



Missing School

The Effect of Crises on Students and Teachers in Pakistan

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Disruptions to education, such as prolonged school closures during times of crisis, amplify inequalities and exclusion, especially when effective emergency response measures are not in place.

- The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on education manifested through a diverse set of variables, including school closures, a drop in income, and food insecurity, all of which **exacerbated existing inequities across socio-economic levels, gender, and urban-rural divides.**
- Disruptions to school **perpetuate gender roles for women and children**, increasing the risk of domestic work and child labor, interfering with students' access to school, and placing increased burden on female teachers.
- Increased **empowerment at the school and district levels strengthens implementation** of emergency response measures to ensure remote education is tailored to the needs of students, their families, and the school community.
- **Multi-sectoral collaboration in times of crises** is necessary to offer a well-integrated response that adequately addresses learning, as well as student and teacher safety, health, and broader well-being.

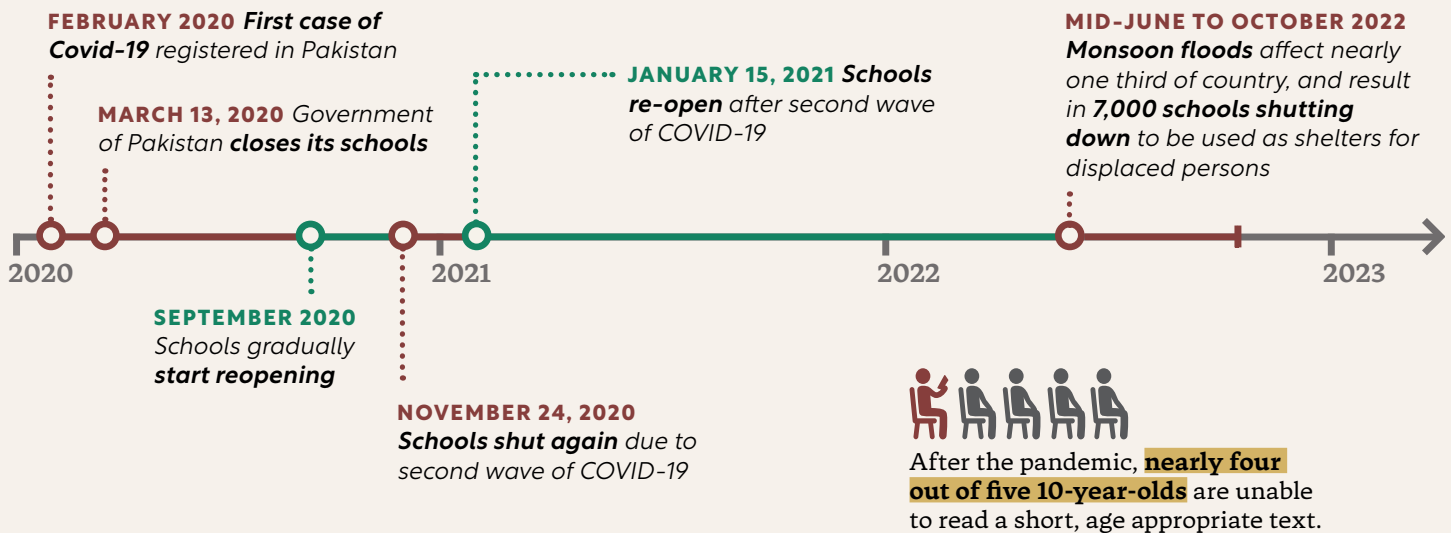
Pakistani children have faced nationwide and severe disruptions to their schooling over the past several years, first due to the COVID-19 pandemic and then the 2022 floods. Given the country's vulnerability to climate change, these disruptions are likely to increase. What measures can be implemented to minimize the impact of these crises and return children to learning as quickly as possible?

In addition to COVID-19 learning losses (World Bank, 2022), some countries—including Pakistan—experienced a wide range of other impacts, such as an increased rates of student drop-out, increase in gender-based violence, child labor and mental health issues (KORE Global, 2022). In order to reverse human capital losses and better prepare to respond to future shocks, governments must establish agile, resilient, and adaptive human development systems, coordinate across sectors (education, health, etc.), and ensure their approach is data-driven and that it leverages technology effectively (Schady et al., 2023). This note further supports this argument, drawing on the context of Pakistan.

The first case of COVID-19 was registered in Pakistan in February 2020. Soon after, on March 13, 2020, the Government closed its schools, affecting over 46 million learners aged 5 to 16 (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2020). Schools gradually started reopening in September, but a second wave of the virus caused schools to close again from November 24, 2020, until January 15, 2021. In an attempt to mitigate learning losses caused by the eight months of school closures, the federal ministry and provincial education departments launched several distance learning programs, including through broadcast media, such as radio and cable television, and an online learning portal for students to access pre-recorded lessons and additional materials.

Despite these efforts, the number of out-of-school-children has increased since 2019. In 2021, 19% of rural children were reported to be out of school compared to 17% in 2019, and 7.8% of urban children were reported out of school compared to 5.6% (ASER, 2022). In addition, learning poverty in Pakistan is currently 77%, a two percentage point increase from 2019. This means that 77% of children cannot read a read and understand a short, age-appropriate text by age 10 (World Bank, 2022).

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Compounding these impacts, in mid-June 2022, COVID-19 recovery efforts were hampered by floods caused by unusually heavy monsoon, with rains affecting nearly one-third of the country and resulting in additional school closures. Nearly 7,000 schools across the country were used to accommodate people displaced by the flooding, and damage to infrastructure disrupted families' access to schools and health centers (Barón et al., 2022). The multi-dimensional impacts of COVID-19 and the floods go beyond effects on learning and schooling, highlighting the need for a more holistic understanding of, and response to, such crises. It is within this context that this research was conducted.

This note explores the government's response to COVID-19 and school closures in Pakistan; it shows **how data disaggregated by gender, household location, and other variables can inform a more effective and inclusive education response** and build the education system's resilience to future emergencies.

It focuses on vulnerabilities within the system, to ensure that responses to future crises are informed by how these vulnerabilities perpetuate exclusion and inequalities, especially those pertaining to gender, income, and geographical location.

One of the most pertinent questions here is: **how can we plan for an emergency response that accounts for the most marginalized from its inception, and protects students, teachers, and parents, and the wider education system from shocks?**

To answer this question, the note draws on the results of a mixed-methods study, including a phone survey and series of key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). Information was gathered on the experiences of approximately 4,000 families with children ages 3 to 17 in Pakistan, as well as teachers, school leaders, District Education Officers (DEOs) and other education personnel, capturing a range of variables, including household characteristics, access to technology, participation in educational activities, time use for parents and children, service delivery processes, and institutional mechanisms available to teachers and students. Interviews and focus group discussions also explored the impact of COVID-19 on individuals' physical and socio-emotional well-being, as well as their perceptions of the government's response to the pandemic. The results draw on evidence collected in four provinces and the federal areas, inclusive of the poorest households in both rural and urban communities; however, the samples in these districts are not nationally representative. *(For the methodology and caveats about the interpretation of results, see final section of this note.)*

Even before COVID-19, Pakistan experienced high rates of inequality, observed particularly in the intersection of socio-economic level, gender, and rural-urban divide.

According to the 2014–2015 Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM), as measured before the pandemic, more than half (55%) of rural households live in multidimensional poverty, compared to just 1 in 10 (9%) urban households (Government of Pakistan, et al., 2016). Provincial differences in poverty rates ranged from 31% in **Punjab** to 71% in **Balochistan**, and rural communities across all provinces are significantly more likely to experience multidimensional poverty (ibid). Inequalities based on gender, socio-economic level, and geography were also reflected in pre-pandemic educational outcomes. Prior to the pandemic, Pakistan experienced low levels of completion and attendance rates, particularly for poor and rural students, and especially girls. According to the World Inequality Database in Education (WIDE), Pakistan is among the top 10 countries in the world with the highest rates of out-of-school poor girls (i.e. from the lowest wealth quintile) at the primary (59%), lower secondary (70%), and upper-secondary (89%) levels (UNESCO, 2022a).

Overlapping crises in Pakistan have disrupted education, exacerbating inequalities for girls and poor students, and especially individuals facing intersecting vulnerabilities. From climate catastrophes to economic issues, girls in rural areas and children from the lowest-income households have consistently been the most likely to go without an education (GPE, 2020). Historically, substantial empirical evidence produced by UN agencies, the National Disaster Management Authority and civil society organizations underscore how women and other marginalized groups suffer disproportionately due to unequal gender and power relations that determine access to, and control over, resources during times of humanitarian crises in Pakistan (UNESCO, 2022b; NDMA, 2017).

Poorer households are impacted by various intertwined and intersecting factors including job insecurity, decrease in income, food insecurity, disruptions in schooling for children, and a system that does not center the lived experiences of these households in their planning (UNESCO, 2021;

Bundervoet et al., 2021). Crises also often lead to a reversal of gender equality progress and return to prevalent gender norms that dictate decision-making and power within households (Harper et al., 2020). As in the case of COVID-19, women and children face increased risks to domestic and intimate partner violence, or other forms of gender-based violence, including child, early and forced marriage, as well as unpaid or paid domestic work and child labor (UN Women, 2020).

Emerging evidence from Pakistan suggests that the pandemic has exacerbated educational inequalities and negatively affected the broader well-being of poor students, and especially girls. School closures in Pakistan have “hit the poorest the hardest,” with the gap in enrollment between the poorest and wealthiest children widening over the pandemic, especially in older adolescent age groups (Nagesh et al., 2022). A nationally representative study found that learning loss was larger among girls than boys in Urdu, English, and Math (ASER, 2022). A survey of caregivers during COVID-19 in Pakistan found that the emotional well-being of some young children deteriorated significantly, particularly for those from the poorest households, with parents also experiencing distress (Humphrey & Devercelli, 2021). This study also found that the youngest students were largely left out of the country’s policy responses, with remote learning rarely designed to meet their developmental needs.

Therefore, this note illustrates how disruptions to education – such as prolonged school closures at times of crisis – **amplify inequalities and exclusion especially when effective and inclusive emergency response measures are not in place.**

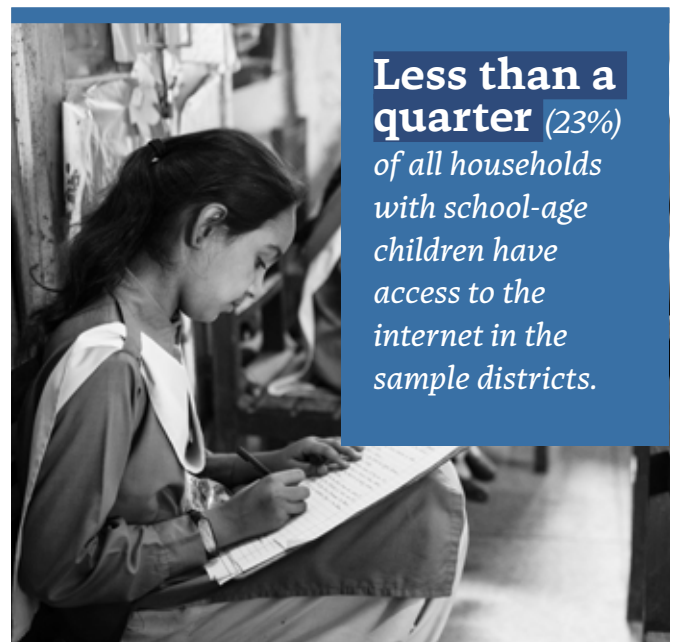
An effective and inclusive emergency response is intentionally designed to address inequities based on socioeconomic level, gender, geography, and other characteristics of vulnerability. It requires education systems to quickly mobilize resources, conduct needs assessments, and identify the constraining and enabling factors that can support or hinder learning and students’ broader well-being.

I. During school closures, household support and paper-based education materials provide learning opportunities for students especially from poorer households.

Across the sample districts, students had limited access to educational support and technology at home. Only 26% of urban households and 19% of rural households report that the continuation of education activities at home during school closures involved receiving help from siblings and parents. Also, only 7% of urban households and 3% of rural households report using smartphones for educational activities at home during school closures, and that number drops lower for using TV and/or a laptop for education. While educational technology can be used to bridge learning gaps, it can also reinforce pre-existing inequalities based on gender and poverty. The findings from our study suggest that poor and rural households in Pakistan were less likely to have access to digital technology and the internet, and girls in particular are restricted by parents who often act as gatekeepers to devices.

School closures immediately disrupted learning for many students, especially in households without access to digital technology. Three in four families (75%) with children ages 3 to 17 report education being discontinued as a result of the pandemic, and more than 80% of boys and girls report not attending school for between six to 12 months. During school closures, the federal ministry and provincial education departments made great efforts to implement diverse modes of digital learning through the radio, TV, and online platforms. While the prompt roll-out of these initiatives was applauded, many of the most marginalized households lacked adequate infrastructure and/or digital technology, hindering student access to remote learning during school closures.

Survey data captured the wide variation that exists across households in terms of their access to electricity, the internet, cable, and digital devices. For example, while 93% of all surveyed urban households have access to the electricity, only 73% of rural households report the same. Further, this figure drops to as low as 43% in sample districts in **Sindh** province. Disparities in access to the Internet are also observed, whereby 31% of all surveyed urban households report having access, compared to just 19% of rural households. Differences across provinces and regions are even more pronounced, ranging from only 8% of households to 43% of households reporting access to the Internet. Cable connection—an asset needed to access TV broadcasted lessons during the pandemic—indicates even greater rural-urban disparities: only 13% of participating households in rural areas report having access to a cable connection, compared to 41% of households in urban areas. Access to different digital devices also differs greatly across districts and rural-urban divide. For example, participating urban households were almost twice as likely as rural households to report having access to a TV (55% compared to 28% respectively). Additionally, smartphone ownership is lowest in the sample districts of **Sindh** (25%) and **Balochistan** (42%), and highest in **ICT** (70%). Only 5% of surveyed households reported owning a laptop or desktop computer.



Less than a quarter (23%) of all households with school-age children have access to the internet in the sample districts.



Boys are nearly three times more likely than girls to have access to mobile phones at home, and more than twice as likely to have access to the internet.

Access to the internet and digital devices at the household level does not always translate into access for students, especially girls. The survey captured whether households allow their daughters or sons to use mobile phones or the internet. Findings reveal that girls are much more restricted

than boys, who are nearly three times more likely than girls to have access to mobile phones at home (27% compared to 10% respectively), and more than twice as likely to have access to the internet (16% compared to 7% respectively). Although the survey did not explore why parents and caregivers did not allow their daughters or sons to use these devices, the broader evidence base suggests gender norms play an important role in household decision-making. Indeed, similar studies in South Asia suggest that parents and caregivers often act as ‘gatekeepers’ to technology; they may prohibit their daughters from using it if they fear it will be used for risky or unsafe behavior (Khlaif et al., 2021; Raha et al., 2021; Billah, 2021). These are important considerations when designing inclusive and gender-responsive remote education policies for girls and other vulnerable learners.

II. Gender-responsive emergency response plans address educational and well-being risks faced by both girls and boys, especially the poor.

Time use data reveals that disruptions to schooling can perpetuate pervasive gender roles for both girls and boys. During the pandemic, girls faced increased responsibilities to complete household chores, and boys were more at risk of being pushed into child labor and income-generating activities. These activities interfere with young people’s opportunity to participate in learning either at school or from home. They also create mental and physical stressors for children (and women), as discussed in Section IV.

Girls were more likely than boys to report participating in household chores in all sampled districts. On average one in three girls (33%) and one in five boys (20%) reported participating in housework. Girls were also more likely than boys to spend more time on household chores. Among those children engaged in housework, girls spent on average 50% more time per day doing this than boys.

Boys were more likely than girls to be involved in income-generating activities. On average 3% of households reported boys’ involvement in paid labor and just over 1% of households reported the same for girls. Boys and girls who participate in child labor spend approximately the same amount of time each week: girls an average five hours per week, and boys an average six hours per week. The need to support households in income-generating activities was among the top reasons that households identified for boys not returning to school after the pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic on child labor was observed more in rural rather than urban households, and especially in the province of Balochistan. Less than 1% of girls and just over 2% of boys in urban households reported participating in income-generating activities, compared to 1.5% of girls and over 3% of boys in rural households.



Girls were more likely to participate in household chores, while boys were more likely to be involved in paid labor.

The intersection of socio-economic level, gender, and rurality increases young people's vulnerability to the impacts of a crisis.

Girls, especially from rural households, were more likely to drop out of school after COVID-19. According to the household survey data, 7% of rural households reported that girls did not return to school after the pandemic, compared to just 3% reporting the same for boys. In some communities, more than one in 10 households reported that their daughters did not return to school once they reopened; for example, this was observed in **Balochistan** (11%) and **Sindh** (15%)—two provinces which are known to already have precarious education outcomes in the country. However, the data suggests that in urban areas where the incident of boys attending non-government/private schools is higher, more boys did not return to schools as households could not afford to pay school fees. Among the top reason reported for boys dropping out, was their need to support their families in income-generating activities, pointing again to how poverty intersects with gender to create risks to children's schooling and learning.

Qualitative data also suggests that the government's emergency response plans did not effectively incorporate a gender, equity, or inclusion lens.

While school head teachers across all regions commended the policy and administrative measures taken by the government in terms of school closures and ensuring the safety of teachers and students, they reported dissatisfaction with the lack of strategy to ensure the education continuity of children living in underprivileged areas, particularly marginalized and hard-to-reach communities. According to KIIs with government officials and policy stakeholders, there was also a lack of substantial gender-focused interventions or administrative measures, and the focus remained on closures and saving lives from the spread of COVID-19.

The National Action Plan (NAP) for COVID-19 comprehensively covers many policy issues and actions that the local and national governments and state departments were instructed to undertake.

Several committees were set up when the government adopted NAP. However, these committees were dominated by men with negligible representation of women and minority communities. As a result, the plan did not sufficiently consider the measures needed to ensure that women and other historically marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities and transgender individuals,

were equally able to access health facilities and safely practice self-isolation and social distancing (Tariq & Bibler, 2020). Insights from interviews with organisations that work with the Khwaja Sira community suggest that even though the law mandates provision of education, often times pre-admission documentation and admission forms do not have an option for third gender or 'other', limiting access to education for this gender minority (Government of Pakistan, 2018). The interviews also show the need to better engage community-based organizations and form alliances to protect and uphold the rights of these vulnerable communities.

Further, the lack of student data hinders effective emergency response and decision-making.

During school closures and the implementation of remote digital learning, there was no mechanism to count the number of students reached or time spent interacting with learning content. Discussions with education authorities reveal data gaps and a need to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of the government's education response. Discussions with key informants suggest that the departments of education did not have just-in-time data on teachers, students, and schools to undertake any geographic mapping and create mechanisms for home-based learning or any homework distribution channels. One way of ensuring this is by issuing unique student identifiers that can provide real-time information on students' attendance, enrollment, drop out rates, or other factors within the larger education landscape (Boisvert et al, 2020).

Time use data—such as the one captured by our survey—can reveal barriers to students' access to learning from home, especially in relation to unpaid or paid labor.

When schools reopened, education personnel did not have access to information about all students; they could not identify who did not return, where they were in the system, or if they joined a new school. The way student information is collected, analyzed, and utilized reveals a need for improvement in institutional capacity for evidence-based decision making. Access to quality, up-to-date, complete, and disaggregated data is critical to designing and implementing emergency plans that are responsive to all students' needs, regardless of their gender, socio-economic level, or household location. It is especially important that school leaders have access to this data and are empowered to make decisions so that the design and delivery of remote education can be tailored to the student community.

III. Vertical coordination between different tiers of government is critical to facilitating school support for students and families.

Although the federal and provincial governments of Pakistan responded quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic, limited coordination between different tiers of government, in some cases, resulted in disconnect between policy and implementation.

To cope and respond to the effects of the pandemic on the education sector, the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, along with provincial education departments, underwent rapid policy planning. All policy-related decisions were primarily taken at the federal ministerial and provincial education department levels, whereas district tiers were responsible for implementing the decisions and directives. A robust communication mechanism was set up to inform district departments about the directives received to be implemented by the school administration. However, interviews with district education officers highlighted the need for more engagement and consultation with district education authorities in policy initiatives and the COVID-19 response plan required for effectively designing and proposing solutions to counter education access and remote education delivery challenges at the local level.

At the community level, schools were not adequately equipped or supported in effectively responding to the pandemic. One of the key factors mentioned as an obstacle toward improved planning for learning continuity during the pandemic was a lack of budgetary planning and support for education continuity of children, particularly for those living in underprivileged areas. This was due to the lack of access and affordability of technological infrastructure required for the uptake of remote learning platforms. Therefore, while the federal and provincial governments responded promptly to mitigate impacts of school closures, there were varied levels of implementation and uptake at the lower tiers of government and community.

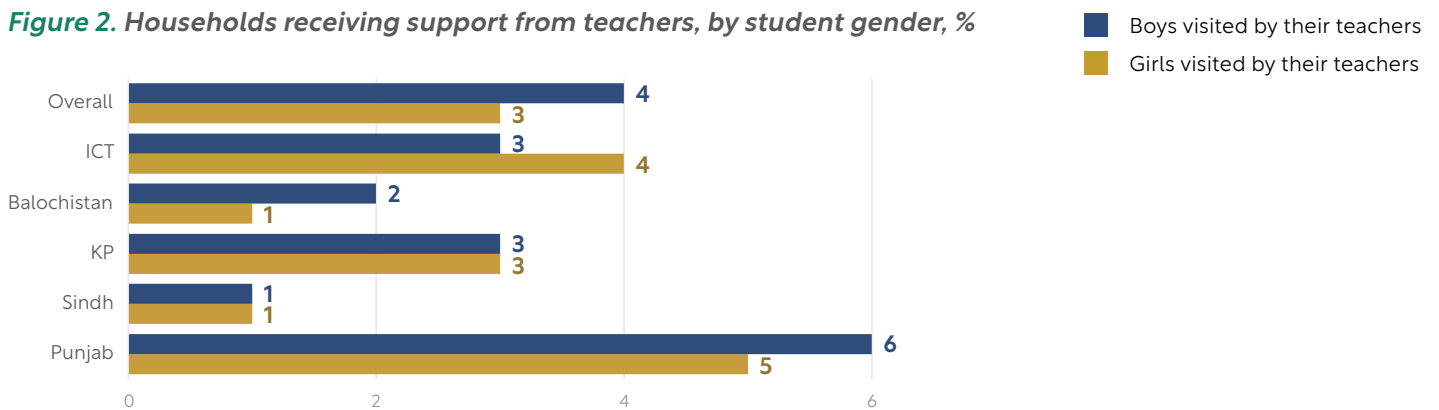
This finding is also corroborated by the survey data. In the ten districts across the provinces and Federal Areas, less than one in five participating households (18%) reported receiving support from schools during closures. **Figure 1** shows that as few as 2% of households in sample districts in **Sindh**, 4% of households in **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)**, and 6% in **Balochistan** confirmed that their children's schools made efforts to continue providing educational support during the closures.

Figure 1. Households receiving support from schools in sample districts, %*



* Differences across provinces and regions are even more pronounced, ranging from only 8% of households to 43% of households reporting access to the Internet.

Figure 2. Households receiving support from teachers, by student gender, %



Teachers in government schools were not given adequate directives for supporting their students during the lockdown. In FGDs, teachers mentioned that the information about school closures reached them via newspaper or news programs on the television. On the other hand, discussions revealed that there was notably higher involvement of teachers in **ICT**. The teachers in these regions made a substantial effort to continue teaching and learning by preparing homework for the students and, in many cases, going to their respective houses to deliver it. This was mentioned during an FGD conducted in a sample district and was echoed in the survey results presented above in **Figure 2**.

Although the government issued a comprehensive safe school reopening plan and standard operating procedures (SOPs), it did not allocate SOP-related funding or earmark budgets to account for teacher and student well-being. The Ministry of National Health Services issued detailed health guidelines for education institutions reopening during COVID-19, comprising essential SOPs to be implemented in all educational institutions. The Inter-Provincial Education Ministers Conference (IPEMC) endorsed the health guidelines and shared elaborated responses to critical questions concerning safe school reopening, distinctly underlining the role and responsibilities of school administration, parents and teachers to ensure safety and protection of students while they are at school. Yet not one federal, provincial or district education department official, school head teacher, or other research participant could share a single instance of adding COVID-19 SOP-related expenses or an increment in equipment, stationery, teaching and learning, or budget at the school, district or provincial level.

Data and interviews from Punjab suggest more autonomy and access to resources at the school level in comparison to other provinces. This could be due to the decentralization reforms in Punjab that ensure that all schools councils are functional and have access to a non-salary budget (NSB), enabling them to meet any school-level needs that may arise (Government of Punjab, 2019; Bari, et al., 2018). In other regions, the limited financial resources and autonomy at the school-level also reflected in the inadequate teaching and learning environments. Education officers at the districts and school head teachers reported how investments in masks and sanitizers were made, and highlighted the efforts to ensure that students and school personnel strictly followed SOPs of social distancing and face coverings within the school premises. But discussions regarding school water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) practices also revealed that WASH facilities were inadequate once schools were reopened. No research participant, across any of the districts, could confirm whether any budget allocation was established for improving WASH facilities in schools.

This resulted in challenges in implementing the WASH guidelines, and ultimately has implications regarding the safety and well-being of students, teachers, and other education personnel. Further, conversations with teachers, education department officials, and schools suggest that no policy or plan was designed at the provincial and district level to ensure mental health support to students or teachers in any region or province except for Punjab. These findings also reiterate the importance of a multi-sectoral emergency response to adequately address the broader health, safety, and well-being needs of students and teachers, as explored below.

IV. Beyond sustaining learning, emergency responses require a multi-sectoral approach to center the well-being of students and teachers.

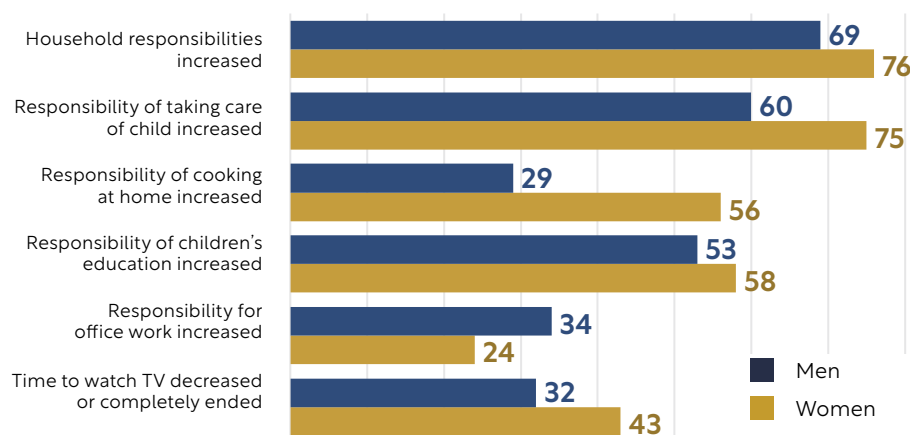
While school closures disrupted learning, they also contributed to increased anxiety and stress for both teachers and students. The previous sections described the increase in paid or unpaid domestic work experienced by children. Likewise, households reported that both girls and boys experienced mental health stressors, and risks of gender-based violence. Teachers—especially women—also experienced increased stress as they tried to manage increased child-rearing duties and a rapidly changing work environment. Further, households experienced a loss of income, increased unemployment, and economic shocks that led to increased food insecurity, and risks to their physical health and nutrition.

Emergencies increase risks to girls’ and boys’ mental and physical health. Approximately one in three households (36% male, 28% female) reported that their children felt frustrated from being confined indoors during lockdown and more than one in three households reported that children had become lazy (36% male, 36% female), bored (39% male, 39% female), or ultimately uninterested in their studies (39% male, 37% female). The lack of recreational activity and social interaction reportedly triggered more feelings of stress or anxiety. While 50% of households reported that boys were able to meet

and play with their friends during COVID-19, this compared with only one in three (33%) of girls. This aligns with global evidence that suggests that during times of crisis, gender norms may restrict girls’ mobility more so than that of boys (UNESCO, 2022b). Gender-based violence (GBV) was also a risk factor for both girls and boys; in several provinces’ teachers reported potential cases of domestic violence or corporal punishment towards students during lockdown.

Schools, teachers and other education personnel were not equipped to support the mental health and well-being needs of students. In FGDs, teachers exhibited a lack of knowledge about gender protection laws and confidentiality was cited as a major obstacle toward ensuring the psycho-social well-being of students. Only the school education department in **Punjab** was noted to have developed a school child protection policy to address students’ safety and health concerns. In addition, an analysis of the perception-based questions on well-being and psychosocial support demonstrates a lack of understanding around identifying students who may be under stress or at-risk. In interviews, DEOs often associated students’ mental well-being with their weakening discipline and decorum post-school reopening, rather than providing insight on the stresses, risks and burdens on students or teachers. Furthermore, interviews with education department officials shed light on the lack of knowledge about protection against GBV and risks to well-being at the school level. This was also due to perceptions that such aspects do not come under the purview of education, but rather are the responsibilities of health departments.

Figure 3. Households’ perceived impact of COVID-19 on time use, %



Teachers—especially women—also experienced increased stress as they tried to manage increased child-rearing duties and a rapidly changing work environment.

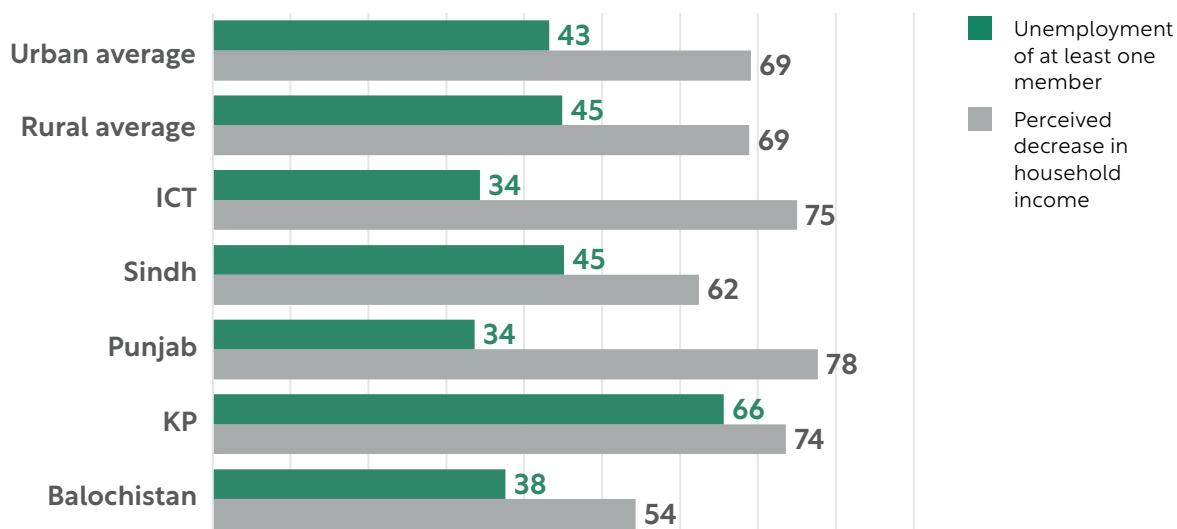
During school closures, parents and caregivers—especially mothers—experienced increased responsibilities at home, to support their children’s education and broader well-being. More than three in four households (76%) reported that the pandemic resulted in increased domestic work for women. **Figure 3** on the previous page shows the perceived impact of the pandemic on women and men’s time use. Women are more likely than men to be affected by an increase in all types of household responsibilities, including childcare, cooking, and providing educational support to children. Indeed, 58% of female respondents reported increased responsibility for children’s education during COVID-19 compared to 53% of male respondents. Interestingly, the findings suggest that the responsibility for children’s education increased the most for female respondents in urban areas (61%) and least for male respondents in urban areas (51%).

This shows how at times of crisis, when state delivery mechanisms are disrupted, the burden of education provision—often already placed on women—becomes exacerbated. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to experience increased responsibility for office work. This may be because men were more likely to participate in office work prior to the pandemic. Importantly, most men (60%) also report an increase in time spent on household chores and child-rearing duties. This is likely explained by the fact that men were staying home more due to the pandemic lockdowns; it may not suggest a shift in gender roles. Women were also more likely than men to report a loss of time spent watching TV or relaxing.

The experience of female teachers provides a lens through which to understand the burden of increased domestic work experienced by women during the pandemic. FGDs with teachers indicate that feelings of confinement at home, with increased household responsibilities and limited mobility impacted female teachers more than male teachers. The exponential increase in technology use also added to the stress of teachers who reported not receiving adequate resources or training to adopt these methods easily. In addition, most survey respondents, and male and female teachers participating in FGDs, could not recall measures implemented at the school level to support their own well-being and safety. This finding resonates with the broader literature on the pandemic’s impact on teachers, especially female teachers (Shaukat et al., 2022), and working mothers (Kalsoom, 2022) in Pakistan. It also echoes global literature on teacher well-being and the need to provide teachers with mental health and psychosocial support in times of crisis (INEE, 2022).

The economic shocks of the pandemic also created increased stress for families. The majority of households in all participating districts reported a loss of income as a result of the pandemic, with significant differences across provinces. **Figure 4** suggests that although a similar proportion of rural and urban households reported a loss of income, the districts most affected by a perceived loss of income were **Punjab** (78%), **ICT** (75%) and **KP** (74%). On the other hand, just over half (54%) of households in **Balochistan** reported experiencing a loss of income.

Figure 4. Impact of the pandemic on unemployment and household income



The differential impacts of COVID-19 on food insecurity are more evident across geographies than across genders. Male and female household members reported experiencing food insecurity at similar levels during the pandemic; however, significant differences were observed across districts. For example, while almost all households experienced a reduction of food consumption as a result of the pandemic, this was felt most in districts of **Punjab** and **Balochistan**. Survey data also suggests that more urban than rural households became vulnerable to food insecurity during the pandemic. This is likely due to the fact that frequency of food consumption was already reportedly less in rural households than in urban households. Indeed, based on available estimates, poverty is more than twice as high in rural areas (31%) than in urban areas (13%) of Pakistan (World Bank, 2019). Global literature on the pandemic also suggests that urban and peri-urban communities were hit hardest by economic shocks of the pandemic (Tabadlab, 2021).

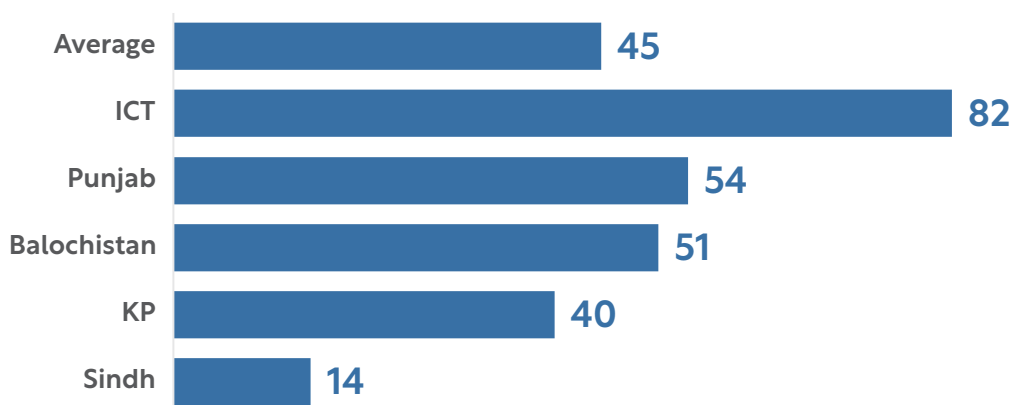
Despite government efforts, stimulus packages and social protection programs did not always reach the most vulnerable. Survey data suggests that the majority of houses did not receive support from the government or other public or private institutes. Approximately 45% of households in sample districts confirmed that they did not receive any assistance (financial or non-financial) from any organization, as illustrated in **Figure 5**. More than half of sample households in **Punjab** and **Balochistan** did not receive any support from either government, private or non-governmental institutions.

Of the households that did receive assistance, about 42% reported receiving only a one-time grant of 12,000 rupees (equivalent to USD \$42) from the Ehsaas Program, launched in response to COVID-19. The other programs that households reported receiving assistance from include the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) (25%), regular Ehsaas Program (17%) and the Sehat Sahulat Program (11%).² Households in rural areas were more likely than those in urban areas to have benefited from national social safety net programs (58% compared to 49%). These results echo an ILO (2021) report, which notes that in Pakistan, the coverage of poverty-targeted schemes such as BISP and Ehsaas can be improved.

These findings point to the need for more robust horizontal coordination and planning between different departments—such as health, nutrition, WASH, child and social protection. This can help leverage all available resources to ensure a well-integrated, holistic response to a crisis that is not only limited to recovering learning, but also recognizes how intertwined and linked effective learning is to the safety and well-being of teachers and students.

2 The Benazir Income Support Program's (BISP) Unconditional Cash Transfers has been a social protection program in Pakistan providing unconditional cash transfers to poor households since 2008. In 2021, the government launched a one-time 12,000-rupee cash transfer to households in-response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 5. Households not receiving any assistance in sample districts, %



V. Conclusion and Recommendations

The education system's response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan provide valuable lessons for responding to future crises. This note highlights how vulnerabilities within the system could be strengthened to be more responsive to the needs of the most marginalized learners and teachers. It also reiterates the importance of planning ahead and building flexibility and inclusivity within the system to ensure a timely, targeted response during times of crises. Even though Pakistan's education response in the form of deploying distance learning, ensuring health and safety protocols, and closing schools due to COVID-19 was lauded globally, this note puts forth the following recommendations that would enable a more effective and inclusive response to the COVID-19 pandemic and future crises, not only in Pakistan but globally.

1. Strengthen data collection and use.

Data that is disaggregated by socio-economic level, household location, and student or teacher gender—amongst other variables—can help decision-makers identify relevant needs and opportunities when designing education response plans and policies. Data collection processes and systems must be strengthened, including through the use of rigorous and timely needs assessments when a crisis strikes, and by ensuring that data collection tools capture a range of data points, including access to technology, other assets, and services, perceptions of government response, time use, health, and protection data. Data sharing across government sectors is vital for effective emergency response. It is also important that time and resources are dedicated to the analysis and dissemination of data and evidence, to ensure education stakeholders, including governments at the national and subnational level, as well as school leaders, are able to properly use the data for informed decision-making.

2. Empower lower tiers of governments and school leaders to improve service delivery and ownership.

When school leaders are equipped with resources, capacity, and data to make informed decisions, they can design remote education responses according to the needs of school communities. A good example of this is the decentralization reforms that have been put in place in Punjab to empower school management and provide funds through a non-salary budget for schools. Additional solutions may include: developing a school or community contingency plan that clearly articulates established arrangements, roles and responsibilities to enable timely, effective and appropriate responses to potential emergencies; providing capacity building and training for school leaders and district-level authorities to respond to emergencies; or allocating funds and resources to emergency response at the district level.

3. Diversify remote education responses, and train teachers and parents on how to facilitate home learning.

Given the large rural-urban disparity in access to educational technology and the Internet, effective education response plans must include low-tech and paper-based options for students from poorer or rural households. Investments in developing infrastructure to support distance learning in lagging districts should be accompanied by ongoing training and support for teachers and parents to implement distance learning measures and facilitate home learning effectively. Training for teachers may address how to effectively implement remote teaching and assessment, how to adapt curriculum and pedagogy for vulnerable learners, and/or how to effectively engage and communicate with parents to support their children's home learning and/or return to school.

4. Strengthen multi-sectoral collaboration and ensure a whole-of-government approach.

In times of crises, it is critical that the education sector works together with health, WASH, child protection, social protection, social welfare, disaster management and other sectors to adequately address the learning and broader wellbeing needs of students and teachers. This includes, for example, strengthening schools' abilities to create safe environments that align with health protocols, as well as addressing specific challenges faced by some teachers and students, such as GBV or paid and unpaid child labor. To effectively respond to emergencies, education sector plans and especially emergency response plans must clearly articulate the responsibilities of different sectors and government institutes, as well as how cross-sectoral collaboration will be coordinated. Governments can also establish platforms and mechanisms for regular communication and coordination, including, for example, the establishment of an emergency response task force or intergovernmental committee that oversees decision-making processes in times of crisis.



Access to high quality data is critical for emergency plans that are responsive to all students' needs.

5. Engage diverse stakeholders while planning, implementing, monitoring, or evaluating education response plans, including emergency response or recovery plans.

To ensure all education plans center the needs of those most at-risk, it is of paramount importance to consult and meaningfully engage diverse stakeholders along the policy lifecycle. Women and girls, children from vulnerable households, transgender communities, or other minority groups (including learners with disabilities and others who were not in the scope of this study), can help inform the design of relevant, effective, inclusive, sustainable education plans. To do this, a variety of tools and methods can be used, including pulse surveys, focus group discussions, or consultation workshops to capture perceptions on an emergency response at a given point in time. Accessible and confidential grievance mechanisms during emergencies can help identify issues of child protection or GBV, and the establishment of an Advisory Committee with diverse representatives from the community can support in ensuring that engagement is sustained from emergency response to recovery.

Methodology

The study was conducted in sample districts in Pakistan during the months of August to October 2022 to assess the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on the health, well-being and safety of teachers and students.

The study employed a mixed methods approach, incorporating quantitative and qualitative research techniques to explore aspects such as access to education (during school closures and after schools reopened), education service delivery, institutional capacity and responsiveness, gender risks, roles, burdens, and perception-based analysis of mental and psychological well-being.

The study was conducted in 10 districts that were selected nationwide, two per province and two for federal areas. Using the Index of Deprivation (IDE), districts with relatively high levels of deprivation in education as per IDE in provinces were identified for the survey. Therefore, the results of the study are not representative of provincial realities, but rather provide a picture of regions more disadvantaged in the country. The districts included in the study are Upper Dir and Torgarh (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), Muzaffargarh and Rahim Yar Khan (Punjab), Badin and Tharparkar (Sindh), Jaffarabad and Sibi (Balochistan), Nagar, and Islamabad Capital Territory.

Primary data collection took place at the level of households (4,000 household surveys, 400 households per district allocated proportionately 30:70 for urban and rural locations). Research

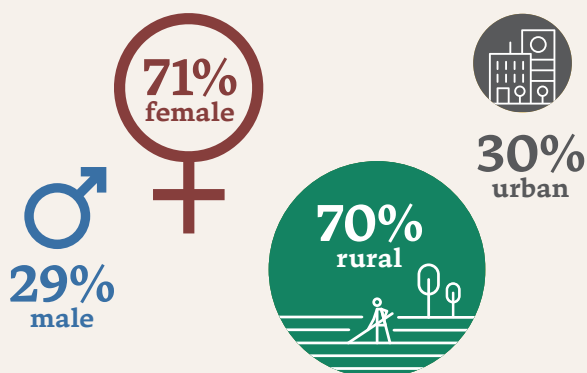
4,000

Households surveyed in 10 districts

participants also included teachers (20 FGDs with male and female teachers), school administrations (20 KIIs with school leaders), government officials (16 KIIs with officials at the federal, provincial and district levels), policy stakeholders (three KIIs) and organisations working with vulnerable communities (three KIIs). Of the 4,000 survey respondents, 71% were female (average age 39 years), 56% were housewives and did not work for pay, and most respondents did not have a background of formal schooling.

While the study explored how COVID-19 exacerbated inequalities in these provinces based on socio-economic level, household location, and gender, the research instruments did not capture other characteristics of vulnerability, such as disability, language, ethnicity, religion, or refugee status.

In the sample:



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