



Adolescent education and learning in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Policy and programming implications from the GAGE baseline findings¹

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Overview

Over the last several decades, Bangladesh has invested heavily in girls' education through government policy and programmes, which have worked in tandem with NGOs to expand non-public schools and *madrasas* to modernise curricula (MoPME, 2015; Badrunnesha, 2015; Jahan et al., 2011). Today, Bangladeshi girls are almost universally enrolled in primary school; and their primary enrolment, attendance and completion rates are higher than those of boys, while their drop-out rates are lower (UNICEF 2009). Encouraged by girls-only stipends for secondary school, which reached 3 million girls in 2013 (MoPME, 2015), and the expansion of *madrasas* in conservative areas (Badrunnesha, 2015; Asadullah and Wahhaj, 2012), girls are also more likely to transition to secondary school than boys.

However, despite recent progress in enrolment, girls remain far less likely than boys to complete their secondary education (52% versus 65%) (MoPME, 2015). Furthermore, girls' access to higher education remains more limited than that of boys. While on a national level girls account for 48% of university students and just over 47% of college students, their enrolment at professional institutions (39%) and teacher training schools (34%) remains far lower (BANBEIS, 2015).

Early adolescence marks a turning point for Bangladeshi girls – especially the poorest, given the high number of hidden costs that accompany ostensibly free education (GoB, 2015; Shonchoy and Rabbani, 2015; UNICEF, 2009). Specific populations of adolescents continue to face especially high barriers to education, with wealth differentials, for example, being a large factor. Child labourers, children in urban slums and char areas, those with disabilities, and ethnic minorities also have limited access (UNICEF, 2015; GoB, 2015). Due to social norms, particularly in rural areas, many parents continue to see girls' education primarily as a vehicle for improving their marriage prospects (Shonchoy and Rabbani, 2015). Many girls are removed from school to keep them safe from rampant sexual harassment and most are ultimately married as children, which leads them to discontinue their education (GoB, 2015).

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Educational quality also remains a significant concern. Student achievement levels are below national targets; only about half of primary-school graduates achieve the minimum national curriculum competencies owing to a combination of factors, including little emphasis on developing analytical skills, overcrowded classrooms and a shortage of trained teachers (MoPME, 2015; UNICEF, 2009) and absence of life skills and basic vocational skills. Concerns are particularly pressing when it comes to the quality of education provided by *madrastas*, which educate over 1.5 million girls. Research has found that *madrastas* heavily funded by orthodox rigid Islamic curriculum, (funded and influenced by some countries in the Middle East) promote rigid stereotypical gender roles, poor quality of education, little to no teacher training, a limited number of female teachers, with higher rates of early marriage among those students, and low parental and community involvement. Adding to this, is the complete lack of involvement by government, NGOs and donors (Badrunnesha, 2015),³ to review and revise or monitor these religious schools, which are attractive to the poor as they often provide meals and even residential support to children and adolescents who cannot afford government, private and NGO schools.

This brief draws on evidence from GAGE (Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence) – a unique longitudinal mixed-methods research and impact evaluation study focused on what works to support the development of adolescents’ capabilities during the second decade of life (10–19 years) (GAGE consortium, 2019 forthcoming). It discusses the educational aspirations of adolescents and how role models, social status, respectability and poverty influence the opportunities they have and what they aspire to be. We look at the challenges and barriers to accessing appropriate and quality schooling and how education differs in public, NGO, private and *madrasta* schooling, and the business of coaching centres, which are expensive but have become essential to get good results in exams, given the poor quality of teaching in the schools. We also explore the kind

of parental support that adolescents receive, and changes over time as perceived, from parents’ own experiences to those of their children. Finally, we look at how adolescents’ educational experiences are shaped by gender and other intersecting disadvantages.

Research methodology

In Dhaka, baseline data collection entailed quantitative survey with 780 adolescent girls and boys which was complemented by in-depth qualitative work involving 36 nodal adolescents, their parents and communities to better understand the experience and perspective of young people. According to GAGE methodology (Jones et al. (2019), we included adolescents who are involved in adolescent-focused programme interventions as well as non-programme participants so as to better understand the relative contribution of programmes in shaping their well-being and empowerment in the short and longer terms. Participatory research methods were undertaken so as to better understand young people’s experiences, and in particular the role that peer relations play in shaping their identities, priorities and broader well-being. We undertook our primary data collection with adolescent girls and boys, of younger (10–12 years) and older (15–17 years) age cohorts, in peri-urban and urban contexts and included groups of adolescents who are more at risk of being left behind such as adolescents with disabilities, child brides and adolescent mothers.

Research sites

The three study sites chosen for the GAGE baseline study in Dhaka are two slum areas, referred to here as Community A and Community C (peri-urban), and one low-income settlement, referred to as Community B. These were chosen to capture variation in how long the settlements had been established and whether residents were long-term or were more transient. Other important differences included access to health and education services and location, as these have been shown to affect the lives of adolescents.

Table 1: Research sites

Name	Location	Households	Social and physical infrastructure	Access to services
Community A	Dhaka periphery	8,400	Well-developed and stable slum on government-owned land near an industrial area	Excellent access to educational and health institutions, non-governmental organisation (NGO) services
Community B	Central Dhaka	300	Privately owned low-income settlement, high in- and out-migration, many working children, electricity only, poor roads	Poor access to educational and health institutions, NGO services
Community C	Central Dhaka	3,000	Well-developed and stable slum, good road, mostly legal utility connections	Reasonable access to educational and health institutions, NGO services

³ GAGE DIGEST: Adolescent girls’ capabilities in Bangladesh - A synopsis of the evidence by Elizabeth Presler-Marshall and Maria Stavropoulou (December 2017)

She talks very nicely. She can explain things well. If she sees anything wrong happening, she can protest. The thing I like her about the best, is that she is very hardworking. That is what I like about her.

(A 12-year-old adolescent girl in Community C)

Educational aspirations

Educational aspirations of and for girls have changed over the past 10–15 years as employment opportunities have increased in the garment sector, increasing the economic value of education (Heath and Mobarak, 2012). Even girls who were married as adolescents, want their children to pursue an education and get a job (Kabeer et al., 2011), and unmarried girls articulated similar aspirations for themselves (CARE, 2016).

Within our study, adolescents said their aspirations were influenced by those around them, particularly those they viewed as role models – for example, mothers, fathers, teachers and in some cases, celebrities whom they admired because of ease of access to media and social media and mobile phones. Aspirations ranged from wanting to have prestigious high status or high income earning positions to less prestigious but more realistic expectations of following their parents in the informal economy sector.

There were gender differences in girls' and boys' aspirations, for example, many adolescent girls shared that they aspired to be doctors, teachers, fashion designers, journalists; and boys shared that they aspire to be shop-owners, garment supervisors, cricketers, soldiers. Some of the occupations listed suggests that aspirations are shaped by stereotypical ideas of masculinity and femininity, as well as what they see as available to them according to their gender. Being a doctor was seen as fairly gender neutral, unlike some of the other occupations listed, which were more male dominated. Boys also mentioned owning a shop, which is not surprising as many see their expected role as the main rice-winner of the household, irrespective of the fact that this may not be the case in reality. There were also less prestigious aspirations shared, such as becoming a garage mechanic or working in a garments factory and following in their parents' footsteps.

Some girls mentioned some of the women in their area who they clearly admired because they were educated and empowered, and whom they saw as their future role models. One 12-year-old girl in Community C mentioned her private tutor who seemed to be very empowered to her: '*She talks very nicely. She can explain things well. If she sees anything wrong happening, she can protest. The thing I like her about the best, is that she is very hardworking. That is what I like about her.*'

From childhood I have a wish that I will give treatment for free.

(A 15-year-old adolescent girl in Community A)

Most adolescents see education as a pathway to achieve a better life, which means that they have internalised the messaging by the government since the 1990s that education can lead to opportunities. Boys and girls expressed that they wanted to continue their education to the point where they could secure a formal well-paid job such as teacher, which is considered extremely prestigious in our context, as teachers are viewed as knowledge bearers of society. In the survey, 88% of females and 61% of males aspired to professional occupations such as teacher or doctor and 20% of males aspired to work in retail industry (versus less than 1% of females, reflecting the lower status of opportunities for women in this sector). Young adolescents were more likely than older ones to want to work in a professional occupation (80% versus 65%) and less likely to want to work in retail (6% versus 18%). This may represent a generational shift, or demonstrate that older adolescents' aspirations are more realistic than those of younger ones. In urban low-income settlements, particularly those parents from poorer families work in the informal sector. Our qualitative data showed that most mothers work as domestic help, which tend to be very low paid, often looked down at, and the job market was uncertain, or in garment factories, which are highly labour intensive, long hours and viewed as also less prestigious. Fathers work in garages or small shops or drive buses or auto-rickshaws; but most are not considered prestigious jobs, unless the income was extremely high from owning a small shop. Most parents were illiterate or did not finish primary education. In contrast with this, many adolescents mentioned their dreams of having a high-status and well-paid job, or at least get a university degree, which many believed would lead to those opportunities. Others wanted to at least complete their Higher Secondary Certificate exam, which allows for some entry level jobs i.e. shop assistant, as many realise that they will not be able to continue after that because of their family's economic status.

Aspirations are also influenced by teachers: a 15-year-old boy in Community A said his teacher had inspired him to study science and he now wants to become an electrical engineer.

I want to put him in a good school. I also want to give him in a good organisation ... and if I can send him a good school then he will get a better environment and it will make him better.

(A mother from Community A)

I want to be a teacher. But do dreams ever come true for a poor man's daughter?

(A girl from Community C)

A 15-year-old adolescent girl from Community A wants to be a doctor to treat people in her community, as *'From childhood I have a wish that I will give treatment for free.'* However, some adolescents wondered whether their aspirations were realistic. One girl from Community B said: *'I want to be a teacher. But do dreams ever come true for a poor man's daughter?'*

Adolescents in these areas also want to be enrolled in good schools or colleges, which was defined as having a reputation for well-trained teachers and students who generated good exam results. Good schools were also known to provide free books and computer lessons, etc., which are often unavailable in other schools. Some adolescents, particularly if the families could afford to, took extra coaching classes and had and private tutors, so they can enter such schools and or continue to achieve good grades in their exams. Even though the 2016 Education Act banned coaching centres, as it was seen as business centres making money, they remain an integral part of adolescents' learning among the poor, middle class and even the rich in the country.

A 12-year-old girl from Community C said she wanted to get admitted to reportedly one of the best schools in the area, perceiving that this would lead to a better job, higher status and more money: *'I want to study in a very good college ... But my father wants me to study in the colleges nearby. I really want to be a doctor. If I can't study there, then I am finished!'*

Parents of adolescents had similar views. A mother from Community A said: *'I want to put him in a good school. I also want to give him in a good organisation ... and if I can send him a good school then he will get a better environment and it will make him better.'* However, this is an option only for those who can afford the cost of extra coaching, which can result in the poorer often dropping out as they can't compete with the other students who receive additional tutoring and coaching. Parents consider education for boys as the norm, as they are seen as the long-term providers for the family, whereas for girls are seen as eventually getting married and would be taken care of by the groom and his family. However, in the changing urban context, this was also changing and one of the main reasons given for educating girls was so they could find better job opportunities or receive better marriage proposals as education was valued even among the poorest. Qualitative data also showed that girls are more focused on going to school and studying harder. One reason could be that they have less mobility than boys, and their movements are regulated, which gives

them the time to concentrate on studying, and they may want to avoid getting married early. Male adolescents have greater freedom, which can distract them from studying and parents also have less control over boys, given the increasing extracurricular activities taking place in the slums and in the city (i.e. joining gangs, hanging out the youth clubs, accessing internet cafes, playing soccer and or cricket in the nearby areas).


Many parents stressed the importance of giving their daughters the opportunity to be educated. They seemed to understand the changing social norms and that education is critical in ensuring future employment prospects, which in turn would improve their daughters' lives even after they are married. A father of an adolescent girl from Community A said: *'We won't marry her off now. We will continue her education further. I believe she needs to be able to stand on her own two feet. If she can manage a job after completing her education then we will get her married. ... Now girls are educated for a better future, so that they don't suffer after marriage. They can both work.'*

Similarly, a mother of an adolescent girl from Community C shared her view on girls' education: *'If there is education, they [girls] would get NGO jobs. Other jobs would bring money to eat, after marrying to raise her own children.'*

Several older adolescent girls also expressed a desire to complete their education before getting married, or at least to be able to continue after marriage. One girl from Community A said: *'I told my parents that do not look around [for marriage] and pressurise me right now. Let me complete my higher secondary and then I will do whatever you all want me to do.'*

Others worried about being forced to drop out by parents, if they were seen to be interacting with male students, and parents worried about romantic relationships and sexual relationships. One adolescent girl in Community A said she used to have male friends at school but when she started at secondary she stopped interacting with boys as she felt that people would not approve.

Young girls recognise the value of education in opening different possibilities and putting them in a better position to negotiate their rights after marriage in relation to their relationship with their husbands, in laws and any form of pressure, as they would be able to earn an income and be

 If my girl passes honours degree or masters then if the husband is not quite right, she will be able to live by teaching, by giving private tuitions. She will stand on her own feet. So, the future will be better.

(The father of an adolescent girl from Community C)

Case study: Restricted mobility and discontinuation of girls' education after marriage

It is often found that the mobility of adolescent girls and women can be restricted by their family and in laws due to sexual harassment and fears about pre-marital sexual relationships. Parents feel anxious about their girl's safety and sometimes they stop their girls from going to school and restrict their regular movement within the community and around the household. Similarly, after marriage, her in laws are less willing to continue the girl's education and do not allow their daughter-in-law to go out. Sometimes this kind of restriction leads to argument between family members. For example, one female respondent (17 years old) from a community mapping exercise shared the following experience about her paternal female cousin:

My cousin was married off when she was about to take her Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exams. Her kabin (Muslim marriage contract) ceremony was completed before her SSC exam took place. But she moved in with her in laws after the wedding which took place after she took the exams. Her in laws said they will let her continue her education after marriage. Both her own family and her in laws agreed to it. My cousin really wanted to continue her education. It was only after hearing this that my cousin even agreed to the marriage in the first place. She thought the family was good, especially since they did say that they would let her continue her education. That is why she got married. After getting married, they did not let her study. Her mother-in-law did not allow it. I mean, before her marriage, they didn't have anything to hold against about my cousin, but then they began restricting her mobility. They even said to her that you can't go anywhere and stopped her from talking to any of her friends.

independent and have some autonomy in their decision making. The father of an adolescent girl from Community C shared similar thoughts: *'If my girl passes honours degree or masters then if the husband is not quite right, she will be able to live by teaching, by giving private tuitions. She will stand on her own feet. So, the future will be better.'*


The positive changes in aspirations and secondary school enrolment described above owe partly to government initiatives such as free education, stipends for girls in school and providing free textbooks (Jahan et al., 2011). For example, in December 2010, the annual allocation of the Primary Education Stipend Programme was BDT 3.9 billion and it covered 62,087 rural schools and 7.8 million primary students (Government of Bangladesh and UNICEF, 2014). One less well-off mother in Community C said that the stipend system should be needs-based instead of gender-based: *'A girl, even those who are well off, they are getting the allowances too, but not a boy. For example, I have paid for my four sons to study but until today, we haven't got 10 BDT from the government. But two girls from my house are studying and both are getting these kinds of support.'*

There were no significant differences between boys and girls, or adolescents with and without disabilities, in desire to continue to secondary school: all percentages were in the high 90s. There were also no significant differences in the level of schooling mothers hoped sons and daughters would attain. There were small locational differences. Among those currently enrolled in school, girls are significantly more likely to have university aspirations – 66% versus 57% of boys – shaped by their desire for a better future. However, financial resource constraints remain in this regard. Almost all adolescents, and their parents, want to continue education for as long as they can afford it.

Access to appropriate and quality schooling

Since the 1990s, enrolment, attendance and literacy rates in Bangladesh have increased considerably (BBS, 2017). While there is still a gender gap in some areas, gender parity has been achieved in primary and secondary education. Recent data suggests more girls are enrolling than boys (ibid.), and our survey suggests girls are significantly younger at enrolment than boys. While the number of boys who fail to enrol, enrol late or drop out is higher at primary level, only 54% of enrolled girls complete secondary school, compared with 66% of boys (BBS et al., 2017). Few young people are enrolled in technical and vocational education and training following completion of their lower secondary schooling – only 6% of boys and 3% of girls (MOPME, 2015). The lower enrolment of girls is attributed to social stereotypes about suitable occupations for females, distance to training institutes, lack of secure residential facilities and limited economic resources (ADB, 2017).

In Bangladesh as a whole, two-thirds of those never enrolled in primary are from ultra-poor and poor households, and more than half of children dropping out are from these households, although they represent only 45% of the population (MOPME, 2015). Education opportunities for other marginalised groups, such as working children (particularly domestic workers), married adolescents and those with disabilities are still limited (UNICEF, 2009). Within our urban sample, 97% of adolescents have been enrolled at some point and there are no significant differences by gender or disability. Younger adolescents are significantly more likely to be enrolled than older ones (87% versus just over half). There are also striking differences by area: adolescents in Community A are 30% more likely to be enrolled than those in Community B, perhaps reflecting greater availability of schooling, a clearer linkage to

 Now, girls have no barriers and many girls from our (general) society are even going abroad to get higher degrees, which is a big change in general.

(A father of an adolescent boy in Community C)

skilled job opportunities and a more stable population in Community A.

In relation to attendance, older adolescents had missed on average 9% of the days school was in session in the previous two weeks; younger ones had missed 6%. Although not statistically significant, the quantitative data suggests older adolescent girls miss more days of school on average than older adolescent boys (11.8% versus 6.9% of days). One reason for low attendance and ultimately also for dropout is that girls and boys are needed to assist in household chores. This is a particular problem for girls, especially when both parents are working. The programme manager of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Community B said: *'The main problem is that the parents here are very busy. They mostly work outside and don't stay home. The children stay home by themselves, because of this the older children play the role of babysitter so they don't have enough time for anything else and the parents are not interested in letting their children spend time with something else (school, coaching).'*

In other cases, financial constraints lead to mainly male adolescents dropping out to support the family, with young boys working as helpers for buses (a few schools in Bangladesh allow children to work and attend school but none were in our qualitative sites). This is the traditional cultural expectation and gender expected role for males in the family. Adult men in Community C perceived that 70–80% of children dropped out in the area because of poverty. They complained that even NGO schools were not free and there were always some costs, and families had to pay 200 BDT per month in tuition fees. Respondents in Community B also spoke about tuition fees and poverty as reasons for not being able to continue their child's education. A 16-year-old girl from Community B said her fees had recently increased to 600 BDT per month.⁴ Some adolescents had dropped out for personal reasons, such as failing exams or being bullied (bullying was more common among boys). This also points to the lack of non-formal alternatives and other options which could cater to school dropouts.


However, parents in all three sites emphasised that, compared to their generation, children, particularly females,

had much more access to schools, coaching centres and other opportunities to learn. The father of one adolescent boy in Community C said: *'Now, girls have no barriers and many girls from our (general) society are even going abroad to get higher degrees, which is a big change in general.'*

Key informants in all three sites suggested there were now more opportunities for education than before. Some respondents shared that parents are also learning from men and women and young people in their locality who were successful because of their education, and therefore, many were motivated to educate their children.

Government schools (as opposed to schools that follow a government curriculum, which can be privately run) are generally better resourced, more sustainable and viewed as generally more prestigious as students passed with better results and the environment was viewed as better. However, this did not apply to all government Schools and quality did vary. Parents in all three sites felt that the schools that existed were insufficient in number and quality was a challenge. Our survey data shows material differences in the resources held by schools. For example, in Community C, 60% of schools have computers for students; no schools in Community B have these facilities and only 13% in Community A had such Schools. Fewer than one in ten schools have Adolescent peer clubs for girls; the proportion in Community C is one in five. Similarly, while most schools in Community C have sexual and reproductive health lessons in their curriculum, overall only 30% of schools in the sample do. There is one co-educational school in Community A, and a sixth of schools in Communities B and A are single-shift, providing a longer school day and greater curriculum coverage than is possible with a morning and an afternoon shift. Overall, only one in ten schools provide support for students with special needs. This is slightly higher in Community C (one in five).

The shortage of quality government schooling means parents need to send their children to private schools (there are 14 such schools in Community C), and the cost of these

 People are running different kinds of schools but their results aren't good, neither is the standard of education. They run the schools, they give coaching classes, then they give all kinds of exams – monthly, weekly; because exams mean more money.

(A senior programme manager of an NGO-run school)

⁴ To set this fee in context, the Secondary School Stipend for girls is between 1,260 and 3,560 BDT per annum and the average household income is around 16,000 BDT, according to Household Income and Expenditure Survey data



Students of a madrasa in Dhaka, Bangladesh
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pose problems for poorer families. An alternative is NGO schools but some parents looked down at these schools and were unhappy with the quality and management of these. A father of an adolescent boy in Community C said: *'I don't like them much ... no money needed there but sometimes the teachers come and sometimes they don't and sometimes they take classes and sometimes they don't ... there is no maintenance, for example – in a school there should be a uniform ... There should be specific time for break when students can go outside of the class but there's nothing like that. Parents come during class time and take their child with them, sometimes students play outside during class time. Teachers don't say anything. They only care taking their salary. Sometime two of three teachers are absent.'*

Respondents' from Community C have greater access to schools but felt that schools in the area were increasing in quantity (there are now 17 kindergartens) but not in quality. Male participants in the community norms group said: *'Almost every one of them is running schools as a business; too much concentration on business.'*

The senior programme manager of an NGO-run school stated: *'People are running different kinds of schools but their results aren't good, neither is the standard of education. They run the schools, they give coaching classes, then they give all kinds of exams – monthly, weekly; because exams mean more money.'* The same concerns were sometimes

expressed in relation to coaching centres, which are often staffed by the same teachers as in schools.

Despite this, one mother from Community C – a domestic worker sending her daughter to a private school, stated that she believed that the quality had improved since she was at school. She also thought schools paid more attention to students and disciplined them more strictly: *'During my time ... if children go to school, they go, if they don't, they don't ... But now when my daughter is going to school, the teachers are sincere ... If she doesn't attend, then they will deduct 50, 10 BDT. If she is absent then she gets punished [beaten] or they call her guardians to school. This is the difference between now and our education.'*

Most adolescents attend coaching after school – regardless of gender, age, disability and sometimes even irrespective of wealth status – as the quality of the teaching and coverage of the curriculum is better, and parents wanted their children to be competitive, particularly because they were investing in their education. However, those who were better off were more likely to be able to

In those days there wasn't much inclination towards education. Nowadays, education is much more in demand and it is also very hard.

(A mother of an adolescent boy in Community C)

pay for coaching. One boy in Community A said he enjoyed attending coaching more than school because at coaching they explained things better. Taking coaching increases the chances of getting good grades but the cost is a concern for parents across all sites and a factor in dropout. Some adolescent boys also complained that they did not get time to play or spend time with their friends because of the heavy coaching schedule.

Adolescents from all three sites said they enjoyed extracurricular activities arranged by schools, such as participating in cultural activities, joining sports clubs and taking music lessons. While girls were less likely to mention physical activities, most school-going adolescents appeared to have access to some activities, albeit the time they could spend on them is reduced by the need to attend coaching and in some cases to work. Some adolescents in Community B mentioned having access to a library; but this was not reported in any other site.

According to the qualitative data, the most vulnerable groups in terms of access to education are adolescents with disabilities and new migrants from poor rural backgrounds. For adolescents with physical disabilities, there are two

kinds of barriers. First, their education is often overlooked, as the family perceives them as not being able to support their household. The programme director of Disability Association, explained that parents of adolescents with a disability often shared with frustration and despair: *'What is the benefit by investing in the disabled child? I have to take care of his eating, taking in the bathroom everything. If he would die then it will be better for them and me.'* Some families earn less than 9,000 BDT per month and thus have to prioritise when it comes to spending money on education. One mother of a girl with a physical disability shared that it was already difficult financially to educate their abled bodied children given their current circumstances and they did not have the luxury of educating a child with a disability.

The second barrier is accessibility. Schools in low-income settlements are not even oriented to and do not accommodate any students with visual, auditory or mobility impairments, in terms of infrastructure or curriculum or even teacher and students orientation to their needs. In Community C, an NGO provides both medical and educational services for people with disabilities but this was not available in the other sites.



Students in a school in Dhaka, Bangladesh © Ricci Coughlan / DFID 2019

D Because of his speech impairment he cannot talk clearly that is why in place of calling the teacher 'Sir' he says 'Tar'. Then all the students start saying 'Tar, tar, tar'. I mean they began to tease him. Because he is a disabled person they try to disturb him mentally.

(A mother of an adolescent boy in Community C)

Lack of adequate facilities often leads adolescents with disabilities to drop out of school. One boy in Community C mentioned that one of his classmates stopped coming to the school as he had started to lose his eyesight. Also, students often tease adolescents with disabilities. A 19-year-old boy from Community C described how students teased a classmate with a speech impairment: *'Because of his speech impairment he cannot talk clearly that is why in place of calling the teacher 'Sir' he says 'Tar'. Then all the students start saying 'Tar, tar, tar'. I mean they began to tease him. Because he is a disabled person they try to disturb him mentally.'*

All three sites had migrants from rural areas and these families seemed to be the poorest in the area, with poorer and less established networks of support, which longer term residents had access to, being more familiar with the slum and the city. Most of them came after losing their livelihood, home and possessions, owing to river erosion. Although they were not included in our sample, which was household-based, other residents shared that newer migrants were unable to send their children to school, irrespective of gender, and mostly sent their children to work and earn money for the family, as they had no choice and they had to survive.

Parental support for education

Parents from all three sites compared their own attitudes to education favourably to those of their parents. The mother of an adolescent boy in Community C said: *'In those days there wasn't much inclination towards education. Nowadays, education is much more in demand and it is also very hard.'*

Some parents regretted not continuing school and felt this had had a negative impact on their socio-economic situation. Some of the adolescents also appreciated and recognised the effort their parents made to have them continue their studies. One adolescent girl from Community B stated: *'My mother told me that she would continue supporting my studies till she has the last drop of blood in her veins. But we are poor. I don't know if I would be able to*

continue my studies. But both my mother and I have the same wish regarding continuing my studies.'

Given the level of investment by parents and the optimism and hope surrounding what an education can achieve for their children, most parents are very attentive to exam results, which can result in stress for adolescents. Many adolescents said their parents became very angry when they got poor results in their exams. Parents mentioned strict disciplining methods, particularly for their sons, such as scolding them and even beatings, to stop boys from missing schools and getting into bad activities. Most parents shared that girls' attendance was not perceived as a problem.

Sometimes, parents transfer their children to a madrasa, either because they want them to pursue a religious career but this is really for many of the poor. Usually a *madrasa* education is free, and includes food, residential space and books – even though the quality is variable. Poverty and general insecurity, as well as religious and cultural beliefs, play a large part in parents making this decision. Some fathers in Community B also shared that sending children to school was a way of keeping them from 'bad company' and becoming negatively influenced. Availability of drugs was a common concern in all three sites, and some of the adults reported that children and adolescents were involved as drug mules or in drug-dealing, although none of the respondents admitted to doing this or to taking drugs themselves. Usually the drug trade was controlled by the local leaders and local powerful well connected politicians who were in links with law enforcement officials.

Learning outcomes

Despite high enrolment rates, student achievement levels are below national targets. This is because of a combination of factors, including an overemphasis on rote learning, overcrowded classrooms and a shortage of trained teachers. The problem is particularly acute in government schools and rural areas (MOPME, 2015). An assessment of competencies in Class 8 in 2012 found that only 44% of students had acquired a basic language competency and 35% a basic maths competency; girls were 7% lower in maths than boys (ibid.). Our survey did not measure achievement, but girls were significantly more likely to be in a higher class than boys, in part because of the additional support provided for girls' secondary education. Older adolescents were significantly more likely to *'feel comfortable speaking up in class'* than younger ones, but numbers were high across the board (98% versus 93%). Again, the perceived limitations of schooling in terms of fostering good learning outcomes can be seen in the extensive use of coaching.

Key actions to accelerate progress

1. Improve the quality of general education overall.

Quality control in schools, monitoring and evaluation and holding teachers accountable is crucial to ensure quality education and to ensure lessons cover learners' needs, reducing the use of private coaching (which is in fact banned).

School management committees are currently dysfunctional and politicised and need to be improved. Quality of education is not only a technical issue but also a governance issue. Strong relationships between schools and communities are an integral part of school management policy but implementation of this is weak.

2. Increase availability of government schools and stipends for secondary education.

Slum areas lack government schools, and the costs of private schools are one of the reasons for adolescents having to drop out. Urban areas need greater coverage of stipends for secondary education.

Movement between schools and madrasas is common for poorer children as the latter are cheaper and provide food and accommodation. Madrasas are being increasingly brought under a uniform curriculum

and stronger monitoring, which is likely to address issues of quality.

3. Increase availability of institutions catering to adolescents with disabilities.

There is a need to increase the availability of educational institutions catering to the special needs of those with disabilities, and to equip general schools and their teachers to better respond to the needs of such children. This requires teacher training as well as infrastructural investments.

4. Allow girls to continue education after marriage or childbirth and boys to combine work with schooling.

School dropout is mainly caused by poverty and, relatedly, internal migration and paid work. Girls are more likely to marry early and take on significant domestic responsibilities, whereas boys are more likely to enter into full-time paid work, so levels of dropout are similar.

School teachers and authorities should pay attention to the motivational aspects of schooling for both boys and girls so that they continue and complete their education.



Students in a madrasa © Mahmudul Hasan Shohel, 2019

Secondary schools should be encouraged to allow girls to continue education after marriage or childbirth. Boys would also benefit from being able to return to school after a break to work, or to combine work with schooling. Increased childcare facilities would free up older siblings.

5. Improve vocational training opportunities and gender-neutral careers advice.

Government policies on education, teachers' development and skills development encourage improved vocational training and counselling of students on future careers, especially for marginalised groups. Unfortunately, currently little weight is given to this aspect.

Government and non-government vocational training should be made more attractive and accessible for girls and boys by lowering entry requirements, becoming more localised and arranging secure accommodation. Stereotyping of skills for girls and boys should be avoided and efforts made to encourage parents, students and potential employers to take girls into trades traditionally considered male and vice versa.

Working with well established Vocational Training Institutes might be the best way to pilot and test out some of the recommendations to encourage younger adolescents from poorer families to be able to access basic informal and formal training.

6. Support children from poorer families to attain better results and life skills.

Although government policy emphasises inclusive education, formal exams at the end of Classes 5 and 8 put pressure on schools, students and parents. Overall, the grade-dependent education system encourages

rote learning at the cost of quality. Many educationists as well as policy-makers are advocating against such formal examination systems.

Children from poorer families in particular need additional support from schools and teachers to ensure their educational results are good. If they do well, their parents will be more inclined to continue their schooling. Extracurricular activities and computer education in schools need to be increased to provide poorer children with better life skills and thus opportunities.

Loans, stipends and various schemes to encourage boys from the poorest families to continue to remain enrolled in School could be piloted in some of the most affected, poverty stricken areas.

7. Pay greater attention to parity of education completion.

Teachers, administrators and parents need to emphasise the needs and aspirations of young men and girls to ensure parity of completion as with enrolment. Quality education with adequate stimulation through sports or cultural activities can increase boys' motivation to complete their schooling. Government policy is now being changed so poor boys in secondary school will also receive stipends.

Structured linkages between NGO schools, informal schools and government schools, to work together to retain and ensure parity of completion with enrolment for both boys and girls.

Loans, stipends and other schemes to encourage boys from the poorest families to continue to remain in School could be piloted in some of the most affected, poverty stricken areas, with low performance or high drop out among boys.

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