



A rapid assessment

Impact of COVID-19 on Education in Bangladesh



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Advocacy for Social Change (ASC), BRAC

In collaboration with BRAC Education Programme (BEP)

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Executive summary

Following the COVID19 pandemic, the students are facing 'new normal' life after the closure of all educational institutions since 17 March 2020. BRAC conducted a rapid assessment intending to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the students and their learning processes. The assessment was carried out in 16 districts, ensuring the representativeness of all administrative divisions. The assessment banked mainly on a sample survey conducted during 4-7 May 2020.



It covered 1,938 students studying in primary and secondary schools. We also conducted some key informant interviews with relevant stakeholders to feed into essential qualitative aspects.

Almost all respondents (except four) informed that the students are well aware of COVID-19. Field data suggest that 90% of students wash hands with soap and water or use sanitiser, and 82% of students stay home all the time. The high percentages might provide a glowing picture, however, leave an alarming gap too.

16% of the students who took part in the survey have expressed anxiety and panic due to the pandemic. With a total of 31 million school-going children, the number can be as many as 5 million panic-stricken children in the country. The children with disabilities (29%), female students (17%), students of secondary schools (17%), students living in rural areas (17%), and madrasa students (17%) are more in fear compared to the rest. Their state of fear is quite palpable. 34% of the panic-stricken students have become cranky, show tantrums or remain agitated most of the time. 28% of them have lost enthusiasm to study or play while 25% feel hesitant to speak to outsiders. 20% of them are suffering from monophobia, and 28% feel scared of seeing outsiders.

The lockdown poses a risk of child abuse as well. 3% of the surveyed students (54) were survivors of various types of abuse during the lockdown. This percentage is alarming, considering the total number of students. In 82% of cases, students encountered psychological harassment alongside physical torture, sexual harassment, confinement, and forced labour. The students with disabilities (16%) have been the worst victims of abuse. Survey data suggest that only 2% of female students were the victims of abuse. Because the interview was conducted over the telephone, many girl students might have decided not to talk about such a sensitive issue.

Apart from studying, the students are engaged in various types of activities throughout the day. Most of the students (55%) assist their parents in household activities. Data suggest that female students (65%) are more involved in household activities compared to their male counterparts (44%). A significant portion of their time is spent in unproductive activities such as gossiping (27%) with family members, friends, and relatives and mobile phone browsing, internet and online games (19%), etc. Male students spend more time in gossiping (30%), phone, internet and online games (23%) and sports (14%), compared to their female counterparts.

The coronavirus pandemic seems to have made 13% student less interested in studying while 14% of students do not study at all. The survey data shed some light on the underlying reasons behind 'not studying so well' and 'not studying at all'. 44% of students reported that they are not getting any direction from schools. They are mostly madrasa students and students living in rural areas. In 22% of cases, the scarcity of food appeared as a significant issue, reported mostly by madrasa students and those living in urban areas. Some other issues such as non-supportive families (19%), poor mental health condition (18%), and absence of study environment at home (11%) are also responsible. The students living in urban areas reported the most about their troublesome mental condition.

Distant classes through Sangsad TV or online classes have limited appeal among the students. Survey data suggest, 56% of students are not taking part in the classes. The more non-participation in distant learning is evident among the students from ethnic minorities (75%), madrasa students (68%), students with disabilities (61%), and those living in rural areas (60%). The foremost reason behind this is the logistical constraint, e.g. television, internet, electricity, cable-network connection, etc. The lowest participation of students from ethnic minorities is mainly triggered by the language barrier and deficiency in the flow of information.



Most of the respondents (54%) opined that extra classes to cover the loss after the schools resume. Despite an increased rate of spread of the pandemic, 49% of respondents want the schools to open within a short period. 35% of respondents suggested reducing the syllabus, while 26% of respondents want the exam questions to be simplified. To help students recover from the psychological trauma, the respondents provided some recommendations. Recreational activities, gifts or increase of stipend, and strengthening distant learning processes are some of them.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the assessment

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus outbreak as a global pandemic. Given the potential spread of coronavirus, the Government of Bangladesh declared the closure of all educational institutions with effect from 17 March 2020. The government has extended the shutdown several times. We assume further extensions due to high risk of community transmission of coronavirus.



There are 38.6 million students in Bangladesh. Among them, 3.6 million students are in pre-primary, 18 million in primary, 13 million in secondary, and 4 million in tertiary education (BANBEIS, 2018). The government initiated distant learning through Sangsad TV to continue the teaching and learning during the lockdown. It was for the students of class 6-10 from 29 March 2020 and

gradually for the students of primary schools and madrasas. Some schools in urban areas, especially the English medium schools, initiated alternative mechanisms including online classes using video conference apps.

Education is a priority area for BRAC programmes. BRAC is interested to learn about the psycho-social condition of the students staying at home amid the lockdown. The study intends to find out how students are coping up with this situation continuing their learning.

1.2 Objectives and critical questions of the assessment

The objective of the rapid assessment is to assess the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students and their learning processes. The critical questions for the assessment are:

1. Are the school students aware of COVID-19 messages and practising them to remain safe from any infection?
2. What is the psycho-social condition of the students during the lockdown induced by the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. Are the students continuing their learning by adopting alternative mechanisms? Are alternative mechanisms effective for the continuation of studying?
4. How can the authority, teachers, and parents make up for the gaps immediately after the lockdown is over? What should be the role of relevant stakeholders?

1.3 Scope and limitations of the assessment

The rapid assessment intended at looking into the condition of students studying at the primary and secondary level. It is challenging to cover all existing streams of education through a rapid assessment. Thus this work was limited to covering two significant education streams i.e. Bangla medium schools and mainstream madrasas, both public and private. The students studying in pre-schools, English medium schools, Qawmi madrasas, colleges, and universities were not covered in this assessment. Moreover, the assessment did not include every aspect of education. The assessment was limited to shedding light on the students' current situation and psycho-social conditions impacted by the lockdown. Furthermore, we conducted telephone surveys due to nation-wide lockdown. It might have failed to extract the authentic picture on some sensitive issues such as harassment or violence against female students.



2. Methodology

The assessment was carried out throughout the country by maintaining the representativeness of all administrative divisions. Sixteen districts (2 from each division) were randomly selected. An Upazila was picked from each selected district through the same sampling procedure. Mainly the parents were contacted for this assessment as primary respondents, who provided information about their

Total number of students covered: 1,938
Female students: 51%; Male students: 49%
Primary students: 50%; Secondary students: 50%
Students with disabilities: 4%
Students from ethnic minorities: 8%
Bangla medium students: 87%;
Madrasa students: 13%
Students living in rural areas: 73%; Urban areas: 27%
Average divisional coverage: 242 students
Districts covered: 16 (two from each division)

Box 1: Main features of the students covered through survey

school going kids. Moreover, we interviewed education officials, teachers, school management committee (SMC) members, and people's representatives. The parents and the Key Informants were interviewed over the phone during the period of 4-7 May 2020.

We covered a total of 1,938 students via their parents, elder siblings, or legal guardians. In 75% of the cases, they responded on behalf of the school-going child. In 25% cases, however, the parents/guardians themselves handed over the phones to the child for responding.

Of the children covered in the survey, 51% were female, and 49% were male. 50% of the students were selected from primary schools and rest from secondary schools. 4% (82 students) students were with disabilities and 8% (146 students) from ethnic minorities. Among the selected students, 87% of students are from Bangla medium schools and the rest 13% (259 students) from madrasas. 73% of students are from rural areas and the rest 27% from urban areas. On average, we covered 242 students from each administrative division.

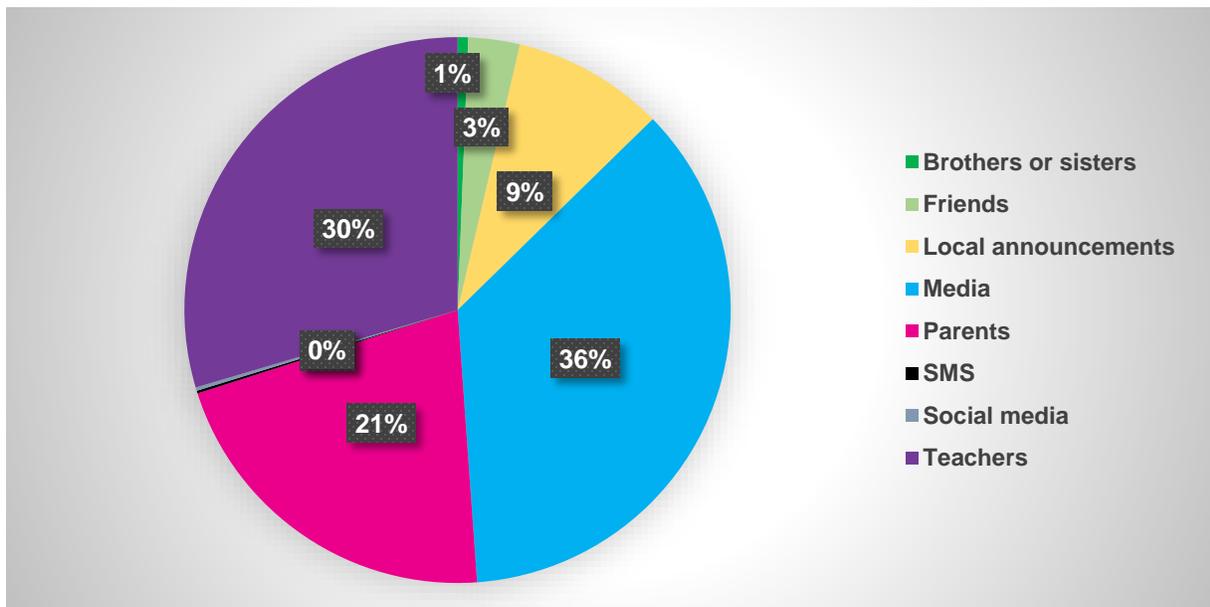
3. Findings of the assessment

3.1 Awareness of coronavirus high among the students

Survey data suggest that students have knowledge and awareness about COVID-19. The messages regarding the virus have been well disseminated through different mediums. Almost all respondents (except four) informed that the students are well aware of coronavirus. Media (both traditional and digital) played an essential role in this

dissemination. 36% of the students received information on coronavirus from the media. Teachers (30%) and parents (21%) were the next two critical sources of information.

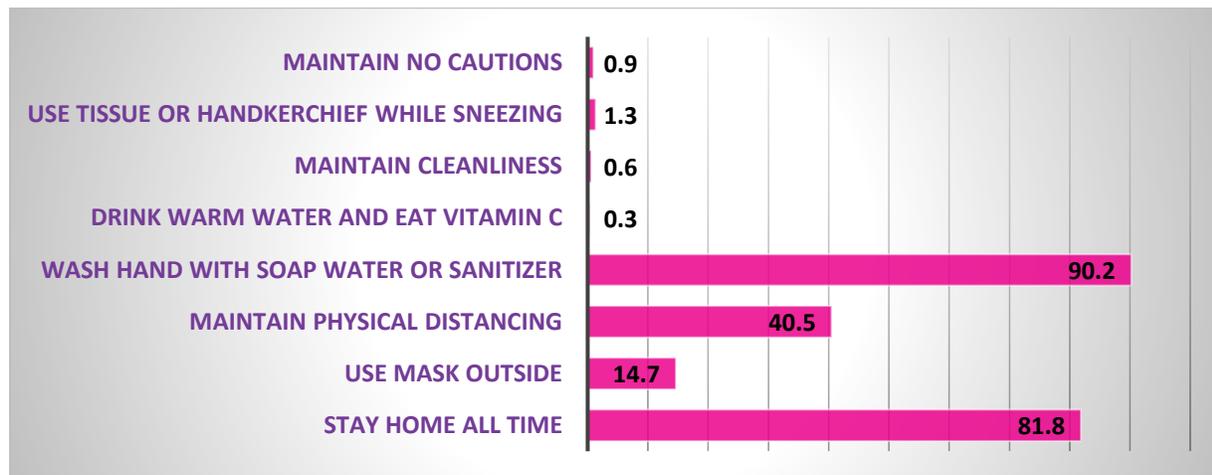
Figure 1: Sources of information about coronavirus (n=1934)



3.2 Most students maintain hand-hygiene

Most respondents observe good hand hygiene to prevent the disease; 90% of the students wash hands with soap and water or use hand sanitiser. 82% of the students stay home all the time. 41% of students maintain physical distancing, and 15% wear masks while going outside. That is 18% of students go outside amid the lockdown, and most of them do not maintain physical distancing or use masks while out. A small number of respondents (18 respondents) do not maintain any caution at all to keep themselves protected from infection.

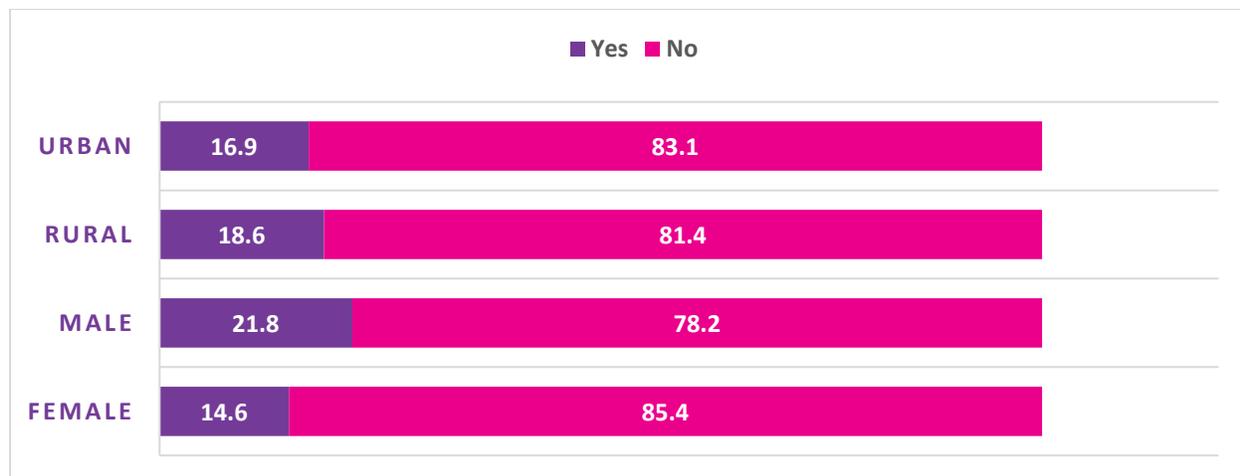
Figure 2: Measures taken by students to protect themselves from coronavirus (percentage) (N=1938) *



*Multiple responses

The tendency and frequency of going outside are more evident among male students and those living in rural areas. 22% of male students go outside, which is 15% for female students. On the other hand, 19% of students living in rural areas have the tendency to go outside, which is 17% in urban areas.

Figure 3: Tendency of going outside during lockdown by sex and location (percentage)



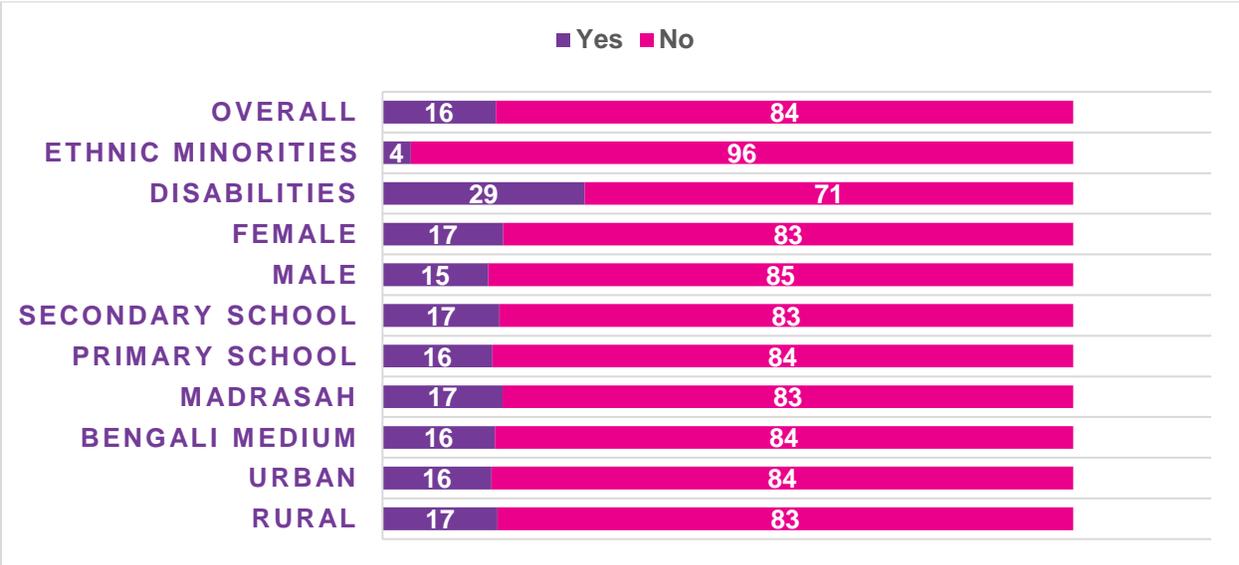
3.3 Manifestation of panic apparent among the students

Students are passing a difficult time due to the rapid spread of COVID 19 virus and vulnerability caused by it. 16% of students (318) expressed anxiety over this pandemic. It is alarming considering the total number of students in Bangladesh. Some key informants believed that it was reasonable to feel 'panicked'. An Upazila Secondary Education Officer mentioned, "We have 300 students in a school from different socio-economic backgrounds. It created a trauma among the students of the upper-class family

in a rural context. Their knowledge about the severity caused by the infection makes their children conscious. Besides, they watch television regularly.”

Children with disabilities are more vulnerable than others. 29% of students with disabilities expressed their fear. This experience is also higher among female students (17%) compared to male students (15%). Moreover, the students of secondary schools (17%), those living in rural areas (17%), and those studying in madrasas (17%) are more anxious compared to others. Interestingly, only 4% of students from ethnic minorities expressed their anxiety over coronavirus.

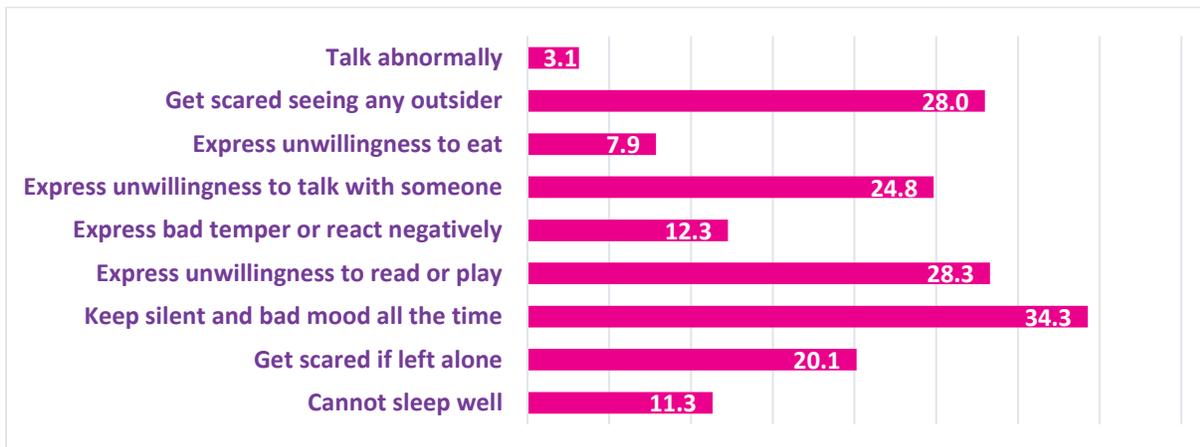
Figure 4: Experience of panic by different categories (percentage)



Despite receiving positive messages from parents and teachers, the students are in a panic. A high school teacher mentioned, “We cannot claim that students are not scared. As a teacher, I always try to communicate with them to make them aware of the virus. I ask them to maintain social distance, wash hands with soap, and stay at home. Still, some of the students are somewhat scared. One of my students got a fever out of fear.”

The panic has different kinds of manifestations among the students. Almost 34% of students become quiet and cranky. 28% express unwillingness to read or play, 28% get scared seeing outsiders and 25% is reluctant to talk to people. 20% of students feel scared to stay alone at home.

Figure 5: Manifestation of panic among the students (percentage) (n=318)*



*Multiple responses

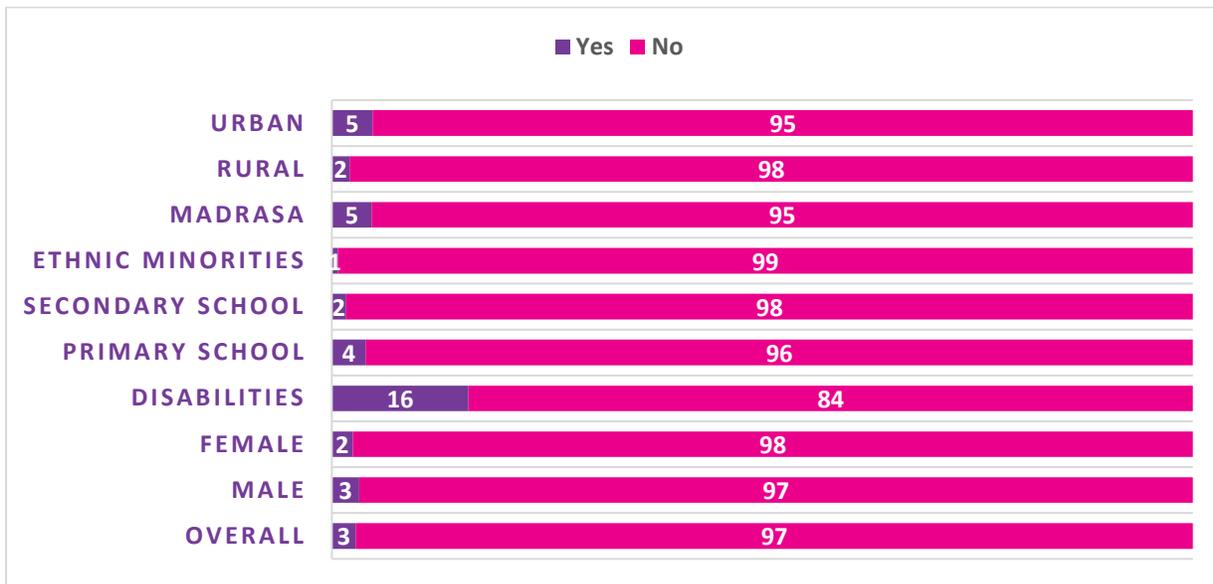
3.4 Child abuse during the lockdown

Several studies show that harassment and violence against women and children are evident during the lockdown. Our survey data suggest that only 3% of the surveyed students (54) were victims of any kind of abuse during this time. As mentioned earlier, this might be an underreporting. The parents might have felt discomfort to disclose the bitter experience of their children through a telephone interview. However, if generalised for 31 million students studying in primary and secondary schools, 3% is still a significant number.

If we analyse the incidents of abuse by different categories, it reveals that 16% of students with disabilities have been the worst victims of various types of abuse. It is much higher than the overall rate of abuse. Moreover, the students of urban areas (5%), madrasas (5%) and primary schools (4%) were the victims of abuse at higher degrees, compared to the overall rate of abuse. Only 2% of female students were victims of abuse, which is less than the overall rate of abuse according to the analysis. Due to the sensitivity of this issue, the number may be underreported.

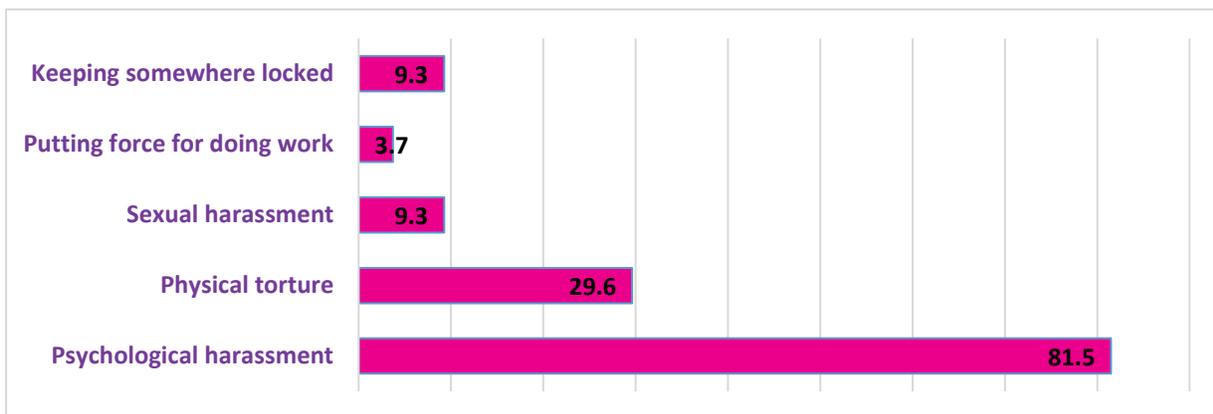


Figure 6: Victimization of abuse by different categories (percentage)



Of the three per cent of respondent who suffered abuse, 82% faced psychological harassment. There are also survivors of physical torture (30%), sexual harassment (9%), confinement (9%), and forced labour (4%).

Figure 7: Type of abuse encountered by students during the lockdown (percentage) (n=54)*



*Multiple responses

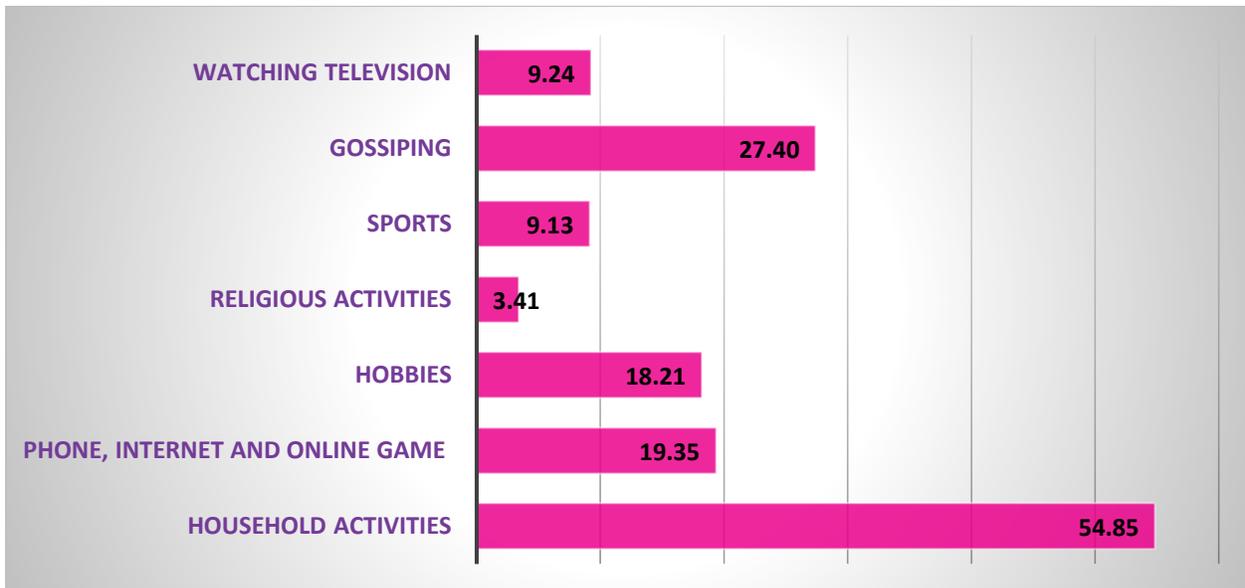
Most of the 'key informants' expressed unawareness about any child abuse or harassment against their students during the lockdown. However, few participants mentioned that students from less privileged groups could be the victims of torture or harassment at home. A Secondary Education Officer mentioned, "We keep in touch with the teachers. Teachers regularly check on their students. Till now we have not heard of any such incident. However, we assume some level of abuse and harassment can be

found in families with financial constraints. They may face ‘inter-family harassment’, mental harassment, physical harassment, or sexual harassment.”

3.5 Students are spending most of their time in household activities and gossiping

Besides studying, the students are engaged in various other activities in their day to day life. Most of the students (55%) assist their parents in household chores. 27% of students pass their time gossiping with family members, friends, and relatives. 19% spend time on the mobile phone, internet browsing, and online games. Interestingly, 18% of students spend their time in creative activities or leisure pursuit such as reading storybooks, painting, singing, making toys and keeping pets etc.

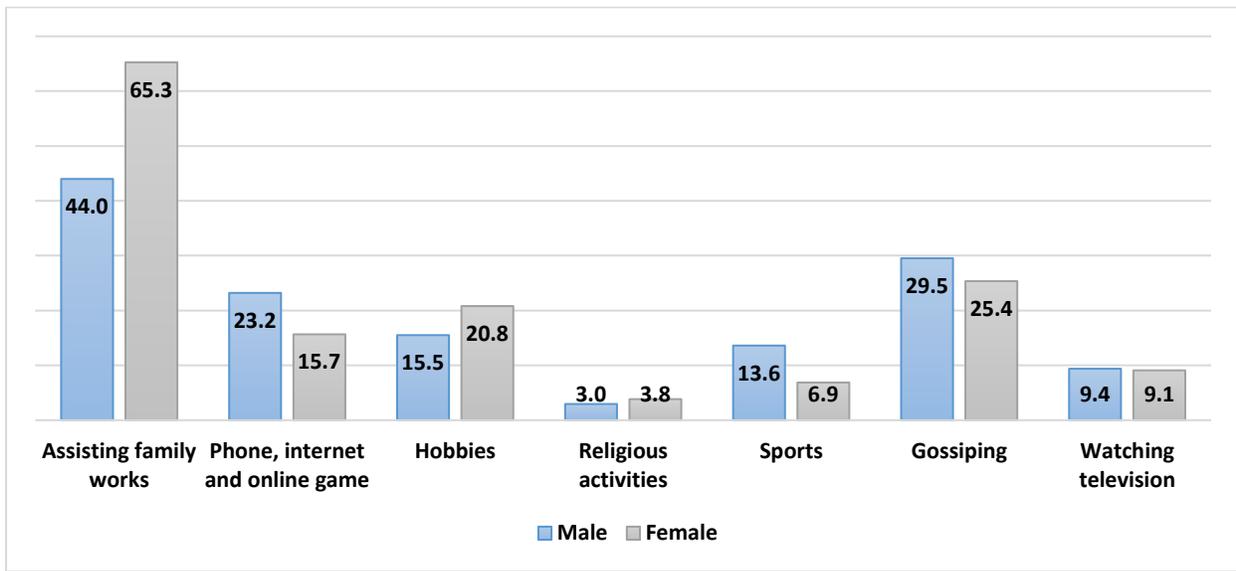
Figure 8: Ways of spending time in lockdown days (N=1938)*



*Multiples responses

Survey data suggest female students (65%) are more involved with household activities compared to their male counterparts (44%). Male students spend more time in chattering (30%), phone, internet and online games (23%) and sports (14%). Apart from household activities the only one activity that takes more time of female students (21%), compared to their male counterparts (16%), includes only hobbies. However, watching television takes similar time from both sexes (9%).

Figure 9: Students' spending time by sex (percentage)*



*Multiple responses

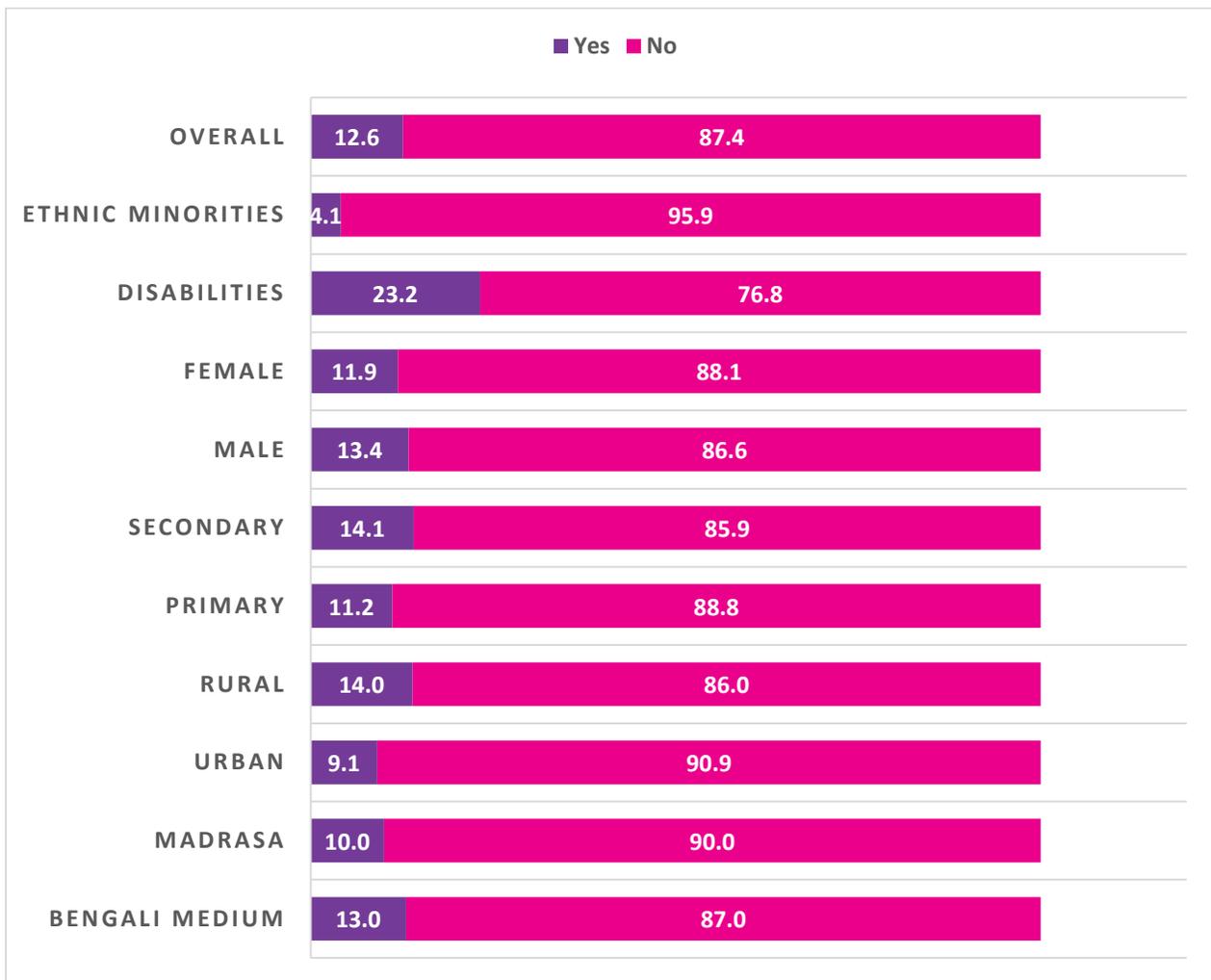
The 'key informants' have also mentioned that a 'new normal' has emerged in everybody's life, including for students. A primary school teacher mentioned, "The routine has changed nowadays. I have a kid who is a primary student. She used to wake up at 7 am and prepare for school. But now, she wakes up at her will. Then I ask her to do whatever she prefers. She plays carom, ludo, watches television. She practices handwriting and waters the garden. Thus, she passes her days."



3.6 Education at stake during the lockdown

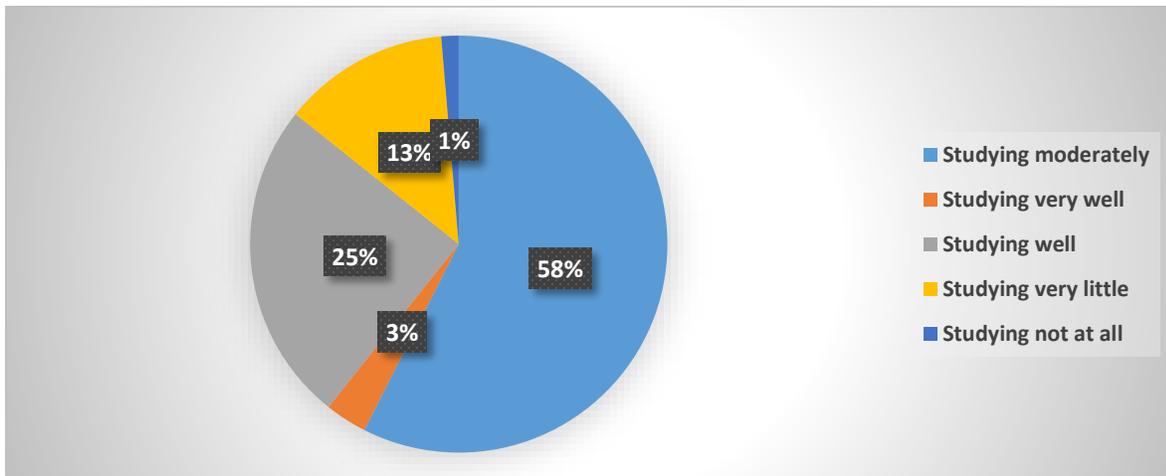
13% of the respondents opined that the students become uninterested about studying. This apathy is more evident among the students with disabilities (23%), students of secondary schools (14%), and those living in rural areas (14%). However, some key informants did not agree. An Upazila Education Officer mentioned, “Till now we have not observed any type of depression or lethargy among the students. They are hopeful that schools will resume soon. But if the situation sustains for a longer time, different scenarios can be found. Some of the students might lose patience, and some might drop out.”

Figure 10: Negative attitude towards the study by different categories (percentage)



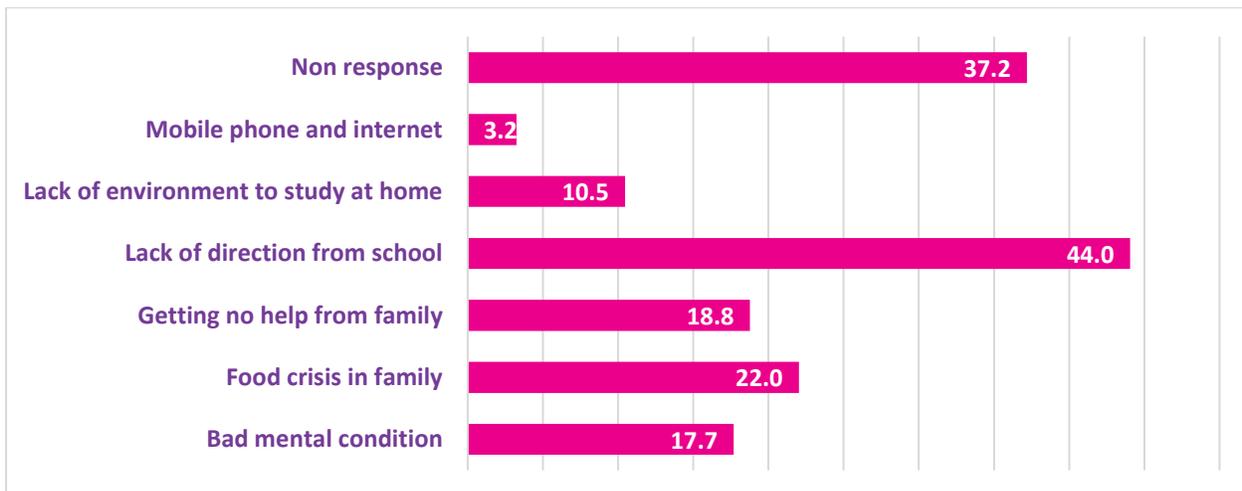
The survey, however, found 14% of the respondents who are not studying at all. Most of the students (58%) are studying moderately. Only 28% of students are doing well in continuing studying at home.

Figure 11: State of education at home (N=1938)



The survey data suggest some causes behind ‘studying very little’ and ‘studying not at all’ among respondents. Among the 277 students, 44% (122) students are not getting any direction from schools. In 22% of cases (61 students), the families reported scarcity of food as an issue. Moreover, there are other factors, e.g. non-supportive families (19%), poor mental health condition (18%), lack of environment to study at home (11%), etc.

Figure 12: Reasons behind not continuing education at home (percentage) (n=277)*

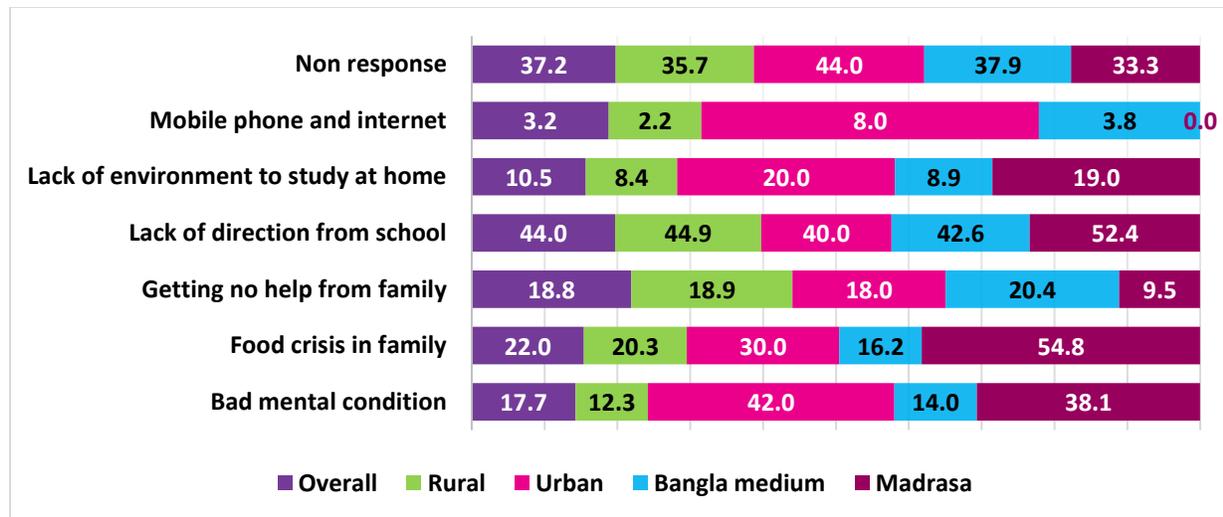


*Multiple responses

If we analyse this state by location and type of schools, it reveals that the madrasa students who reported not continuing education at home are due to food shortage (55%). 52% of them have reported not getting necessary directions from schools. Given that the economic downturn affected urban dwellers more, it is not surprising that the students living in urban areas (30%) suffered more from the food crisis compared to rural areas (20%). Students living in rural areas (45%) reported not getting any direction from their schools about how to continue education at home. Data also show that the students living

in urban areas (42%) do not study at home due to their poor mental health condition, including anxiety, depression, isolation etc.

Figure 13: Causes of not continuing education at home by location and type of schools (percentage)*



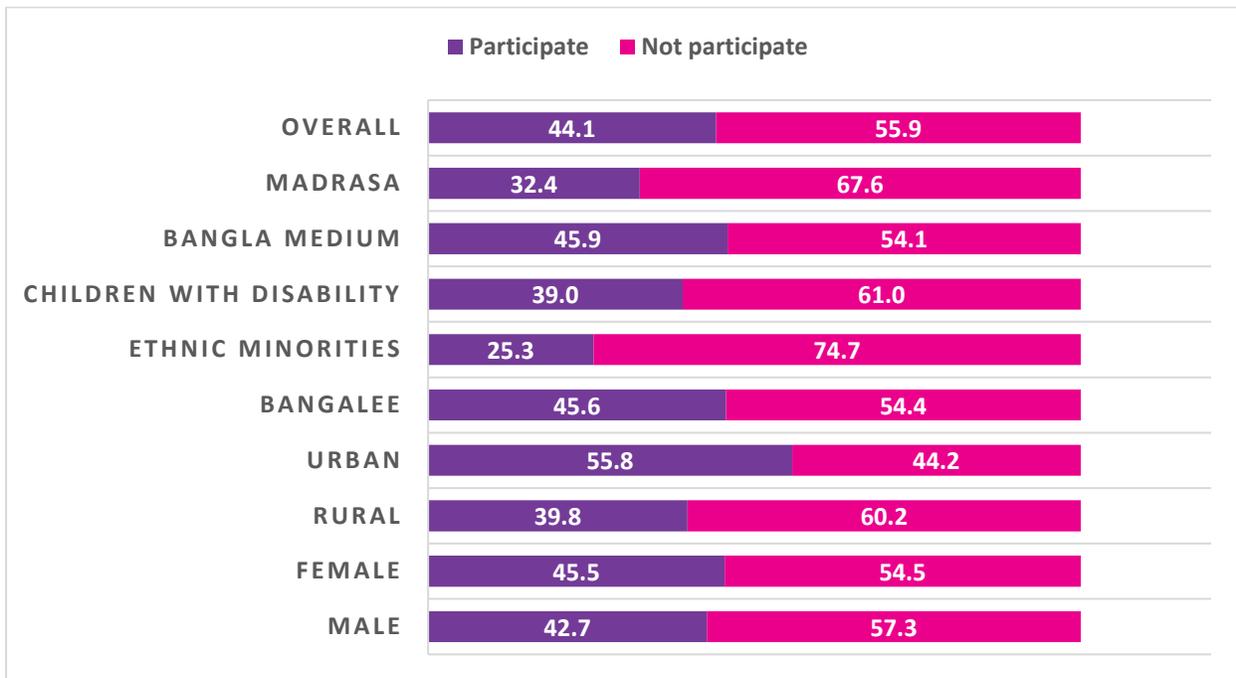
*Multiple responses

The ‘key informants’ pointed out some other possibilities. For example, a primary school teacher opined, “Since students have no class and homework, they don’t feel bound to study. They do not have to submit homework or any task assigned by the school, so they do not study at home. They are losing their concentration.” Another primary school teacher mentioned, “They are not studying properly at home. Most students are impoverished. Their parents are not well educated too. I have contacted most of the students who are available within my network. They need some extra care, but their parents fail to do so.”

3.7 Reaching out to all students with alternative methods not yet ensured

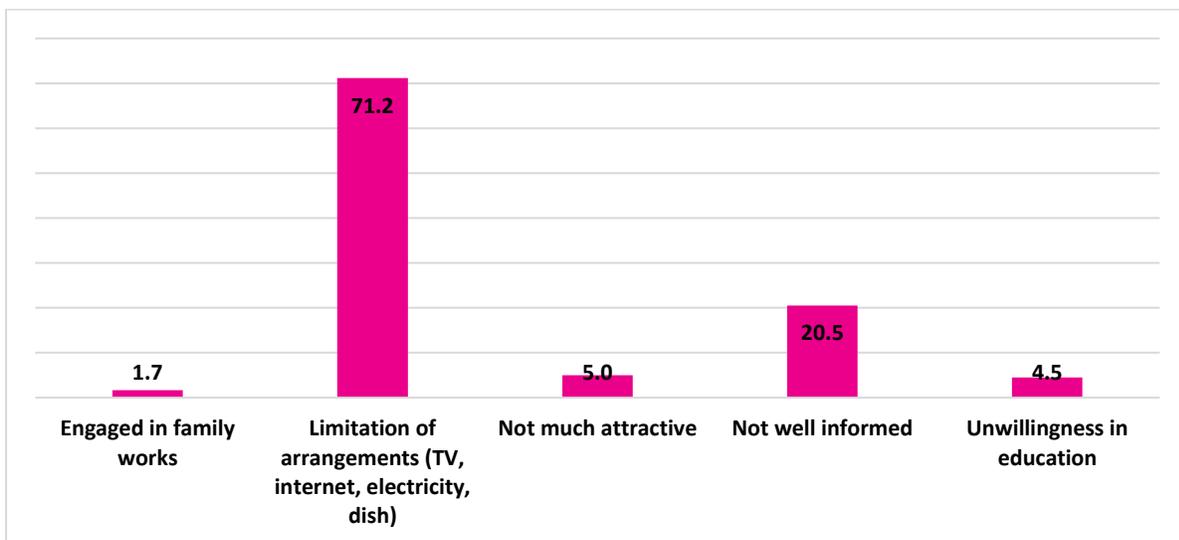
The government of Bangladesh has undertaken an initiative to broadcast classes through Sangsad TV. Moreover, some private schools in urban areas have started conducting online classes. Field data suggest that 56% of the students are not taking part in online classes or Sangsad Television. This more non-participation is evident among the students of ethnic minorities (75%), madrasa students (68%), students with disabilities (61%) and those living in rural areas (60%).

Figure 14: Participation in distant learning by different categories (percentage)



Survey data suggest some particular reasons behind 56% of students not participating in distant learning processes. The foremost reason is the limitation of necessary logistic arrangements such as television, internet connection, electricity, cable-network connection, etc. 71% of students face this challenge. Moreover, 21% of students are not well informed about these alternative arrangements.

Figure 15: Causes of not participating in distant learning (percentage) (n=1082)*

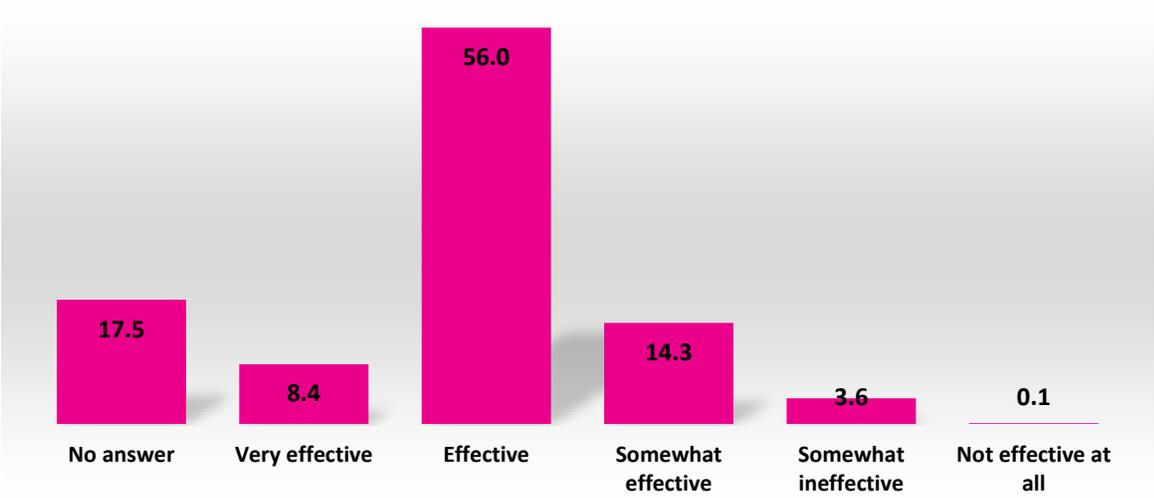


*Multiple responses

Some of the key informants mentioned that education officials are not adequately monitoring progress. Teachers also identified some of their limitations. For example, a secondary school teacher mentioned, “Monitoring is difficult amidst lockdown. It is easy to deliver a single message to a hundred students in the classroom, but tough to give the same message individually. We need to make 100 calls to deliver that message.” There are some other challenges, as well. For example, a primary school teacher from the CHTs mentioned, “Most of my students complain that they do not understand anything in the classes held on Sangsad TV. Most of them do not have a television at home. Mode of instruction is Bangla which is not their mother tongue. So language is another barrier.”

Among 44% of students who are participating in classes through distant leaning processes, mainly through Sangsad TV, 8% have found it very useful. 56% among the participating students have found it helpful for learning. Only 4% of participating students found it somewhat ineffective or not effective at all.

Figure 16: Perception of the effectiveness of distant learning (percentage) (n=855)

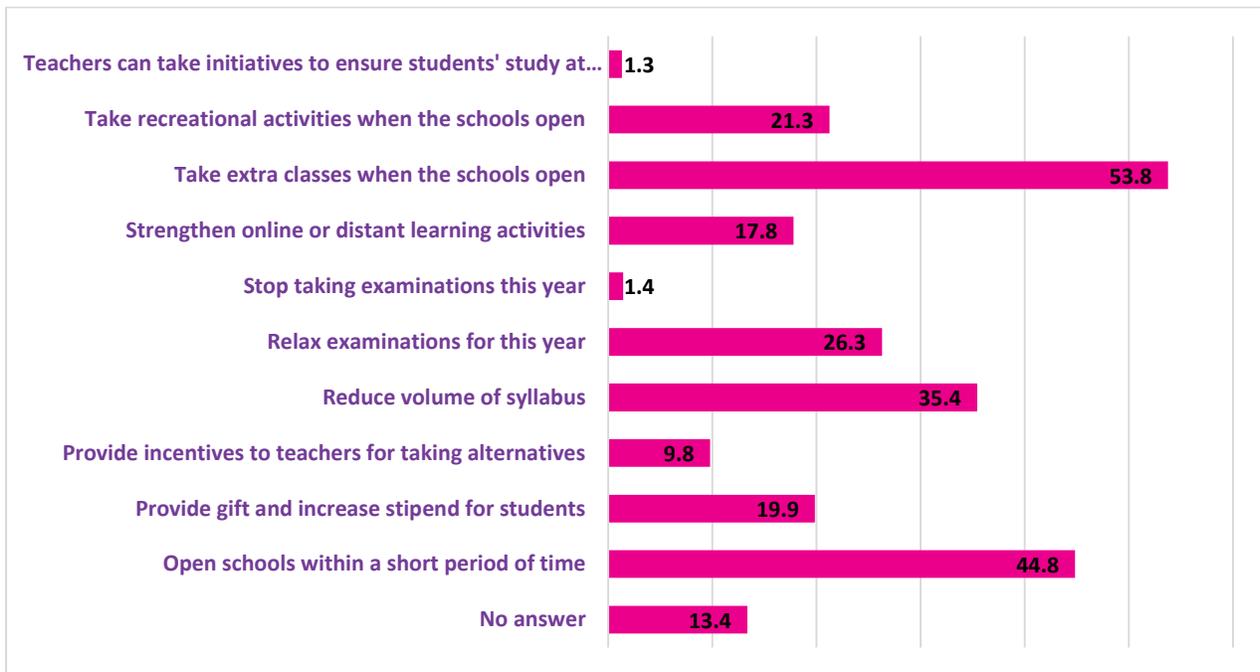




3.8 Recommendations from the ground

54% of respondents suggested conducting extra classes when the schools resume. Despite the community spreading, 49% wants schools to open within a short period. 35% of respondents suggested reducing the syllabus. And 26% of respondents want a 'pressure less' examination. To help students recover from the psychological trauma induced by pandemic, the respondents provided some specific recommendations. For instance, 21% of respondents think recreational activities after schools resume will help students recover faster. 20% of respondents suggested that gifts or increase of stipend may help. 18% suggested strengthening of the online or distant learning processes.

Figure 17: Recommendations from the respondents (percentage) (N=1938)*



***Multiple responses**

An Upazila Primary Education Officer suggested, “We should not create extra load for students. It is impossible to finish the syllabus of six months in just two months. It will be a burden for the students, and the main purpose of education will be lost. We need to trim the syllabus.” Another education official argued, “We need to take extra classes and care for PSC, JSC, SSC and HSC candidates. We should change the regular school routine and add extra hours.” A Union council member said, “There is no way to recover the gap completely. We should utilise all future public holidays and weekly holidays to take extra classes. We should re-schedule school time too.”

4. Conclusion and policy recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

The lockdown has posed adverse impacts on the students studying in primary and secondary schools. Most students have been continuing their education at home on their own, or with the help of family members. Some students are participating in distant learning programmes. However, most students are facing challenges. Psychological trauma and anxiety are evident among a significant number of students. Not getting enough assistance from parents and socio-economic constraints are also affecting studies. Many families are going through a food crisis due to economic shutdown and mobility restrictions. Students are getting engaged in unproductive activities due to lockdown. A significant portion of their time is spent in gossiping, internet browsing, playing online games, and watching television. However, the bright side of the story is that a good number of students are spending their time pursuing their hobbies or creative activities.



The students with disabilities are disproportionately affected by the lockdown. They have suffered the most from abuse and harassment. Their anxiety towards coronavirus infection and fear of education has increased. Language and remoteness are the main challenges for students from the ethnic minority. On the other hand, the madrasa students are suffering from a shortage of food, which has led them to discontinuation of education at home. The students living in rural areas and those studying in madrasas did not receive clear directions from schools. Lack of monitoring by relevant stakeholders is another challenge to continue studying at home properly.

The distant learning has emerged as useful alternative. However, most of the students cannot access this facility. The students of ethnic minorities, with disabilities, madrasa and those living in rural areas are least benefitted. Logistical constraints seem to be the critical obstacle behind the lower participation in these platforms. The students who do participate have also suggested improvements.

4.2 Policy recommendations

Given the findings of the assessments, some short, medium, and long term interventions are required to recovering from the loss caused by the lockdown. The short term recommendations are:

1. Strengthen the online learning processes and provide some alternative to cover the students with technological constraints; mobile app and recorded videos can be helpful in this regard
2. Develop inclusive contents and adjust the teaching process so that the students with disabilities, from ethnic minorities, students living in rural areas and madrasa students can be reached out equally effectively
3. Ensure that the teachers reach out the students at least once a week and guide them on how to continue education at home; monitoring from education offices should be strengthened in this regard
4. Send gifts and reading materials to help students remain protected from psychological trauma and continue learning at home
5. Broadcast more classes and child-friendly recreational programmes through television
6. Introduce a hotline number for the students so that the students can report any kind of complaints including abuse, food shortages, stipend, etc.; Ministry of Education should ensure punitive measures against the complaints

The medium-term recommendations are:

1. Provide incentives to the teachers to take extra care of the students through taking more classes and recreational activities when the schools resume
2. Simplify the exam questions and abridge the syllabus to reduce the burden of the students
3. Incorporate awareness messages on COVID-19 and other pandemics in academic curriculums as it is assumed that this kind of virus will exist worldwide for an extended period

The long term suggestions are:

1. Allocate a separate budget for every school so that they can be equipped with necessary infrastructural arrangements and teachers training to continue distant teaching-learning processes later
2. A collective strategy and action plan should be formulated and implemented; the role of the government, NGOs, civil society and media should be specified

