based messages can help keep girls learning during school closures and whether information shared with parents via these messages might encourage them to re-enroll their girls when schools reopen.

Phone surveys were necessitated by the need to adhere to the government’s Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for student safety. Phone-based messages were chosen as the medium for this intervention given the high feasibility of being able to reach our key respondents and low cost of doing so (approximately PKR 0.25 per message sent).\

1. Can phone-based messages help keep girls learning during school closures? 
2. Can information shared with parents via these messages encourage them to re-enroll their girls when schools reopen?

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1 The first round of the survey took several months to complete. This reflects the time needed to obtain all phone numbers to call families, as well as low initial response rates.
2 Attock, Faisalabad, Lahore, Muzaffargarh, Rahim Yar Khan and Sargodha. Weights are used to adjust for survey design.
3 This is equivalent to US$0.0015 per message at prevailing exchange rates.
How did COVID-19 affect households between August and October?

Less than 1 percent of households in this sample report someone in the household having gotten sick from COVID-19 or having died. Thirty-six percent of parents in the sample reported losing a substantial share of income. This suggests that COVID-19 had predominantly manifested itself as an income shock among these households by the time the survey was conducted.4

Do households have the means and knowledge to access remote learning opportunities?

While two-thirds of the households have access to TV or internet, most parents do not know about available options for remote learning. When asked specifically about Teleschool or Taleem Ghar, only 22 percent of those with a TV reported that they were familiar with these programs (figure 3). On average, few families reported that their children take advantage of remote learning. However, among those who knew of available remote learning opportunities, take up was higher.

4 This is in line with evidence in other surveys such as those conducted by the Center for Economic Research in Pakistan (CERP) and the Center for Global Development (CGD).
Will households send their children back to school?

Of female students who were enrolled in schools pre-COVID, 2.5 percent in our sample may not return to school after schools reopen. An even greater percentage of boys (4.9 percent) in our sample who were previously enrolled may not return to schools. When we inquire about the siblings of these children, the numbers are higher for older children (7 percent on average for those aged 13–17) than for younger children (2 percent on average those aged 5–12) (figure 4). Taken together, it seems that a substantial share of students may be lost from the education system, particularly in adolescence.

Figure 4: The Likelihood That Children Will Return to School Varies by Age— for Both Boys and Girls

Note: Areas denote 95% Confidence Intervals
How are children spending their time while schools are closed?

We asked respondents to report how children in their household spend their time on a range of activities while schools are closed. Parents report that both boys and girls spend almost three hours on average on academic learning, with girls’ parents reporting about twelve minutes more on average. The findings also suggest that time use during the lockdowns is somewhat gendered (figure 5). Girls’ families report that their children spend about an hour and twenty minutes per day on household chores, while boys’ parents report that their children spend an hour and ten minutes on chores. While girls’ and boys’ families report that their children spend roughly equal amounts of time on family care (looking after siblings or elders)—there is a distinct gendered pattern. Girls’ parents are more likely to report that their children are spending time looking after siblings, while boys’ parents are more likely to report that their children are spending time looking after elders. Boys’ parents are likely to report that their children spend more time on leisure activities than girls’ parents do—approximately two and a half hours compared to two hours. The families of boys report that their children do two and a half hours of work outside the household compared to those of girls who report their children spending half as much time on this—about one hour and fifteen minutes.

Note: Academic learning includes time spent on remote learning, self-study and time with tutor; leisure includes time spent watching television and playing; unpaid work inside the home includes making food, toys, or other materials that are sold by members of the family; work outside the house includes paid and unpaid work such as farm work, livestock, etc.; non-academic learning includes leisure reading, religious learning/activities and learning new skills; family care includes child care and elderly care; and household chores include cooking and cleaning.
What concerns do parents have about sending their children back to school and how have these impacted their expectations?

Eighty-eight percent of parents had no concern about schools reopening. However, parents of girls were slightly more likely to report being concerned about the health of their child (1.7 percent) compared to parents of boys (0.5 percent).

Despite these low levels of concern about safety, the pandemic has drastically affected parents’ expectations about the future of their children’s education. Twenty-one percent of girls’ parents and 42 percent of boys’ parents report that their expectations for the highest grade their child will complete have fallen as a result of school closures. Households who report having lost income during the school closures are more likely to say their expectations are reduced due to a decrease in household income—25 percent—compared to 15 percent for households that did not lose income. Yet this is not the most common reason: both groups of households are overwhelmingly concerned that their children will not be able to catch up with learning (49 percent and 80 percent) (figure 6).
CONCLUSION

This brief presents five key findings from the first in a series of phone surveys that are being conducted to assess the impact school closures are having on girls’ education in Punjab, Pakistan. Additional rounds of phone interviews will be carried out to test the effectiveness of phone-based text messages to ensure that girls continue to learn and re-enroll in school once schools reopen.

In subsequent rounds, we seek to engage households in semi-structured interviews to understand the dynamics driving some of the patterns presented here. We will also assess how the patterns presented here evolve as the crisis stretches into 2021.
This brief is part of a series produced by the team managing the SMS Girl Impact Evaluation. This includes Tazeen Fasih, Koen Geven, Amer Hasan, Naveed Hussain, Kevin MacDonald, Rabea Malik, Javaeria Qureshi, Ayesha Tahir, and Najaf Zahra. We would like to thank Rohit Chhabra and Sheena Fazili for research assistance.

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**Figures**
Authors’ calculations based on SMS Girl baseline survey data.

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