

# COVID-19 AND POSSIBLE REPERCUSSIONS FOR DROPOUT RATES

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As we are all aware, Pakistan is a fragmented society with fissures running across class, ethnicity, and gender. Amid this stratification, social mobility is hard to achieve and the poor and quasi-poor remain vulnerable to external shocks. These schisms are also reflected in a fractured educational culture, separated along class lines: there are four distinct *schooling* streams, with the higher income classes occupying the elite English medium schools, the middle and lower middle class students attend public schools or the non-elite private schools, while the poorest of the poor end up in madrassas. Some critics feel that this hierarchical education system rather than acting as a facilitator for social mobility further perpetuates this inequality.

While the COVID-19 virus itself does not distinguish between color, caste, creed, or even gender, the response to the virus reflects these fault lines. Although at the moment policy-makers, doctors, and economists are trying to come to grips with emerging cases and are preoccupied with taking immediate actions to contain this pandemic, I want to step back and consider its potential impact on Pakistani students.

In the wake of the lockdown, all schools are closed until further notice, and Board examinations (Matric, Intermediate, GCSE) postponed. While elite English-medium schools are preparing for virtual school and some of them are also handing out Chrome-books to their students, public sector and low-income private sector schools have no plans in place for virtual home-schooling. Higher Education Commission (HEC) has instructed public sector universities to prepare online lectures to mitigate any disruption in the provision of education while schools/colleges have no policies in place as yet. Even if in the near future low-income public/private schools are able to mobilize their teachers to introduce online lectures, students are expected to have access to Internet connectivity and a computer to be able to retrieve the information. One option might be cellular phones: Although according to the 2018-19 Economic Survey, 89 percent of the total population have access to cellular

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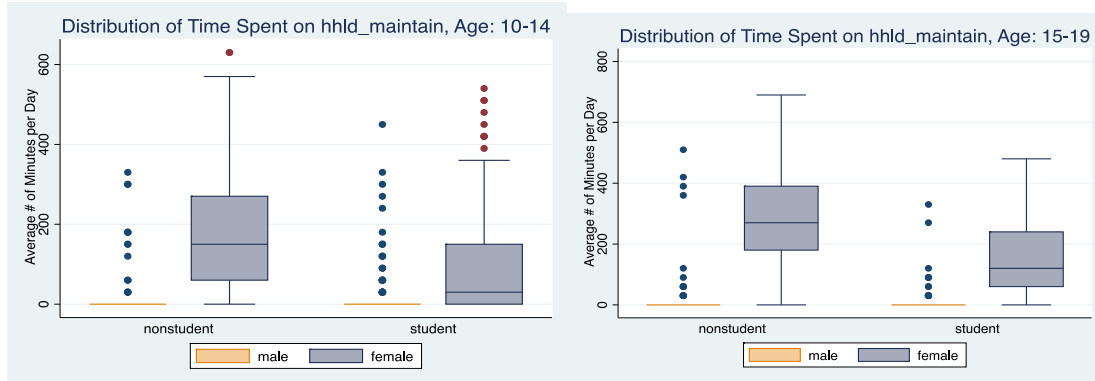
mobile services, Data connectivity remains a problem for many and furthermore, all households may not own a smartphone. Moreover, virtual schooling may be a viable option for older children, who can follow slideshows and online lectures, though how much they assimilate, is a separate pedagogical question. Younger primary/middle-school students require monitoring and guidance from parents while they follow virtual school and try to complete the tasks assigned by their teachers; but many of these are first-generation students and for them guidance at home may not be readily available: these students may require extra hand-holding which the State may be able to provide through public service educational broadcast on Radio and Television (TV). Perhaps the government should instruct PEMRA to assign at least one (if not a few) TV channels to air educational material for students and for older students, request distinguished lecturers to record key-note lectures and make them available publicly

Pakistan has made significant improvements in its gross enrollment ratio (from GER of 86% for primary education (classes 1 to 5) in 2013 as compared to 97% GER for primary level schooling in 2017), retention rate at 67 percent is still low and strong disparities in terms of gender, class, and location exist (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2017). There are currently 5 million children of primary school age out of school. At the middle, high and higher secondary level, the out of school children are 6.5 million, 5 million and 6.3 million respectively (Pakistan Education Survey, 2017). Once a child drops out of school she hardly ever goes back to formal education. And I fear that as students sit at home in the wake of the pandemic their momentum to study and the structure that schooling offers to their daily routine will be severed; especially our girls might fall back into their gendered roles of household maintenance, and other care work and may never be able to go back to the gender neutral task of learning.

Initial investigation of time-use data shows that school enrollment makes the lives of girls and boys more similar than if they never make it to school or drop out. For Pakistan there exists strong evidence of gender differentiated patterns of time use, with associated gender asymmetry in work burdens (PTUS 2007 survey report). School enrollment attenuates this gender asymmetry. School not only provides an important site of socialization away from one's own dwelling, and provides an opportunity for children to become more autonomous it also changes the composition of activities performed by boys and girls at home even on weekends when the structure of the school itself is not present, with female students spending less time on household maintenance activities than their counterparts not enrolled in school (see figure 1). However, time spent on household maintenance increases with age

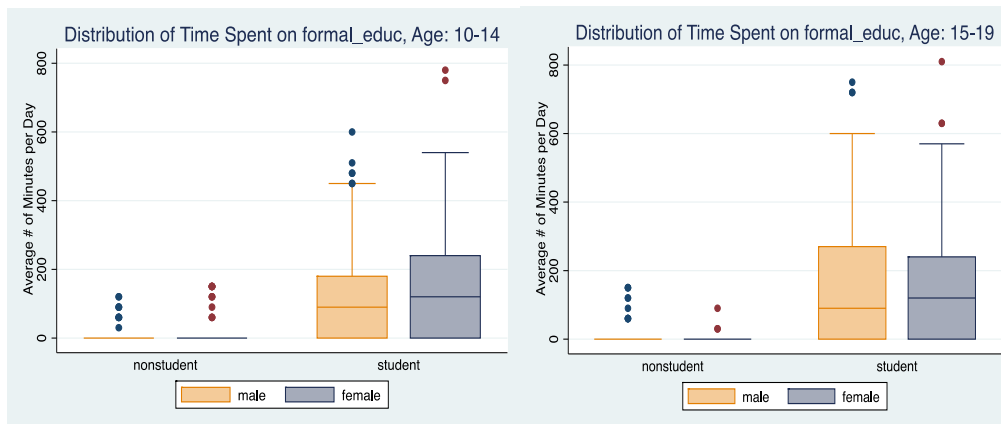
for both female students and nonstudents. We observe that in a patriarchal society like Pakistan only girls do housework and boys, irrespective of their enrollment status, do not contribute to this task. In contrast, boys spend more time in the labor market than girls.

**Figure 1: Time Spent by Boys and Girls on Household Maintenance by Enrollment Status**



Source: Pakistan Time Use Survey 2007. Author's estimates

**Figure 2: Time Spent by Boys and Girls on Formal Education**



Source: Pakistan Time Use Survey 2007. Author's estimates

Moreover, even on weekends students spend time on learning. Female students belonging to age-group 10 to 14 years, spend a higher number of hours on learning on weekends than boys do, however, for the next age group (15 to 19 years) this relationship is reversed.<sup>2</sup> It is this age-group of

<sup>2</sup> We specifically use boxplots, which take outliers into account. The shaded area of the respective boxplots contains the interquartile range (IQR); about 50% of girls of both age-groups spend between 0 to 3 and a half hours studying per day, with a median of 1.75 hours. In contrast, the IQR for the boys shows that for the age-group 10-14 years, 50% boys spend 0 to 3 hours per day studying, while for the age group 15-19, the IQR is 0 to 4 hours per day, but note that the median is much lower at 1 and a half hours.

adolescent girls that remains particularly vulnerable to external shocks. As we can see, with age the tradeoff between care-work and learning is diminishing, and as schools close down and these girls are cooped up in their own dwellings they might get preoccupied with their traditional role of caregiver and in the long-run may not be able to return to school/college. This group remains the most at risk to drop out of school. We can of course hope that the opposite occurs in a lockdown situation with boys spending more time in their own dwelling, and other helpers (such as extended family or domestic-care workers) unable to visit, the males of the household start performing more unpaid care-work. How the intrahousehold division of labor actually unfolds in the coming weeks is a moot point, but we want the government to remain cognizant of the risk this poses in terms of retention rate and devise policies to ease our children's journey back to school.

Of course, as a precautionary measure the government has no choice but to close schools and enforce lockdown, however, it is pertinent to pause and reflect on possible repercussions of this action as it is not easy to turn back the clock. To be in the physical presence of the teacher in a classroom environment is a different experience than attending online lectures at home. We need to address pedagogical issues in terms of the quality of knowledge transferred and should look at existing models such Khan Academy and other educational apps for guidance. A lot of material is available online, and teachers do not have to reinvent the wheel. Again, as mentioned above, in terms of accessing online resources, first-generation students may require extra support. I, finally, want to conclude on a positive note, by emphasizing that in this chaos lies opportunity: and as long as we are cognizant of the risks and stand together to ensure that the provision of education continues uninterrupted despite lockdown, we can emerge out of this pandemic a stronger and better informed nation.