

Bridging the gender gap in education success: primary education policy in Bangladesh

Pronita Dutta

Department of Public Administration, Jagannath University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines the implementation challenges of female primary education in Bangladesh, its impact on local cultural and socio-economic dynamics, stakeholder involvement to promote inclusivity, and policy alignment with national and international gender equality goals.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative approach was adopted, including a literature review, content analysis, in-depth interviews, and expert opinions to analyze the quality of education for females. Six interviews were conducted with policy administrators, academics, and private sector representatives.

Findings – The findings reveal that girls face more barriers in accessing and continuing primary education, as reflected in higher dropout rates and limited academic progression — factors that perpetuate social and gender inequality. Curriculum gaps, shortfalls in evaluation, urban-rural enrollment discrepancies, different teaching methods, the lack of a unified national education structure, inadequate teacher training, and environmental variables diverting resources exacerbate the challenges. The narrow focus on literacy overlooks prior failures to address the needs of disadvantaged people. Inflated statistics have obscured the reality, as bureaucrats tend to rely on favorable reports to evade criticism.

Originality/value – The focus on using local resources, donor assistance, and financial incentives for schooling girls provide a limited perspective on gender representation in primary education in Bangladesh. Investigating the implementation of free female primary education will help explore stakeholders' input, education quality, and gender-related social changes in greater depth.

Keywords Primary education, Gender, Policy, Equality, Free education, Bangladesh

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Education plays a crucial role in poverty reduction and sustainable development, with universal rights to education being a fundamental principle. Reinforcing this, the UNESCO Convention of 1960, which prohibits discrimination in education, highlights education's role in promoting human development, fundamental liberties, societal progress, and human rights (The World Bank, 2018). In this context, primary education is widely recognized as both a fundamental human right and a public good, particularly for children under the age of eleven (Numan and Islam, 2020).

Turning to international efforts, the 1990s witnessed a global push through summits promoting “Education for All” (EFA). However, universal primary education was only realized by 2000, when developing nations committed to providing access regardless of gender, age, income, or location. Nevertheless, progress toward these goals, particularly the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDG), was often subjectively assessed and ultimately fell short (Sabur and Ahmed, 2010). In response, the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) sets a broader, more inclusive agenda. It aims to ensure equitable, quality education, and promote lifelong learning through specific targets addressing gender disparities, learning outcomes, and access, supported by policy, financing, and data strategies (Ahmed and Rahaman, 2016).



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Looking more closely at the national context, Bangladesh has historically undervalued girls' education, largely due to entrenched socioeconomic and cultural factors. Gender stereotypes, poverty, child marriage, and violations of reproductive rights have systematically hindered women's societal participation. While there have been improvements in literacy and enrollment, inequities persist, with poor learning outcomes and low quality contributing to high dropout rates (Begum, 2015). For instance, the World Bank reported a female net enrollment rate of only 75.38 percent at the lower secondary level in 2018, with just 57.32 percent completing primary education the following year (UNESCO, 2018).

Despite commendable government initiatives, including free textbooks, education for girls, tuition waivers, and stipends, Bangladesh continues to lag behind other South Asian countries in achieving educational social inclusion (Badruzzaman and Mian, 2015). Addressing this gap requires recognizing that female access to basic education is not only a right but also a strategic investment: it contributes to economic development, boosts agricultural productivity, reduces maternal and infant mortality, and combats child marriage. Therefore, policy focus must go beyond eliminating fees to enhancing girls' school attendance, especially in rural areas, and improving learning outcomes.

From a gender perspective, this article examines the challenges and problems in implementing the primary education policy for girls, the impacts of the policy on cultural and socio-economic changes at the local level, the extent to which it aligns with national and international goals of gender equality, and the role of policy networks in ensuring girls' equal and equitable access to primary education.

Contextualizing girls' education in Bangladesh

Since 1971, the country has emphasized educational equity and access through a constitutionally mandated, mass-oriented system of free and compulsory primary education (Badruzzaman and Mian, 2015). Building on this, the government introduced targeted interventions under the 2010 National Education Policy, offering free education for girls up to Grade 8, distributing free textbooks, providing financial incentives, and operating the 'Food for Education' program. While these efforts have improved enrollment, gender parity, and reduced absenteeism, girls' completion rates remain below 79 percent, ultimately limiting the policy's effectiveness despite its gains (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2015).

Bangladesh met the MDGs, particularly in promoting gender parity in primary and secondary education and improving women's participation in the labor force. However, when we look closer, intra-household investment in child schooling and contra-directional gender bias in education-related decisions appear to be reasons of girls' relatively low education and is partially explained by the effective use of local resources and donor assistance. The sole focus of major scholarships and financial incentives on girls' secondary-level performance provides a limited lens for examining gender representation in education in Bangladesh. While initiatives such as the Female Secondary School Assistance Program have significantly increased girls' secondary enrollment, with female students surpassing boys in enrollment before the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges persist in access and retention at the primary level (Akanda and Haque, 2025).

Regarding the issue of retention, as of 2021, the net enrollment rate in primary education stood at over 90 percent, yet the completion rate was significantly lower, with nearly 14 percent of children dropped out before finishing primary school (UNDP, 2022). Gender disparities also persist, particularly in rural and disadvantaged regions, where girls are more likely to face barriers to continuing and completing their education.

To move beyond mere quantitative indicators of success, Bangladesh must now prioritize quality. In a comprehensive review of South Asian primary curricular standards following international norms and their impact on learning achievements, Filmer *et al.* (2006) noted that although Bangladesh met the MDG target of achieving universal primary education — measured primarily by school enrollment and completion rates — many students still failed to

attain even minimal levels of cognitive competency by the end of primary school. Over one-third of primary school graduates lack basic reading, writing, and math problem-solving skills (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2015). The World Bank also found that foundational learning fails to improve attention, imagination, and basic skills, leading to girls' grade repetition and causing nearly half of primary school students to drop out before Grade 10 (The World Bank, 2018). Consequently, Bangladesh's literacy rate improvement will be challenging due to girls' low competency levels in primary education.

This suggests that many challenges observed at the secondary level originate in primary education. Despite high enrollment rates and the inclusion of gender-sensitive content in curricula, girls in Bangladesh often show limited active participation in classroom activities from primary school onward, where similar issues such as overcrowded classrooms and resource constraints persist. For example, while some secondary schools report teacher-student ratios of 1:103, many primary schools also exceed the national standard of 1:30 (Ahmed, 2025). This undermines teachers' ability to provide individual support and creates a disengaging learning environment from an early age. Furthermore, as Islam and Asadullah (2018) note, summative evaluation practices in Bangladesh often worsen learning gaps. Lenient grade promotion prioritizes retention over genuine academic progress. Another critical issue lies in educational content: textbooks often reinforce traditional gender roles, portraying women as confined to domestic and low-paid work, which discourages girls from pursuing education (Ahmed and Rahaman, 2016). However, because academic studies predominantly focus on secondary level textbooks, they fail to adequately highlight how gender attitudes embedded in early education shape gender and education policy throughout childhood (Islam and Asadullah, 2018). Therefore, the relationship between time spent in school and knowledge acquired remains unclear. This ambiguity may stem from the fact that current assessment methods and international curriculum standards still inadequately address the specific learning needs of girls.

In addition, one must not overlook the role of infrastructure. The lack of adequate infrastructure, such as functional sanitation facilities, begins in primary education and worsens over time, especially for girls. Research consistently shows that inadequate or unsafe toilet facilities in primary schools contribute to discomfort, absenteeism, and eventually early dropout, particularly as girls reach puberty (UNESCO, 2018). These foundational issues in primary education not only undermine learning outcomes but also perpetuate gender disparity in later stages of education.

Although earlier sections discussed challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, untrained teachers, and the lack of gender-sensitive facilities, it is important to emphasize that these issues persist not due to a lack of awareness, but because of a disconnect between national policy frameworks and local-level implementation. Generally, policy implementation involves one-time and ongoing actions mandated by prior policy decisions to translate them into operational changes. Implementing education policy is a multi-directional process rather than a straightforward implementation (Viennet and Pont, 2007). Bangladesh often prioritizes macro-level educational indicators, such as enrollment targets and curriculum reforms, at the expense of addressing contextual, ground-level barriers. For instance, while national policies formally endorse inclusive education, many rural schools continue to operate without the essential conditions needed to actualize these goals. Decision-makers tend to focus on broad, top-down approaches, such as national targets and standardized strategies while overlooking the specific challenges faced by marginalized groups or regions. Local realities, such as child labor, early marriage, and prevailing gender norms, are frequently underrepresented in national planning. While funding and legitimacy may be allocated to gender-focused projects, a systematic review of policy and practice is necessary to enhance access and parity. Conceptual confusion among central and peripheral policymakers exacerbates contradictions in implementing inclusive school culture (Malak *et al.*, 2013). Since 2004, development partners have funded PEDP macro plans, which have led to poor coordination, increased workload, and hampered gender parity supervision in schools. Due to resource diversion

toward poverty alleviation, educational equality in Bangladesh has suffered (Sabur and Ahmed, 2010).

In terms of accountability, civil society has been vocal about these issues. The Bangladeshi government's 2016-2020 Seventh Five Year Plan aimed to implement the SDGs, but civil society organizations in Bangladesh have critiqued the government's narrow focus on primary education, arguing that it often overlooks critical issues of gender equality and universal access. For instance, the Campaign for Popular Education, through its Education Watch initiative, has highlighted that while Bangladesh has made strides in achieving near-universal primary enrollment and gender parity, significant challenges remain in ensuring quality education and equitable access for marginalized groups (UNDP, 2022). Additionally, in June 2023, the Centre for Policy Dialogue and the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, held a national conference where stakeholders emphasized the need for greater citizen participation and adequate funding to improve local primary education. They pointed out that budget allocations for primary education had decreased from 6.51 percent of the total budget in FY2016-17 to 4.56 percent in FY2023-24, highlighting a decline in investment (Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, 2023). More importantly, education budgets were never equally accessible to all groups (Monem, 2011).

Finally, gender-related social changes have had an intricate link to equality and quality in girls' education. In seeking to find out how free education for girls is being implemented in Bangladesh despite varied challenges and issues, the research seeks to explore the implications of social and economic barriers, policy orientation of the government and stakeholder inputs for education quality.

General ideas on policy implementation

Implementing education policy is inherently complex, requiring a clear definition of determinants and the active involvement of both local administrators and national policymakers. As stakeholder diversity increases, accountability becomes harder to ensure, making effective policy design and a supportive environment essential (Viennet and Pont, 2007). Significantly, the 'policy cycle approach' frames implementation as a process beginning with policy adoption, followed by implementing decisions, target group compliance, evaluation of outcomes, and eventual revision.

In addition, policy development in democratic settings often follows Lindblom's (1959) notion of 'incrementalism' where gradual reforms are favored due to limited resources and the complexity of social issues. Incremental changes are less controversial and help manage resistance, though they invite criticism over lack of ambition or coherence. Stakeholders negotiate and influence policy direction, making inclusive processes essential. To address this, 'Advocacy Coalition Framework' blends top-down and bottom-up approaches, emphasizing the role of coalitions sharing core beliefs, normative values, and coordinated actions (Jenkins-Smith *et al.*, 2014; Viennet and Pont, 2007).

Methodology

In this study, indicators were used to assess policy implementation patterns, processes, and consistency through systematic analysis, historical data comparison, literature review, policy papers, and official statistics projections. In-depth interviews proved to be a practical method for examining institutional interactions, political ideas in education policy, and their approaches to educational outcomes (Adhikary, 2018). Empirical studies and official documents were analyzed to develop interview questionnaires that link theory and research. This research required in-depth understanding of the complex relationships between gender and educational quality rather than relying on broad statistical analyses. This study emphasized the sequential, cyclical, and interconnected steps involved in implementing an equal access policy for girls' primary education.

To understand the implementation and evaluation of education policy in Bangladesh, six in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals from three professional groups (Table 1).

Participants were selected using a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling techniques. A junior officer from Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) acted as a gatekeeper, helping to identify an initial pool of candidates who met the criteria, namely individuals with diverse professional backgrounds and direct involvement in policy implementation or analysis. After initial interviews, snowball sampling allowed the researcher to identify additional key actors through recommendations by earlier participants. The final group (P1-P6) included one senior policy administrator (P1), two private-sector representatives (P2, P3), and three academics or activists (P4-P6).

Given the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted either by telephone or through virtual platforms such as Microsoft Teams. An adaptive, semi-structured interview format was used, allowing questions to be tailored based on the participants' responses to gain more in-depth insight. To ensure the credibility of the findings and mitigate the limitations of a small sample size, multiple data sources, including policy documents and previous research, were used to triangulate the results and provide a broader understanding of the issues discussed.

Findings and discussion

Bangladesh's education sector has been internationally lauded for two decades. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) for primary education increased from 1.06 in 2010 to 1.09 in 2020, while at the secondary level, it rose from 1.12 to 1.21 during the same period, indicating higher enrollment rates for girls. By 2019, girls accounted for 54 percent of secondary-level students, up from 43 percent in 1999, and outnumbered boys in 63 of 64 districts (IndexMundi, 2023).

Increased enrollment is especially important for any educational system in developing countries such as Bangladesh, which is ranked 129th out of 191 countries in the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2022). Due to increased educational facilities, female participation, continuation, and drop-out rates have improved compared to male rates. The 'food for education program' at the primary level and the female stipend program at the secondary level also closed the gender gap. However, due to a focus on secondary education, gender differences in primary education and internal efficiency (completion, drop-out, retention rates) are still pressing issues. Despite the higher female enrollment rate, Huq and Rahman (2008) argue that rural girls, especially from poor households, face limited access from the start, lower success and higher drop-out rates than boys.

Table 1. Participant Sample

<i>Group</i>	<i>Participant</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Data Collection</i>	<i>Data Analysis</i>
Policy administrators	Participant 1	Directorate of Primary Education (DPE), MoPME	Interview	Thematic Analysis
Private sector	Participant 2	UNICEF, Bangladesh		
	Participant 3	BRAC		
Academics/Policy expert	Participant 4	University of Dhaka		
	Participant 5			
	Participant 6			

Source: By author

A closer look reveals that significant challenges remain in ensuring all children, especially girls and marginalized groups, complete primary education (UNESCO, 2018). Without a strong foundation at this level, many students struggle to make a successful transition to secondary and tertiary education. In fact, it is difficult to expect equitable success at later stages when disparities in access, participation, and learning outcomes persist at the primary level. Arguably, unless quality education is made equally accessible from the beginning and ensuring that increased enrollment translates into sustained attendance and academic achievement for all students, the system risks reinforcing existing social and gender inequalities (UNESCO, 2018).

Government strategies for primary education

The education system in Bangladesh consists of four stages: five years of primary education (Grade 1 to 5) for children aged 6 to 10, junior or lower secondary (Grade 6 to 8), secondary school (Grade 9 to 10) and higher secondary (Grades 11 to 12). The primary education system comprises government, nongovernment and community schools, religion-based schools (madrasahs), kindergartens, and satellite schools. The MoPME is responsible for primary education and mass literacy, whereas the Ministry of Education (MOE) operates secondary, vocational, and tertiary education (UNESCO, 2018).

Since 1992, the government's basic education human resources development priorities have aligned with EFA initiatives. The National Poverty Reduction Strategy (NPRS 2006-2015) prioritized economic growth, governance, and human development with a focus on basic education (UNDP, 2022). Considering that education is closely linked with poverty and health, the second phase of the Primary Education Development Program (PEDP) introduced quality universal primary education to reduce poverty through sustainable socio-economic development (Momen, 2011). Bangladesh did not meet the targets due to the need for more knowledge and creative solutions to socio-economic issues (UNESCO, 2018). Although access targets of the PEDP (2011-16) follow up were met, quality classrooms and teaching-learning environments were not possible by 2015 with a US\$8.8 billion budget. The government gave the female primary school students in disadvantaged areas stipends as household food security was correlated with school attendance. High enrollment rates from a US\$1.3 monthly stipend prompted the government to request matching funds from developing partners and study how food price increases affect marginalized households' enrollment and drop-out rates (Momen, 2011). From the late 1990s, its Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) and Net Enrollment Rate (NER) have substantially increased to 99 and 81 percent, respectively. In supporting gender balance in primary education, ratios of females to males in GER is also higher in recent years. As of 2023, girls made up 50.75 percent of primary students, with even higher representation at junior secondary (55.14 percent) and secondary levels (51.65 percent) (IndexMundi, 2023). Significantly, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) in primary education stood at 1.09 in 2020 and slightly declined to 1.02 in 2021, still indicating parity. These trends suggest that national policies, supported by extensive partnerships with NGOs, development partners, innovative strategies, and efficient resource use, have been effective in boosting girls' enrollment across educational stages (UNESCO, 2018).

Although progress in expanding access to primary education is evident, Bangladesh faces poor quality and efficiency, marked by high dropout rates (50.5 percent), low female literacy growth, overcrowded classrooms, and mismanaged resources (UNDP, 2022). Education sector allocation in the annual budget has dropped at 2.1 percent of GDP and 14 percent of total expenditure recently (UNESCO, 2018). Due to Bangladesh's geographical vulnerability, particularly in low-lying and disaster-prone regions, schools are increasingly exposed to severe floods, heavy rainfall, extreme temperatures, droughts, and cyclones. While these impacts are more acute in certain areas such as coastal and riverine districts, they have become a wider national concern, prompting policymakers to divert resources toward keeping children in school amid frequent disruptions (Momen, 2011).

Actors in primary education delivery

The interviewees agreed that NGO involvement raised education awareness and demand. Academic respondents noted that NGOs offer large-scale expansion of formal and non-formal primary education programs alternative to public schools and school preparedness activities for almost one million children. They appreciated the efforts of NGOs and donors for collaborating with the government for promoting inclusive access and facilitating effective learning by their innovative curriculum and qualified teachers.

The government created the School Learning Improvement Plan (SLIP) to involve school management committees, teachers, and parents in improving education to prepare children from disadvantaged households for formal schooling (Ahmed and Rahaman, 2016). NGOs and donors contributed modestly to such school operations. This crucial partnership provides evidence-based advocacy to decentralize education to empower schools to address their own improvement needs and encourage the community to significantly contribute to basic education.

While the global community expressed concerns over policy making and development programs to speed up unfinished EFA efforts, the initiatives taken so far have been particularly valuable. “Adequate funds are not being used properly, and when financial assistance is discontinued, it delays or stops projects like teacher training, school meals, and extended learning hours”, noted P2. “As a result, poor communities are being denied access to quality primary education, which creates serious inequity in the system.” According to P5, learning outcomes vary significantly across the country due to differences in education delivery methods, the absence of a unified national education system, and the lack of a standardized core curriculum.

Gender, education and MDGs

According to the public sector participant, the 2010 Education Policy, the 6th Five Year Plan, and the Vision 2021 ‘Digital Bangladesh’ initiative set goals aligned with the 2015 MDGs and beyond. P1 said, “Despite rising female enrollment in primary schools, underlying factors, often unspoken or not explicitly detailed by respondents, continue to drive educational inequality”. Respondents from the private sector also observed, “In our country the first challenge is to enroll girls in the school. Once this milestone is reached, we can focus on other scales of factors. But till now we have achieved only 72 percent at secondary level. It is crucial to control dropout rates and simultaneously improve the knowledge and quality of teachers.” While these “other scales of factors” were not specified, they point to broader structural and social challenges that persist beyond enrollment.

Geographic disparities further compound the issue. Academic and private sector respondents highlighted that metropolitan areas show the highest enrollment rates, while semi-urban and rural regions continue to fall behind (Huq and Rahman, 2008). Male students are more likely to persist in urban schools, and metropolitan schools generally have a higher concentration of female students. In contrast, rural and semi-rural schools experience higher dropout rates among girls, reflecting weaker institutional capacity and greater internal inefficiencies compared to urban areas (Huq and Rahman, 2008).

According to UNESCO (2018), fifth grade students should be proficient in reading, writing, and mathematics. Without a uniform curriculum and assessment standards, primary schools cannot improve teaching and learning. Civil society and educational respondents maintained that the international community’s goals are unrealistic given the current teaching workforce. Current salary and incentive structures for teachers and recruitment at the behest of influential people rather than merit and qualification hinder goal achievement. Information and communication technology resources are not properly used for teachers’ professional development and students self-learning. Even public sector representative admits “. . . primary schools, especially rural ones, lack the physical infrastructure needed for learning. Special education resources are also lacking.” Respondents also worry about the ministry’s control

over primary education. Talking about the loopholes in monitoring, P6 mentioned “the available statistics in our hand are exaggerated and lacking actual situation. . . . The responsible government officers always want to share only positive and progressive reports to avoid inquiries. This type of attitude is another reason of improper monitoring.” Schools, districts, and sub-districts have limited discretionary power for resource management, capacity building, and structural and legal changes.

Education and SDGs and the Seventh Five Year Plan

With ten target areas and 43 indicators, SDG 4 aims to provide high-quality, equitable education for all and lifelong learning. All the targets present a major monitoring challenge for decision-makers to design evidence-based education policy, set up education programs, and distribute resources to target areas. In 2016, UNESCO assessed Bangladesh’s readiness to measure SDG 4 Education 2030 global and thematic indicators. Stable economic growth and falling reproduction rates have driven educational progress. However, Bangladesh still faces extreme poverty and post-natural disaster management issues. UNESCO and academic sources note that climate change has intensified flooding in Bangladesh, with several villages, particularly in the country’s low-lying, tropical southern and coastal regions, being hit by multiple cyclonic storms and submerged in floodwaters for weeks during the monsoon season, which typically lasts from early June to late September (UNESCO, 2018). This indicates that the impact is regionally concentrated, though the broader implications are national in scale. Private sector respondents said these disasters damaged primary schools, care centers, and other educational institutions, preventing 16million of children from attending schools in 2017 alone. Given ongoing social, economic, and environmental disruptions, there is growing concern that Bangladesh may fall short of achieving its 2030 education goals (UNESCO, 2018).

Moreover, the Bangladesh government has a conventional view of SDG 4, focusing only on eliminating illiteracy by 2030 and ignoring past failures in identifying disadvantaged groups, children with disabilities and special needs, gender gaps, and necessary responses in serving them. The government pledged to spend 6 percent of GDP on education to meet 2030 human development goals. But policy initiatives are criticized for failing to track the growing educational achievement gap between rich and poor, rural and urban communities (Ahmed and Rahaman, 2016).

In this context, the Seventh Five Year Plan serves as the primary framework for SDG implementation. Signposting the gaps, stakeholders also note that the plan lacks clear strategies for decentralizing school governance, improving curriculum and teacher coordination, and addressing slow target achievement. Notably, there is no mention of individualized learning or the establishment of a permanent Education Commission involving academics and activists — elements crucial for long-term success (Ahmed and Rahaman, 2016).

Social and economic barriers

Enrollment parity for girls is hindered by financial and social factors. Poverty is more than a problem in understanding education policy implementation, respondents mentioned. As P2 explained, “poverty affects gender, ethnicity, geography, early marriage and labor market attitudes, healthcare, religious norms, and violence. Without these, analyses will fail to explain how policy-practice gaps perpetuate education inequalities”.

Poverty reinforces social attitudes and structures that disadvantage poor, ethnic minority and disabled girls (Dejaeghere and Lee, 2011). Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with 88 percent of the total population living in rural areas (The World Bank, 2018). The large rural population is causing significant challenges in rural society, including land scarcity, inadequate nutrition, and lack of education. Poor families often invest less in girls’ education, and after marriage, labor markets prioritize sons’

education over girls' (Banu, 2011). According to the interviewees, communities prefer private tutoring due to poor teaching. One-on-one classes with male teachers undermine girls, making them more vulnerable to sexual harassment. P5 mentioned that "teachers are trained and advised to consider students from gender neutral point, but due to social structure sometimes they act as per society". In analyzing implementation failures, respondents suggest understanding discriminatory conditions and norms. Blanket intervention and "positive discrimination" or affirmative action for girls may conflict with primary education safety, support, and relevance.

Girls still face challenges in education due to deeply ingrained gender discrimination in families and societies. This leads to lower aspirations and career options for girls, resulting in physical and psychological costs, parental expectations of marriage after puberty, and lack of job and economic opportunities. Additionally, girls underrepresent in STEM fields due to their preference for 'soft occupations' (Dejaeghere and Lee, 2011).

Respondents observed that primary school girls often drop out due to safety concerns and harsh disciplinary practices by teachers. Girls are vulnerable to threats such as sexual or domestic violence, acid attacks, and eve-teasing. These incidents often result in long-term physical and psychological harm, severely limiting their mobility. Additionally, the widespread practice of dowry—where the bride's family must provide cash or gifts during marriage—discourages families from allowing girls to continue in school, as dowry demands increase with a girl's age and education level. Participants also noted that while conditional cash transfer programs aim to promote girls' education, they can inadvertently lead to domestic violence and disrupt traditional gender norms. This backlash, they suggested, stems from shifting perceptions of girls' roles, from preparing for marriage to pursuing education, alongside changing expectations of men (Dejaeghere and Lee, 2011).

Rural people are religious. Religiously, parents must marry their daughters before puberty, and extramarital sexual activity is a sin, causing social scandals. Practicing Muslim families also seclude rural girls (Banu, 2011). Their education is often considered useless for their future roles as wives and mothers. The interviewees argued that girls' primary education does not change gender norms about girls' education and post-school life (Chisamya et al., 2012).

Measurable indicators

Bangladeshi primary education is pluralist. In Bangladesh, public primary schools account for approximately two-thirds of total primary school enrollment. In addition, around 15 percent of students attend non-government formal schools, while NGO-run primary schools enroll about 8.5 percent of the student population (UNESCO, 2018). According to UNESCO reports, girls have surpassed boys in GER and NER, and government-run primary schools have gender balance in admissions. Despite these achievements, almost one-third of primary school students are older than 6-10 years (Heissler, 2011). Late enrollment, low participation, poor teaching and management, and repeating classes contribute to over-aged primary school students, P2 said.

Table 2 shows notable improvements in education outcomes since 1990, especially for girls.

Girls have a lower repetition rate (1.9 percent) and dropout rate (15.7 percent) compared to boys (5.1 percent and 19.2 percent, respectively), and they slightly outperform boys in completion (83.2 percent vs. 80.8 percent) and survival to Grade 5 (86.1 percent vs. 84.1 percent). These figures suggest that girls are now progressing more efficiently through the primary cycle than boys, with a higher coefficient of efficiency (83.2 percent vs. 81.9 percent) (DPE, 2020, p. 97). However, class-wise repetition rates have remained largely unchanged since 1990. Although there has been a slight improvement for girls in Grade 5, repetition rates remain high in other grades, particularly in Grade 6.

Dropout rates remain high and are a major concern (Heissler, 2011). Respondents questioned the reliability of official statistics, noting that "success should be measured by

Table 2. Gender-wise data on repetition, drop-out, completion and survival rates

Gender	Years Input/ Per Student	In Percentage			Coefficient of Efficiency	Survival Rate to Grade 5
		Repetition Rate in all grades	Cycle Dropout Rate	Completion Rate		
Boys	6.10	5.1	19.2	80.8	81.9	84.1
Girls	5.95	1.9	15.7	83.2	83.2	86.1
All	6.05	5.1	17.9	82.1	82.6	85.2

Source: (DPE, 2020, p. 97)

education completion rather than enrollment alone”. Table 3 illustrates inconsistencies in dropout data, with sharp grade-level variations. For instance, girls show a low dropout rate in Grade 1 (0.3 percent) but a sharp rise to 9.3 percent by Grade 4, while boys experience a steady increase, peaking at 6.6 percent in Grade 4 (BANBEIS, 2018). These fluctuations suggest that dropout is not consistently tracked, potentially obscuring key trends. Respondents across sectors expressed concern over inaccurate reporting, pointing to a flawed data collection and record-keeping system prone to errors (Ahmed *et al.*, 2007). A major cause, as highlighted by several participants, is inconsistent birth registration, which complicates age verification and enrollment tracking (UNESCO, 2018).

Bangladesh rarely evaluates the quality of education. Numbers, percentages, and benchmarks are used to show primary education’s literacy and enrollment gains. However, as highlighted by academic professionals, the recent trend of using a lenient grading system to boost passing rates poses a major threat to quality education. In the words of P4, “students do not deserve the result of this lenient grade system.” Furthermore, there is a shortage of skilled teachers at primary level, and teachers are often reluctant to put extra effort under this system. Political pragmatism tends to compromise the transparency and accountability of education budget over serving the best interests of children.

Policy network and stakeholders’ input

The central ministries run Bangladesh’s primary education system. As observed by private-sector respondents, the headmaster is the micro-level supervisor communicating with School Management Committees (SMC), Parent-Teacher Associations, and the Assistant Upazilla (subdistrict) Primary Education Officer who oversees clusters of schools. Upazilla Resource Instructors visit schools for academic purposes and policy implementation monitoring, reporting to District Education Officers and subsequently to divisional and central management. The centralized and top-down decision-making approach where schools are more accountable to governments than communities were cited as a major challenge to primary education policy implementation.

Table 3. Dropout rate by grade in primary education 2017

Gender	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 4
Boys	2.8	4.8	4.6	6.6	3.6
Girls	0.3	1.2	3.3	9.3	1.6
All	1.55	3.0	3.95	7.95	2.60

Source: (BANBEIS, 2018, p. 11)

Affirmative action policies like enrolling at least 70 percent girls and poorer children in non-government schools affect parents' attitudes toward their daughters' schooling (Dejaeghere and Lee, 2011). Despite policy suggestions by private and non-government sectors and state financial and food incentives with donor assistance, improvement is marginal. Due to public-private sector conflicts, development partners and NGOs' advocacy in policy formulation is underrepresented, which slows implementation, private-sector respondents maintained.

Quality education

Bangladeshi primary education policies emphasize quantity over quality. Apart from constant factors like social norms, economic indicators, current policy status, and aggregate school quality indicators, education attained is strongly correlated with basic skills (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2015). School learning outcome is poor. An academic interviewee pointed out, "education policy is mainly prepared by government officials rather than teachers or persons related to education sector. That's why our education policy is mainly based on exams and their results which is greatly hampered in recent pandemic situation."

Female basic education literacy is not a good indicator of the education situation. According to the interviewees, rural girls are at a disadvantage in learning achievement. They attribute low primary education achievement to poor school quality, overcrowded classrooms and untrained teachers since they cannot be quantified. Even though progress has been made in reducing dropout rates, as per P1, "occasionally compromising quality leads to students lacking knowledge". Schools that discriminate against girls also affect parents' views on math and science (Dejaeghere and Lee, 2011).

All respondents across professional groups agreed that access to primary education is closely linked to infrastructure-related challenges. They attributed low attendance rates to factors such as the long distance between students' homes and schools, poor road conditions, inadequate transportation, and the lack of systematic planning in school distribution. As a result, many girls are enrolled in madrasahs, which are often located in remote areas and staffed by untrained teachers. Additionally, respondents unanimously echoed the concern that school completion alone does not ensure the acquisition of skills or competence. They emphasized that, despite spending more years in school, girls often exhibit significant basic skills gaps throughout their education journey (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2015).

Academic professionals consider that SDGs require major curriculum reform. To help students apply science in daily life, UNESCO recommends including basic science in the primary curriculum. Bangladeshi ninth- and tenth-graders study science. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board, which oversees textbooks, often challenges gendered beliefs (Chisamya *et al.*, 2012). In Bangladesh, 300-page books are written in a few months, compared to two years in Japan. Sometimes books only use information from Google (Hassan and Dey, 2021). Teacher quality is another concern. According to BANBEIS (2018), 60 percent of primary school teachers have third division graduation and post-graduation grades and spent their careers as assistant teachers without being promoted.

Because of the static maintenance of the policy cycle and incremental approaches, the government has been attempting to imbibe a new modernizing process at the local level. This study argues that Bangladeshi primary education policies and programs only address gender gaps based on ethnicity, poverty, and geography, not discriminatory norms and attitudes that perpetuate inequalities. While financial incentives have been given to support girls' schooling, the pedagogy, curriculum, and textbooks have paid less attention to gendered norms (Dejaeghere and Lee, 2011). Formal education fails to deliver socio-economic benefits and raises questions about the universality of global targets due to the deliverology approach's precondition of ignoring emerging issues and complex correlation between stages and actors (Viennet and Pont, 2007).

Conclusion

Two decades of experience and evidence suggest that Bangladesh's primary education strategy has the potential to increase female student enrollment and academic achievement. However, longstanding gender-related challenges, such as child marriage, adolescent pregnancies, and severe poverty, disproportionately affect children's access to and outcomes in primary education. Moreover, the presence of deeply rooted conventional grading systems, slow adaptation to evolving curricula, and a teacher training system hindered by bureaucratic structures collectively create significant obstacles. This study has shown that policies focusing solely on enrollment figures fail to address the complex socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors that influence girls' ability to complete their education.

To ensure sustainable progress, several strategic shifts are required. Improving birth registration, particularly for children aged five to six, will enable better enrollment tracking and planning. Similarly, poverty-focused interventions, such as school meals, household income support, and food security, should be prioritized in education budgets to reduce the opportunity costs for families. Additionally, decentralizing school governance can enhance accountability and responsiveness, empowering local communities in staffing, training, and financial decision-making. Equally important, robust gender equity actions must be embedded at all stages of policy development. This includes removing gendered content from textbooks, promoting girls in science and technology, and increasing female representation in STEM teaching roles. Without addressing these deeper issues through integrated, equity-driven, and locally relevant approaches, current policy efforts risk falling short of achieving lasting educational transformation.

About the author

Pronita Dutta is Lecturer of Department of Public Administration at Jagannath University, Bangladesh. Currently pursuing a DPhil in Education at the University of Oxford, her research focuses on education, policy development, and social studies.

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Corresponding author

Pronita Dutta can be contacted at: pronita.dutta32@gmail.com

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