

GIRLS' LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL CLOSURES: INSIGHTS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH GIRLS AND MOTHERS IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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SUMMARY

- This note explores findings on the changing household dynamics in response to the mandated COVID-19 school closures in Punjab, Pakistan.
- The SMS Girl Impact Evaluation and a complementing qualitative study assessed the lived experiences of girls during school closures.
- Mothers and daughters in select districts were interviewed via phone.
- The initial round of interviews tells a story of economic hardship, gendered division of household tasks, loss of learning, lack of engagement with educational TV programming, and fear that some students may not re-enroll when schools reopen.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, lockdowns and school closures in response to COVID-19 affected over 1.6 billion learners. Even now, school closures affect millions of children. Further, in low- and middle-income countries, the share of children living in learning poverty (53 percent prior to the pandemic) could potentially reach 70 percent.¹ Past global crises have increased the gendered household burdens for younger girls and frequent school closures have increased the possibility of early marriage and pregnancy (Korkoyah & Wreh, 2015; Cousins, 2020).

In March 2020, as COVID-19 cases rose, Pakistan instituted widespread school closures. Almost 50 million children—12 million of them in the province of Punjab—found themselves out of school. Within a few weeks of schools closing, the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training and the School Education Department of the province of Punjab, supported by the World Bank and other affiliates, developed two educational television programming initiatives: TeleSchool² and Taleem Ghar.³ Both initiatives were primarily broadcast on television, but were later hosted on YouTube and mobile applications (Zacharia, 2020). Early assessments of the initiatives show high uptake and popularity (Gallup, 2020)⁴; however, awareness and

engagement with programs have decreased since their launch (World Bank, 2021).

Alongside remote learning programs⁵, households resorted to private and home tutoring services.^{6,7} In most households, elder siblings and parents helped students with schoolwork and syllabus revisions. In some cases, parents hired private tutors or admitted their children in tutoring schools. The provincial government in Punjab is also using existing programs, such as the Zewar-e-taleem⁸ stipend program, to maintain girls' enrolment when schools reopen.

¹ UNESCO, UNICEF and WORLD BANK, 2021. The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery

² Teleschool is a federal initiative for students across Pakistan.

³ Taleem Ghar is a provincial initiative launched by the Government of Punjab.

⁴ Assessments show that 2 in every 5 Pakistanis are aware of Teleschool, and 1 in 3 Pakistanis have accessed lessons at some point. The Taleem Ghar mobile app has been downloaded 72,000 times and the website has been accessed more than 180,000 times since its launch (Zacharia, 2020).

⁵ Remote Learning Programs include Taleem Ghar, Teleschool, and other learning programs on YouTube, Whatsapp, Zoom, including Khan Academy, Radio-My Best Friend (UNESCO)/ Listen to Learn.

⁶ A shadow market for private tutoring exists in all urban and many rural locations in Pakistan, where individuals, academies or tutoring centers provide paid supplementary tutoring (Aslam & Atherton, 2012). Traditionally, private tutoring is acquired outside of school hours. This sector is comprised of diverse actors (including schoolteachers) and is unregulated in Pakistan. During school closures it was able to remain functional, often offering the only alternative for continuing studies.

⁷ The SMS GIRL surveys report increased private tutoring during school closures and re-openings (Geven, et al., 2021).

⁸ Zewar-e-Taleem Program is the conditional cash transfer to the girl students enrolled in public sector schools in 16 districts with low literacy.

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To devise effective policy strategies for mitigating the impact of pandemic disruptions for girls' schooling and learning, it is important to understand the ways in which their lives have been impacted, the challenges faced during closures and once they have returned to school.

SMS GIRL IMPACT EVALUATION

Repeated school closures and a staggered reopening of schools have put re-enrolments at risk, particularly for girls. Income shocks can make intra-household decisions more gendered, including enrolment and expenditure decisions toward education (Aslam & Kingdon, 2008). These changes in decision-making can become permanent and contribute significantly toward a higher rate of school dropout for girls. To devise effective policy strategies for mitigating the impact of pandemic disruptions on girls' schooling and learning, it is important to collect evidence on the ways in which their lives have been impacted, the challenges faced during closures and the challenges they may face if and when they return to school.

The SMS GIRL Impact Evaluation aims to gather this evidence by evaluating the relative effectiveness of sending phone-based text messages to parents to ensure that adolescent girls (typically aged 10-14 years) continue to learn during school closures and re-enrol in schools once they reopen. The Impact Evaluation is supported by a qualitative research study that aims to understand the household level dynamics and the lived experiences of girls during the pandemic. Details on the design of the evaluation and findings from the quantitative surveys are discussed in a recently published brief (Geven, et al., 2021)

QUALITATIVE STUDY METHODOLOGY

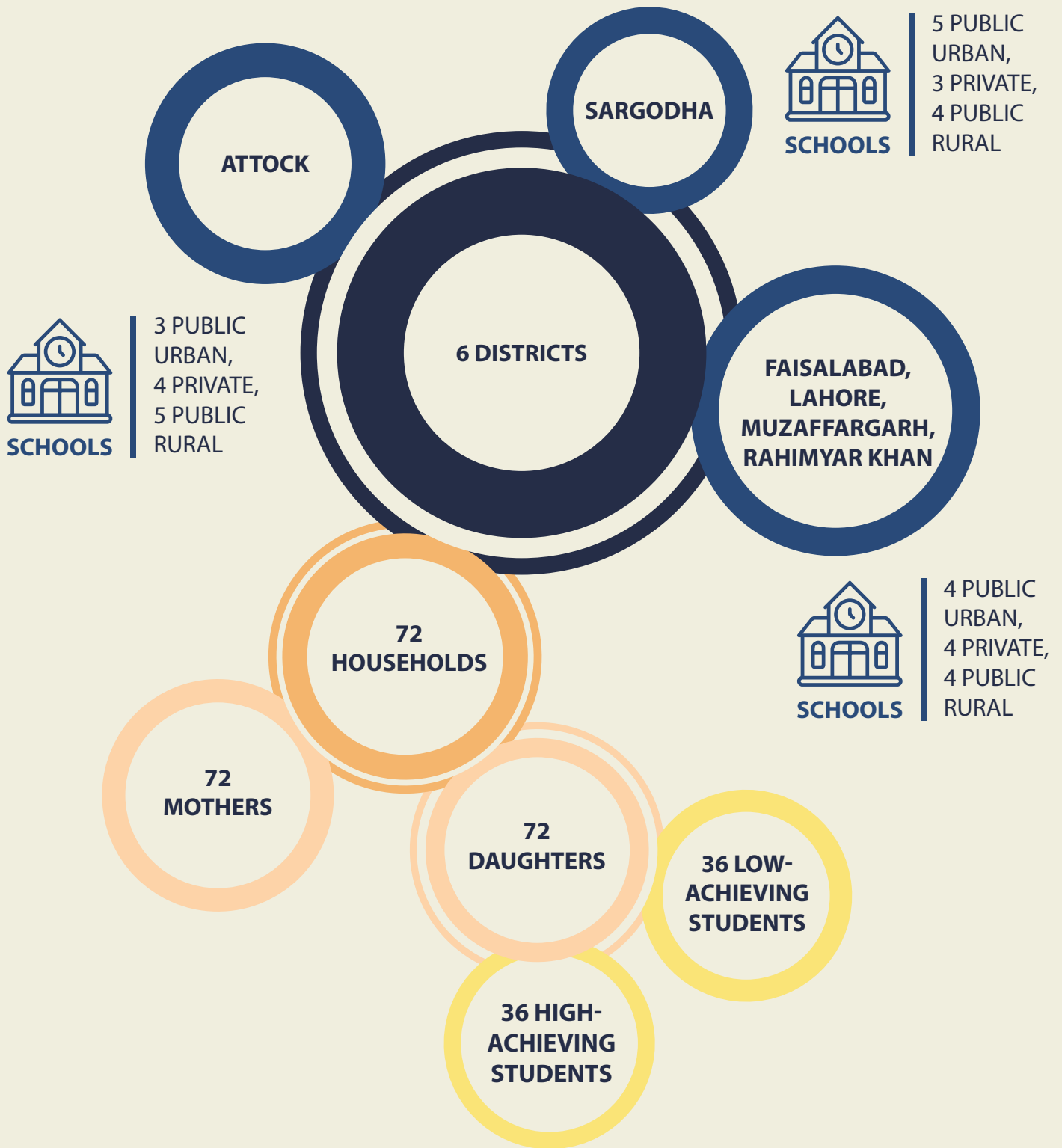
Since social distancing and lockdown mandates limited the conventional processes of conducting research and investigations, the SMS GIRL team designed a virtual qualitative study. In the Punjab province of Pakistan, in-depth interviews were conducted over the phone with households of school-going girls between ages 10 to 14 years and with their mothers. The qualitative study is intended to generate information about girls' lived experiences during the lockdown, the nature and quality of support available, parents' educational aspirations for their girls, and the exposure to and experience of distance learning measures introduced by the government. Findings from the qualitative study are helping to refine the SMS GIRL intervention.

This brief presents the findings from the in-depth interviews. The sample chosen for the interviews is a subset of the larger survey sample for the study. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure representation across treatment types, districts, socioeconomic strata, and academic performance. Seventy-two households were selected across six districts.⁹ The sample included high and low performers¹⁰ and high- and low-income households. The first round of interviews was conducted between November and December 2020. Interviews were semi-structured conversations, which were adapted to individual household contexts. Appendix 1 lists the questions and prompts used to guide conversations with mothers and girls. The average phone conversation lasted for 30 minutes. Figure 1 illustrates these sample characteristics.

⁹ Districts include Attock, Faisalabad, Lahore, Muzaffargarh, Rahim Yar Khan, and Sargodha.

¹⁰ High and low achieving students from the highest and lowest quintiles of test scores from the Systems Approach to Better Education Results (SABER) survey data. The data is a collection of school-based surveys implemented globally since 2016. So far, three countries are included in the series: Laos PDR, Afghanistan and the province of Punjab in Pakistan.

Figure 1. Sample Demographics



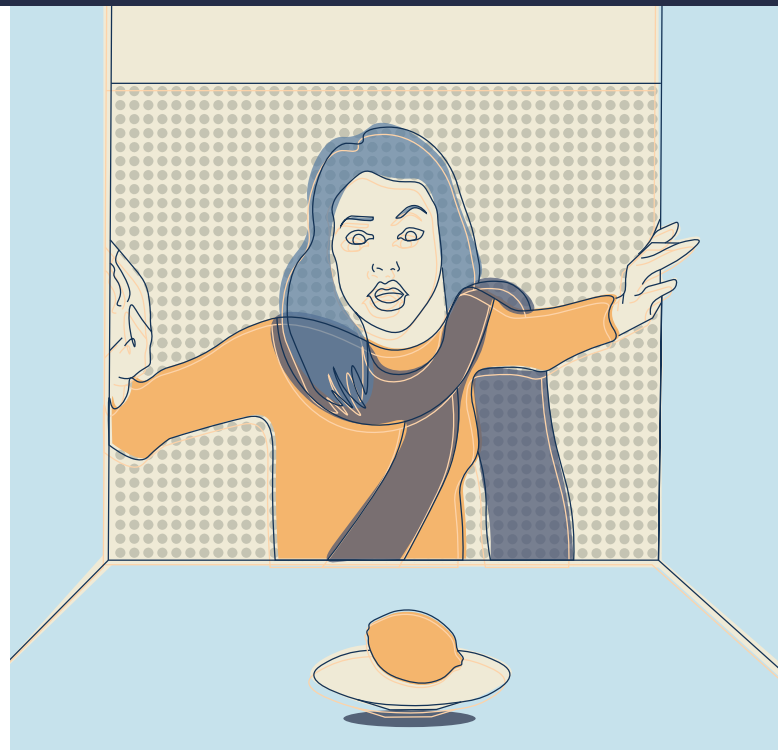
FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

INCOME UNCERTAINTY AND DIMINISHED PARENTAL SUPPORT: A THREAT TO GIRLS' LEARNING

Pandemic lockdowns resulted in a sharp decline in household incomes¹¹, particularly in the cities in Pakistan. These declines persisted even after lockdowns were discontinued. In several cases, the loss of employment by the primary earners (the men) was temporary, but in others the disruption was more permanent. This created significant economic distress, particularly in households with daily wage earners and where no secondary source of income was available. Fathers with permanent jobs (private or government) continued to receive their salaries through the lockdown period, but this was not the case for daily wage and temporary workers. One mother narrated her financial struggles:

“ When my husband was out of work, we [still] had 5 children to feed... there are 7 people in the household. We had to feed ourselves. When work had discontinued, we had limited savings. I was worried about how I was going to cover all our expenses for the children. I was unsuccessful in borrowing money also. The government helped during the Corona [months]. My husband got some utility supplies from a charity. That's how, somehow, we made ends meet.
— Mother, high-achieving daughter, government rural school ”

¹¹ Baseline data reports that almost 36% of the households report losing a substantial share of income since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. 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).



The link between income shocks and threats to continuation of girls' education emerged clearly in the interviews. Respondents spoke about families planning to discontinue girls' schooling altogether so that the girls could help with household chores full time. Income shocks have also altered parental expectations regarding the highest grade their child will complete, with almost 25 percent of the households reporting reduced expectations (Hasan, et al., 2021). One girl articulated the stress of this situation:

“ Covid-19 threatened my future plans because there was no income in our household during that time. Schools were closed and we could not afford tuition [private tutoring]. We could not study at home or even at tuition centers [private tutoring classes]. At times, I would consider dropping out of school and learning a skill to reduce my mother's stress about meeting my educational expenses. I wanted to study but the conditions made me think this way.
— Girl, high achiever, government urban school ”

Financial distress constrained parents' ability to support their children, particularly the girls, during this period.¹² One mother expressed her concern:

“ No, we were not able to help our daughter at all. For one, [my husband] is a daily wage worker and he does not earn enough to cover our expenses. How can we afford tuition [private tutoring]? During school closures, my husband was also out of work because of the lockdown. He was unable to get his daily wage job. Those days we survived by borrowing money from people. ”
– Mother, high-achieving daughter, government rural school

This financial constraint prevented parents from organizing private tutoring for their children, which interviews revealed to be the dominant strategy for parents to mitigate learning losses. Mothers who were able to organize private tutoring classes for their girls said that their main motivation was to ensure that the girls did not forget the knowledge acquired at school in previous years. The girls who took tutoring classes reported that they were studying the same amount during the school closures as they did when schools were open. This signals a potential gap in learning trajectories between children who attended tutoring classes during school closures and those who did not.

Location and affordability determined access to private tutoring, i.e., households in proximity to tutoring centers with a stable income and/or enough to spare for this expense could access these services.

Mothers emerged as champions for girls' education in different ways. Some spoke candidly about having to choose between ensuring that there was sufficient food at home and paying for tutoring services. Those with skills started cottage businesses to generate income for their families through the lockdown. Those who could, borrowed from their families to bear the extra costs for tutoring. Some reported convincing private tutors to continue classes for free. Several mothers reported having to convince unsupportive family and community members to allow girls to continue their education.

HOUSEHOLD BURDEN OF WORK: A STORY OF GENDERED ROLES

Lockdown measures kept families housebound for up to three months, immediately increasing the gendered burden of work. All mothers and daughters interviewed for this qualitative study reported an increase in daily household chores during lockdown, including increased cleaning, cooking, washing, and longer hours of childcare. This increased burden continued for the period of the school closures, which lasted longer than the lockdown. Following traditional models of gender roles, fathers and sons rarely supported the women in housework. Young men did, however, support their families by taking on an increased share of chores outside the house, including buying groceries and other items for the girls, fetching water from the filtration plant and, in some instances, accompanying their sisters to private tutoring classes. In a few instances, sons also accompanied their fathers to work. A time use survey meant to gather activity data validated that girls spent more time on household chores relative to boys.

¹² There is some indication that financial distress and the need to generate income during lockdown threatened boys' education as well. While boys' education wasn't a focus of this study, it did emerge that some of the elder boys had to start working because the fathers either lost their jobs or fell ill.

Time spent on household chores for girls peaked during school closures (Geven, et al., 2021). One girl narrated her altered household dynamics:

“ I am the only girl; I do not have any sisters, so I do all the housework with my mother. I have two brothers. One is older than me and is in the 8th grade. The other is younger and is in the 4th grade. My older brother helps a lot. He buys all the vegetables and is responsible for getting all the groceries for the house. He is responsible for dropping me to my tuition [tutoring] classes and teaching my younger brother. Often, when my father did not feel well, he would set up the roadside stall in the streets nearby.
– Girl, low achiever, private school

”



The eldest/elder daughters took on the most chores and shared a larger proportion of the household burden with their mothers. Many of these girls had automatically assumed additional household responsibilities and reported juggling their studies alongside household chores. Many elder sisters reported advising their parents on the advantages of watching educational TV channels and communicated information on school closures and remote study.

In most families, the elder girls helped their younger siblings with schoolwork, either with revisions or teaching ahead in the syllabus. One girl shared her responsibility as an older sibling:

“ I have one sister and two younger brothers and because I am the oldest, it's obvious that I have the most work-related responsibilities. I helped my mother with household work. Sometimes I washed the dishes or swept and mopped the house. If mother was doing the laundry, I would wring the clothes and hang them to dry. Sometimes, I would take my siblings out to play so that mother could get her work done. I understood mother had a lot of household work and so I helped in whatever way I could without her asking me to do it. I am the oldest and had to be the one to realize this.
– Girl, high achiever, government rural school

”

In rare cases, elder brothers reported helping children, including the girls, with schoolwork and revisions. While the expected cost of increased burden of work is reduced time for studies, most girls reported that they made time to study despite housework. Boys generally had more mobility and free time to play, meet friends and study, whereas girls compromised on leisure time.

USE OF CELL PHONES AND TELEVISION FOR LEARNING: UNEQUAL ACCESS AND USABILITY

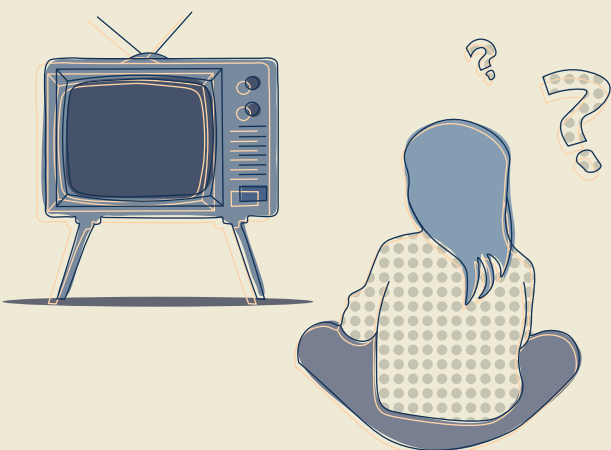
Mothers and girls were also asked about remote learning programs. Many interviewees reported not knowing about the television educational channels because they did not own a television.¹³ Those that did have a TV were often unaware of these channels. Overall, there was little engagement with remote learning programs. These findings were in line with the survey results, where only 14 percent of parents reported that their children engaged with a remote learning activity at home during the first round of school closures (August to September 2020). Engagement with remote programs has reduced further in the second round of school closures, with only 8 percent of girls and 2 percent of boys participating in remote learning as of October 2021 (Geven, et al., 2021).

A minority reported watching educational programs as a way of keeping up with learning at home. Few found them useful, either because the content differed from the syllabus or because of limited or no interaction with instructions on the screen. The pace of teaching and medium of instruction

also presented challenges. Many girls reported the lack of interaction with instructor and peers to be a major barrier to engagement:

“ I used to like those TV programs while I watched them. They were useful. The problem was that we could not ask questions if we did not understand something. I had to call my mother and that topic would pass since we could not pause it. It did help me somewhat understand concepts I had studied earlier, and I reviewed and memorized them. So, I think they were useful. I did understand some things
– Girl, low achiever, private school

I only watched this channel [educational TV] once or twice, so I do not know much about it. These programs taught content via cartoons and animations. I did not watch it a lot as I did not understand it. The channels covered topics that I did not find interesting; therefore, watching the channel would not have made a big difference as the content was not related to my syllabus.
– Girl, high achiever, private school ”



¹³ Only one mother mentioned that her son received a link from their school on his mobile phone and used it to access his coursework.

Families' attitudes toward television may have reduced engagement with remote learning programs. Most families viewed television as an unsuitable medium for study and associated it with soap operas and termed it a disturbance. Most children in these households said that they did not regularly watch channels as an alternative to attending classes and generally watched television as a form of entertainment. Several mothers reported that their husbands did not think that it was appropriate for children to watch TV and had either given away the TV or opted not to get a cable connection.

LEARNING LOSS: IN WORDS OF MOTHERS AND GIRLS

The main anxieties expressed by mothers with regard to learning losses were linked with repeated school closures. For them, these interruptions in routine classes meant that their girls would experience inconsistent learning and a loss of motivation to study which could result in them dropping out of school. One mother expressed her concern about learning losses:

“ When the schools were closed, we were worried about our daughter’s education. The biggest worry was that she would lose interest in studying because she had to study at home and studying at home was very difficult. The effect of going to school and studying there is completely different to studying at home, because children learn more at school but at home, they just rote memorize even if they do not understand it. Since my hope is that she becomes a teacher, she would need to attain a high level of education and complete a masters [degree].
– Mother, high-achieving daughter, private school ”

Several mothers who were either illiterate or had received limited education were unsure about the extent to which their daughters had retained knowledge. They felt that their daughters or their teachers would be better placed to respond to the question. Some mothers were able to articulate a perceived learning loss, including loss of numeracy and literacy skills. For example, they said that their girls could do math faster before school closures or were now reading slower. They felt also that the girls were forgetting lessons they had learned.

These anxieties were not echoed by the girls, who were mostly confident about their studies and skills. However, girls who did not have access to private tutoring classes during

school closures reported having forgotten their previous lessons.

Self-study did not seem to make much of a difference. Girls spoke about the limitations of self-study and limited guidance:

“ Yes, we did not attend school for over 7 months, so it was evident that we would forget most of what we had learned last year. We did not attend tuition [tutoring classes] as well. Whatever we studied, we studied it ourselves and that is why I have forgotten many things. The 5th grade examinations were being conducted when the break was announced and not taking the exams affected our education because we did not study those books afterwards.
– Girl, high achiever, public rural school ”

Yes, I forgot a lot because I did not study anything. I could study some things that were easy. Additionally, my sisters and brother would explain the content that they understood. If they did not understand it then I would ask my friend for help and later revise it only if I understood it. However, I would abandon it if I did not understand it.
– Girl, low achiever, private rural school ”

CONCLUSION

This brief presents findings from the first of three rounds of qualitative interviews that are being conducted to support the SMS Girl impact evaluation.

The risk of school dropout for girls is high because of frequent school closures. Repeated lockdowns and income

shocks have limited parents' ability to provide their daughters with adequate educational support. Families who have the financial means are resorting to private tutoring to continue educational learning for their children.

Households are adapting to these changing dynamics in different ways. Men and women are conforming to gender roles in their daily lives and this has resulted in a disproportionate division of household responsibilities between male and female household members. Elder siblings are taking on a greater share of household responsibilities, including helping younger siblings and cousins with homework and syllabus revisions.

Awareness and use of educational television have decreased since its launch in early 2020. This can be attributed to a limiting interface that inhibits active engagement with students, and societal norms that do not consider television as an educational tool for learning.

Subsequent rounds of interviews will explore these changing dynamics in detail and will include narratives from male members of the households.

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APPENDIX

BOX 1: KEY THEMES FROM BASELINE INTERVIEWS WITH MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Themes	Mothers' Interviews	Daughters' interviews
 Life During School closures and lockdown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Daughters' burden of work - Gendered differences in children's work burdens at home - Exposure to COVID-19 – health, economic, and others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Daily routines, burden of work, including gendered differences - Contact and connections with friends - Changes in burden of work after school re-opening
 Educational support received from families for education during school closures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Types of support provided for children's education, including encouragement and financial support - Challenges faced in organizing support - Gendered differences in support provided - Nature of fathers' support for girls' education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support received for continuing studies by parents, teachers' and others - Family attitudes towards girls' education and any changes due to COVID-19-related disruptions
 Interaction with study text messages	Individual and family responses and experiences with text messages received	
 Experience of remote learning and learning losses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Impact of school closures on learning levels of girls and boys - Experience of multiple closures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Studying schedules during school closures - Home environment and difficulties associated (if any) with studying at home - Government's TV channels
 Fears and aspirations for girls' education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Historical aspirations for daughters' education - Covid-induced changes/threats to these aspirations - Husband's aspirations for girls - Gendered differences in aspirations for girls and boys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal aspirations for education - Aspirations for work - Any COVID-induced changes to plans/aspirations