

Provision and Utilization of Health and Nutrition Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Urban Bangladesh

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Objectives: The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have extensive effects on healthcare systems. The Government of Bangladesh has concerns about diminished coverage and quality of maternal and child health services, but little published information exists on service provision, utilization, and adaptations. We examined changes to maternal and child health and nutrition service delivery and utilization in urban Bangladesh during and after the enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions and identified adaptations and potential solutions to strengthen service delivery and uptake.

Methods: We conducted longitudinal surveys with health care providers (n = 45), pregnant women (n = 40), and mothers of children < 2 years (n = 387) in February 2020 (in-person) and September 2020 (by phone). We used Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-rank tests to compare the changes before and during the pandemic.

Results: Most services for pregnant women remained available during COVID-19 restrictions, with the provision of antenatal care (ANC) services falling by 6.6 percentage points (pp). Services for women and children which require proximity, however, were more severely affected; weight and height measurements fell by 20–29pp for pregnant women and 37–57pp for children, and child immunizations fell by 38pp. Declines in service utilization were large, including drops in facility visitations (35pp among pregnant women and 67pp among mothers), health and nutrition counseling (up to 73pp), child weight measurements (50pp), and immunizations (61pp). The primary method of adaptation was provision of services over phone (37% for ANC services and 44–49% for counselling of pregnant women or mothers with young children).

Conclusions: Despite adaptations to service provisions, continued availability of routine maternal and child health services did not translate into service utilization. Further investments are needed to provide timely and accurate information on COVID-19 to the public, improve COVID-19 training and provide incentives for health care providers, and ensure availability of personal protective equipment for both providers and beneficiaries.

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