

How are children and young people coping with the impact of COVID-19 on their access to education and safe learning?

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in [1.6 billion](#) children unable to attend school in person. Our ongoing research with audiences has explored this issue and the adverse impact it has had on children and young people's lives. People are also concerned about child protection due to children being out of school – this is especially true for girls. These insights aim to inform the wider humanitarian sector responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the development of BBC Media Action content aimed to support parents and young people.

Context

BBC Media Action has a growing portfolio of work which seeks to increase access to learning. This includes creating an enabling environment for children and young people to access basic education and vocational training, with particular focus on shifting the attitudes, behaviours and social norms around access for marginalised groups such as girls and young people with disabilities. In many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has further limited the fundamental rights of children and young people by disrupting

access to basic services including health and education.

Research methodology

We have conducted qualitative research with parents, young people and teachers to understand how families are coping with these issues in Nepal, Sierra Leone and South Sudan. We have adapted how we work during the pandemic by collecting data remotely through mobile phones, and deploying community contacts who can interview vulnerable audiences face to face safely, following precautions.

In Afghanistan and Bangladesh, we are conducting ongoing audience research to understand the key issues affecting community members around COVID-19 and producing regular [bulletins](#) in order to inform the wider humanitarian response to the pandemic. These feedback studies have included analysis of data generated through community feedback mechanisms and involved training local partners to conduct the research in a safe way. Through these bulletins, increasingly respondents have discussed the impact of lack of access to education for their children as a key concern for them during the pandemic.

“To study at home our children need private tutors. But we cannot afford a private tutor because of our financial situation.”

Rohingya mother, Camp, Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh

Key findings

Concerns around lack of access to education

Across Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Nepal and Bangladesh, we have found that **parents and children are concerned about the lack of access to education and learning settings due to the pandemic**. For example, research conducted with Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar found that since August 2020, Rohingya community members have been raising concerns about the impact of the closure of Temporary Learning Centres (TLCs) and Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) on the educational development of their children. Analysis of ongoing [community feedback](#) data shows that people want the educational facilities to be reopened and need access to free educational materials for their children.

This is not just causing parents concern, but also affecting the wellbeing of children. For example, in Bangladesh, children reported that they feel upset about not being able to learn and play in educational settings as they did before COVID-19.

"I can't meet my friends from school as the school is now closed. I also cannot play like before. This makes me upset." Rohingya boy

Impact of lack of access to education

Audiences reported that young people being out of education has an adverse effect on young girls who are more at risk of child marriage, as families struggle to cope with the financial pressures of COVID-19. In South Sudan, respondents reported that school closures and poverty have resulted in increased rates of early marriage and pregnancy.

"When it comes to the issue of school, the coronavirus has led into many problems, esp. with the closure of schools girls are getting pregnant."

Male radio listener, South Sudan

In Sierra Leone, parents also complained that school closures have led to an increase in teenage pregnancy. Respondents felt girls have turned to having relationships during the times that they would have normally spent in school. In Afghanistan and Bangladesh, audiences reported that as families face financial struggles owing to COVID-19, child marriage amongst girls has also increased in their communities.

"Our neighbour was poor. She and her two daughters got infected by coronavirus. They had no money for family expenses and treatment. She had to marry her 13-year-old daughter to an old man who already had two wives, in exchange for money to cover their expenses and treatment costs." Female, adult, Afghanistan

Some specific concerns about the impact of being out of education on boys were also raised. For example, in Afghanistan, parents were concerned that being out of education meant that boys were more vulnerable to recruitment by armed insurgent groups. Although parents and university students said that schools and universities were not complying with health guidance, like physical distancing and other preventative measures, they still felt children and young people were safer at school in Afghanistan than outside.

Lack of access to education settings has also highlighted the digital divide in access to education and learning materials. In Nepal, research findings showed that the risks of irregular school attendance and dropout have been heightened during the pandemic, with families facing severe socio-economic hardship. Alternative learning resources - such as online learning - are often inaccessible and impractical. In Afghanistan, while some universities and schools offer online classes, pupils in poor families could not afford Internet enabled devices or to pay for Internet. As a

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result, they had to drop out and miss out on learning opportunities.

Being out of education has also had an impact on young people's mental health and motivation. In Nepal, limited provision of alternative learning resources means that most children do not have a regular study routine. Parents are generally not able to guide or supervise their children's learning, based on limited time and skills. Overall, many children feel demotivated and are unable to study while schools are closed in their home environment. Most adolescent girls and boys expressed their desire to return to school, but also feared going back because of the belief that they may be at risk of contracting the virus. This was due to schools being used as quarantine centres, which was worrying to most students. They also felt that it is impossible to maintain basic hygiene precautions at school and believe that the risk of virus transmission is higher because their friends come from different communities.

Impact of our programmes

In South Sudan we have been producing a series of PSAs around COVID-19 and supporting children's home learning through the pandemic. One female listener from Torit commented that after listening to the message about supporting children to learn at home, she allowed her daughter more time to study.

"After I have listened to the message it tells us to support our children by giving them time to revise their books, so I supported my daughter by reducing work to allow her time to revise."
Female listener, Voice of Eastern Equatoria, South Sudan

The *Hello, Check!* youth radio show in Bangladesh, which has run throughout the pandemic, has helped young people cope with some of the stresses related to the pandemic and being out of education. In a recent evaluation, young audience members reported

that they felt that the programme has really resonated with their lives in the last year, such as looking at how to cope with the pandemic's impact on mental health.

Implications

Our research has found that children and young people out of school need support in accessing online learning materials; to have an enabling learning environment within the home and to be able to deal with the psychological impact of being out of school.

There is a need for parents and community members to be aware of the risks, especially to girls, of being out of school (i.e. increases in child marriage owing to economic strains).

Media and communication can play a key role in providing access to educational content while also increasing knowledge on child safeguarding issues and the challenges around distance learning.

As such, media and communication content can target both young people and parents and influencers to address these issues, and some of our evidence so far indicates that where our programmes directly address these issues with young audiences, they are appreciated in these extremely challenging times.

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