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POLICY BRIEF #28

EDUCATING GIRLS AND COUNTERING CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH: OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAITH ENGAGEMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Girls in Bangladesh are facing distinctive, detrimental effects linked to the COVID-19 emergencies. Among them are disruptions to education, which are accelerating child marriage and different forms of violence. The lifetime education losses are incalculable. This brief focuses on specific ways in which faith communities, governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have engaged to prevent girls from being left behind in and beyond Bangladesh. It also explores paths toward a more equitable education system when the COVID-19 pandemic is behind us.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When religious bodies are thoughtfully engaged in education strategy and delivery, they can help produce fundamental normative and structural changes, with particularly positive outcomes for girls. This is critically important during the COVID-19 emergencies.

- Dialogue with religious communities needs to focus on identifying and integrating positive religious norms that support gender equality and counter harmful teachings and practices such as child marriage.

- Female madrasas offer educational opportunities for girls and can either counter or reinforce gender inequality. Understanding these factors is key for bolstering female madrasa education.

This brief draws on BRAC University's Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ) and World Faiths Development Dialogue's (WFDD) ongoing research on the rise of gender-based violence in Bangladesh, linked to the COVID-19 emergencies.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education across the globe in unprecedented ways that threaten to reverse gains in access to education and learning. In Bangladesh, the pandemic has affected over 38 million students and 1 million teachers.[1] Public school shutdowns began in March 2020 and continue as of this writing. According to UNESCO, as of March 2021, Bangladesh had the world's longest full-school closure, at 47 weeks.[2]

Access problems linked to the COVID-19 emergencies come on top of underlying quality challenges. The Government of Bangladesh promotes and supports remote learning during shutdowns through television, mobile phones, radio, and internet. Not all students, however, have access to these resources. A World Bank study finds that access to these alternative learning methods and their uptake have been low relative to other countries. Of the surveyed school children (aged 5 to 15), less than 50% have access to radios, computers, and televisions, respectively.[3] Nearly all have access to mobile phones, but many do not have access to the internet.[4]

The underlying quality issues aggravate the access issues. Pre-pandemic estimates have shown that 58% of Bangladeshi children did not achieve the minimum reading proficiency by the end of Grade 5. This figure is expected to increase to 76% if schools remain shut down for longer periods.[5] Thus, despite the wide range of technological platforms introduced to facilitate education during the pandemic, digital divides exacerbate the learning deficit for those children who are already more socioeconomically deprived.

These challenges have particularly severe consequences for female children, whose educational deprivation is compounded by the greater burden of domestic work and increased risk of sexual violence and child marriage (which generally removes them from school). The constraints on female education and empowerment in Bangladeshi society emanate from a wider social system of gender norms, beliefs, and practices. Deeper social and cultural roots of gender inequality in education need to be unearthed if systemic and sustainable social change is to be achieved.

Faith is a powerful force for social and cultural change. Faith-inspired beliefs and practices contribute significantly to the social construction of gender and its associated norms and structures. Likewise, faith-inspired actors and institutions have important roles in reinforcing gender perceptions and standards. In some cases, faith is misappropriated to support particular agendas around gender issues. Whether faith works to counter gender inequality or to reinforce it, it is seldom passive in religious societies like Bangladesh, where social life is permeated by the teachings and traditions of religion.

This brief focuses on government and Islamic educational institutions, given the predominant position of Islam in Bangladeshi society and politics. However, it should be highlighted that many other faith-inspired schools operate in Bangladesh, notably Catholic schools.[6] It highlights instructive examples of interventions that have worked in countries with similar religious and cultural contexts. Such innovative policies and interventions can help point to ways to ensure that girls are not left behind in the efforts to reimagine a more equitable education system post-pandemic.

GIRLS' EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH: A PROFILE

The disruption of Bangladesh's education systems has had particularly devastating impacts on the livelihoods and futures of girls. Girls generally have limited access to distance learning and the internet during school closures. Many are at risk of not returning to classrooms once schools reopen. Boys often drop out of school to join the workforce during times of crisis, but particular attention needs to go to girls, as those who drop out risk becoming socially isolated or vulnerable to early marriage, teen pregnancy, and gender-based violence. Evidence from a wide variety of places shows that many girls who drop out never enter the workforce.

Bangladesh has invested heavily in girls' education over the last several decades. In 1970, before independence, girls made up about 17% of secondary school students; by 2000 they made up over half.[7] As of 2018, the number of girls enrolling in secondary school had risen to 78%.[8] Increased education enrollment played a large role in the decreases in child marriage rates and fertility rates (in conjunction with family planning interventions).[9] Much of this progress is attributed to a conditional cash transfer program, the Female Secondary School Assistance Program (FSSAP), a joint program funded by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and the Government of Bangladesh. It ran from 1993 to 2001, addressing gender disparities in education. Female students in Grades 6 through 10 received monthly stipends on the condition that they maintained a 75% attendance rate, scored at least 45% on their exams, and remained unwed.[10]

The benefits of FSSAP far outweighed its cost.[11] A study that assessed FSSAP found that girls were able to extend their education by up to two years, with a 7% increase in women's workforce participation. Additionally, girls who participated in the program delayed marriage by 1.4 to 2.3 years[12] and used contraceptives at a higher rate. The stipend program was so successful that it has been replicated in Pakistan and Rwanda. While the FSSAP program ended over 20 years ago, similar sustainable and efficient financial support programs have been replicated across the world, and solid evidence shows that they lift many girls and women out of poverty.

In response to the pandemic's disruptive impact on higher education, the World Bank approved a $191 million credit for Bangladesh in late June 2021 to support the Higher Education Acceleration Transformation Program.[13] The program aims to stimulate regional mobility and collaborations across the South Asian education sector. Digitalization of education is a key priority, as it can bolster the resilience of education systems in the face of pandemics and other disruptive events. The initiative promotes women's opportunities in higher education. A network of women's universities and educational institutions in Bangladesh, initially based at the Asian University of Women in Chittagong, aims to increase women's access to quality higher education.

These remarkable models have met success in expanding girls' opportunities in education. Bangladesh has made great strides in educating girls and women; however, many women are unable to complete post-primary education or make the school-to-work transition to well-paying jobs.[14] Another unfortunate reality is that most Bangladeshi families continue to invest more in post-primary education for boys than for girls, and girls tend to

be responsible for a large share of household duties.[15] While girls are more likely than boys to enroll in both primary and secondary school, boys are still more likely than girls to complete secondary school.[16] This translates into greater gender disparities in the economy, family life, and wider society.

FEMALE MADRASAS

An often unrecognized but large factor behind school enrollment numbers in Bangladesh is the madrasa education system. In the past, registered religious school systems in Bangladesh served almost exclusively boys. However, with financial incentives from the government, many became coeducational.[18] Today, madrasas provide over 1.5 million girls in Bangladesh with an education. Even so, various

experts argue about whether these schools hinder or enhance girls' formal education.

The madrasa systems of Bangladesh have experienced significant growth at various times since independence, and today they are one of the world's largest. Madrasas tend to fall into two categories: Aliya and Quomi. Aliya (often known as mainstream or state-reformed) madrasas are state-supported, with general education courses that allow Aliya graduates to compete for university places and jobs. Quomi (more traditional and unreformed) madrasas are largely funded by donations and charity funds, and they are run by non-state actors. There is no established number of privately run

Table 1: Number of Institutions and Students by Type of Education

Type of Education	Management	Number of Institutions	Number of Students		
			Total	Female	% Female
Primary Education	Public	65,529	13,034,723	6,609,907	50.71
	Private	68,618	4,303,377	2,189,126	50.87
	Total	134,147	17,338,100	8,799,033	50.75
Secondary Education	Public	663	660,844	295,131	44.66
	Private	19,802	9,814,256	5,360,250	54.62
	Total	20,465	10,475,100	5,655,381	53.99
Madrasa Education (Aliya)	Public	3	6,714	726	10.81
	Private	9,291	2,471,248	1,368,474	55.38
	Total	9,294	2,477,962	1,369,200	55.26

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, 2018[17]

Quomi madrasas due to their mostly unregulated nature and lack of systematic monitoring.

There is considerable evidence that enrollments in Quomi madrasas have increased since the pandemic started. Many Quomi schools stayed open while other schools closed, by government regulation or voluntary measures. "Day by day the number of female students is increasing at Quomi madrasas as parents prefer them to Aliya madrasas which operate coeducation and have male teachers teaching female students," said Mahfuzul Haque, secretary general of Befaqul Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh, a Quomi madrasa board.[19] Haque also claimed that many parents prefer Quomi madrasas due to a lack of trust in at-home studying and an inability to pay for learning materials and technology.

Many religious parents prefer to send daughters to madrasas instead of conventional schools. Both popular views and some studies indicate that parents think madrasas are safer for girls because of the gender segregation that follows from conservative Islamic practice.[20] One study suggests the rising numbers of female madrasas have helped relax social constraints on women's social mobility, even in regions that are considered more socially conservative.

A possible explanation is the burqa, which serves as a uniform for the majority of women who attend madrasas.[21] Veiling practices may enable women to venture into public spaces alone and without violating various social norms. Such coverings could help to explain the rise in female madrasa enrollment, as they allow female students to adhere to modesty standards while attending school. The authors of the study noted that this does not necessarily mean that head

coverings should be mandatory or adopted as a way to facilitate gender education parity, but rather suggests that some compromises with more conservative cultural and social practices could bolster progress.[22] Madrasas clearly are contributing to providing access to education for girls in Bangladesh's more remote and marginalized communities, especially when many stayed open while other schools closed due to the pandemic.

A prominent concern that merits attention and study is that madrasas may accentuate regressive social attitudes among youth and perpetuate traditional patriarchal gender norms.[23] Girls at madrasas often receive lessons involving proper Islamic etiquette and manners aimed at constructing an "ideal woman" and guardian of Islamic virtue and piety.[24] While madrasas provide education for millions of girls in Bangladesh who might not enroll elsewhere, data suggests that the majority will not complete secondary school or go to university.[25] A recent survey found that, compared to female students at government schools, female madrasa students held less favorable opinions on expanding economic and educational opportunities for women, as well as a preference for larger families.[26] Another study also found that madrasa students (both recognized and unrecognized) in general have unfavorable attitudes about women and their abilities compared to peers from government schools.[27]

Concerns about the impact on social attitudes of religiously linked schools center on the possibility that they might hinder shifts in harmful gender norms about women and their role in society.[28] A study of textbooks by WFDD and BRAC Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ) shows that

while gender prejudices prevail in both public and religious school textbooks, Quomi madrasa textbooks tend to propagate heteronormative gender roles and norms at a higher rate.[29] Thus, madrasas can promote conservative social norms among students and cater to the religious preferences of more conservative families and communities.

Depicting women and girls in more empowering ways rather than simply as wives and mothers can bolster and command respect for girls' rights and education post-pandemic, thus lowering child marriage rates. Involving faith leaders and school curriculum writers together in conversation could help make both secular and religious textbooks more equitable in their depiction of women and gender relations.

Providing schooling for girls in more socially conservative and religious communities can be complex, and more analysis is needed on how faith-inspired schooling, such as madrasas, can both hinder and bolster women's empowerment and education. This could help in policy assessments needed to explore how cultural and religious factors interface with gender equality in education. The central goal is to ensure that girls have access to schooling and high-quality education. The COVID-19 experience shines fresh light on both the challenges for educating girls and the roles that madrasa and other religiously linked education systems play in the shared objective of gender equality.

COVID-19 CHALLENGES: EDUCATION AND CHILD MARRIAGE

Closing schools is devastating for any student's learning and future, especially for girls. Schools often serve as a safe space for girls, where they can escape unstable home lives, low expectations, violence, and early marriage. The social and economic consequences of school closures have special significance for girls, who tend to have less access to internet, phones, and television than boys—and it is access to these forms of technology that helps to facilitate home learning.[30] Previous pandemic experience, for example the recent Ebola crises, has taught us that destabilizations and lockdown measures are often devastating for girls and, of course, for the society at large. The negative effects threaten to reverse positive gains in gender equality achieved over recent decades.

UNICEF predicts that globally, up to 10 million girls could be at risk of becoming child brides due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[31] Child marriage is a multi-layered practice, with distinctive features in each county. In Bangladesh, 58.6% of girls are married before they turn 18.[32] While child marriage is illegal in Bangladesh,[33] the law is rarely enforced, and there are many legal and religious loopholes.

Families ultimately marry off their underage daughters for financial reasons, to protect family honor, to assure food security, and to protect the girl from sexual violence and harassment. With girls out of school, many families report that they fear their daughter may start a relationship or become pregnant without first being married.[34] Faith leaders may thus frame and support child marriage as a prevention strategy to minimize the risk of girls becoming sexually active or engaging in "sinful" behavior at odds with religious doctrine.

A March 2021 report by the Manusher Jonno Foundation estimated that at least 13,886 girls

across 21 districts in Bangladesh were married as children between April and October 2020. "Child marriage has become manifold during the COVID-19 pandemic and it continues to rise. And, only 20% of incidents of child marriage are reported or we usually come to know, while the rest of the incidents are conducted secretly, keeping officials in the dark," said Anna Minj, director of the Community Empowerment Programme and Integrated Development Programme at BRAC.[35]

A girls' madrasa located in Jessore District made headlines when they reported in December 2020 that at least 20 underage girls were married off during the COVID-19 lockdown, drawing on an unofficial survey.[36] A teacher reported that the marriages took place during school lockdowns. The madrasa superintendent said there was little point in reporting to the authorities due to family desperation: Even if authorities try to stop the marriages, families will move locations or conduct the marriages in secret.[37]

ENGAGING FAITH LEADERS

Many NGOs and international development organizations have worked successfully to engage faith leaders and faith-inspired organizations to join the fight against child marriage worldwide and to keep girls in school. However, faith leaders and communities may also explicitly or implicitly promote or silently condone child marriage, drawing on interpreted scripture and patriarchal views of female sexuality and a woman's place in the world.

In Bangladesh, over several decades, faith leaders from different religious traditions have addressed child marriage in collaboration with development actors. Some have made public commitments, refused to perform child marriages, and trained others to raise awareness about the harmful practice and its effects on girls and the broader community.[38] CARE, an international NGO, has worked with community-based groups to collect data to understand the social norms that can uphold child marriage. This in turn allows them to understand various child marriage practices in Hindu and Muslim communities in Bangladesh and support and recommend appropriate policy measures.[39]

BRAC has found that in Bangladesh, many faith leaders' resistance to ending child marriage is tied to their resistance to improved girls' education and women's social and physical mobility.[40] Thus, child marriage can be seen as an indirect proxy for faith resistance to other issues tied to girls' and child rights. Such resistance, research shows, does not stem from a single root cause; it is often linked to multiple factors. Efforts to end child marriage may thus be seen as aggressive secularism or an attack on traditional or religious values, ways of life, and culture.

Finding common ground on such issues—for example, by highlighting the myriad positive effects for overall society of educating girls at least through secondary school—is thus vital. This can help to prompt faith leaders to speak out in resistance of child marriage. Linking child marriage to poor outcomes in girls' education, increased domestic violence, and maternal morbidity can help to stress the positive roles of religion in protecting children. Faith leaders can convince their communities that delaying marriage of girls until they are at least 18 years old, on the grounds of education and health, is consistent with their core values.

ENCOURAGING EXAMPLES: BANGLADESH AND BEYOND

Promising examples of faith-inspired interventions in the education sector during the current pandemic—in and beyond Bangladesh—are useful to explore. In Kenya, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu leaders came together in 2020 to support the #ComeTwendeShule campaign. Video messages urged parents to resume their children's education as schools in Kenya reopened following pandemic-induced closures.[41] The campaign was jointly run by the Ministry of Education, UNICEF Kenya, and the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya. The video messages drew on religious teachings from the different faith traditions to emphasize the importance of children's education and the roles of schools in fostering children's well-being and ensuring their safety.

World Vision's faith-inspired interventions for children's education and well-being have had positive results across several countries. In Uganda and Senegal, World Vision offered a module on child protection for faith actors which led to an overwhelming majority of the participants taking action to ensure child protection in their communities. Many imams enrolled in the program, for instance, refused to perform child marriages.[42] World Vision's interfaith program in Uganda led to a mosque-based women's prayer group pooling together their earnings to purchase education-related resources for vulnerable children in their community.

In Bangladesh, effective measures have been taken by individual faith actors working independently to ensure children's education and well-being during the pandemic. BRAC's CPJ team spoke to Mr. Rezaul Karim, a teacher at a girls' madrasa in Bangladesh, who has taken steps to ensure that the students at his institution can continue their education despite COVID-19 disruptions. He regularly calls students' parents to seek updates on students' learning at home and discourages those considering child marriage for their daughters by referring to religious teachings that oppose such practices. During times of crisis, many families feel that child marriage can offset some of their financial burdens. Drawing on verses from Islamic scripture and hadith, teachers like Mr. Karim can dissuade them and thus help to protect children's rights and well-being.

WAYS FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on past experiences and evidence, the government, international development organizations, and faith communities in Bangladesh can act to ensure that vulnerable girls—alongside boys—can continue their education, resisting harmful external pressures and influence during the pandemic and beyond. Specific areas for attention and action include:

1. *Focus on keeping girls in school:* Faith leaders can work with their communities to keep girls in school or encourage their return when it is deemed safe to do so. By working with families and schools in their communities, faith leaders can help ensure that girls have the resources and funds needed to continue studying during both lockdowns and in-person schooling. They can provide psychosocial support to vulnerable girls who face pressure from their families to discontinue their education and get married.

2. *Use targets in meaningful ways:* Faith leaders can actively participate in village- and district-level government planning to set targets to end child marriage and monitor their implementation. Awareness-raising and training on child rights and child marriage laws for kazis (marriage registrars), imams, and other influential faith leaders can lead to better outcomes, reducing child marriage, especially during economic or public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. *Target strategically:* NGOs and government officials or institutions who want to work with faith leaders should not aim to convince any and all of them, but instead focus on those with influence who are receptive to dialogue with secular actors. Working with influential religious leaders and/or with those who are most receptive to new ideas and social change has often proved practical and effective. Leaders high in the religious hierarchies can more readily convince others to join forces, especially younger leaders.

4. *Hire more female teachers for both madrasas and government-run public schools:* Research in different countries shows that hiring female teachers is important for improving girls' educational outcomes in socially conservative communities where girls cannot go to the school unless there are female teachers. Since madrasas are traditionally male-dominated, the presence of a female teacher is not only important for girls but could also drive more progressive thinking among boys.

5. *Revise textbooks to be more gender inclusive*: Gender roles and norms are often depicted as heteronormative and patriarchal in both secular and religious textbooks in Bangladesh. Textbooks have the ability to reproduce social constructs and shape worldviews. Thus, working to further the education of girls post-pandemic, educators and faith leaders could lobby together for the better depiction of women and girls in school texts, which could positively influence school-age boys and girls alike.

6. *Establish girls' clubs in madrasas to build the capacity and self-confidence of girls:* Girls' clubs in madrasas can provide girls a safe environment to engage in important trainings, idea-sharing, and development of relevant life skills such as leadership, entrepreneurship, and digital literacy. As demonstrated by girls' clubs and capacity-building programs implemented previously by BRAC in Sylhet, Bangladesh, ensuring that madrasas have a robust girls' club where girls can participate in year-long projects will enable them to take on integral leadership roles at school and in the workforce. The involvement of parents and local community or faith leaders in girls' club activities is also important for demonstrating to the greater public that girls must be actively supported to ensure a better functioning society. Post-pandemic, girls' clubs could function as a place to empower girls who fell behind mentally and emotionally during the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. *Work aggressively to support the return of female students to schools after they are reopened:* School authorities should carefully track and stay in contact with more vulnerable girl students on a regular basis to curb dropout and child marriage. Community faith leaders have greater access and can communicate personally with families of at-risk girls during the pandemic and beyond. This can be facilitated through the coordinated

efforts of the local government, school administrators, and community faith leaders. More generally, faith leaders can speak on issues including female children's education, child marriage, and women's rights in Islam during religious sermons such as khutbahs, to raise general awareness in the community and nurture progressive social thinking on gender.

8. *Waive school fees to encourage increased school enrollment from the most financially insecure families:* Studies have shown that in the poorest countries, many people have skipped a meal or eaten less as a direct result of the COVID-19 crisis. By waiving school and examination fees after such crises, schools could better facilitate girls' return. Conditional cash transfers for the most marginalized girls have also proven effective, both in and beyond Bangladesh. For example, after Ebola, the Sierra Leone government waived tuition and examination fees for all students for two academic years to motivate families to send children back to school. More recently, in Bangladesh, a cash-substitute incentive program based on cooking oil has been shown to be useful in curbing child marriage.[43]

NEXT STEPS

During the COVID-19 crises, it is crucial that Bangladeshi civil society members, development partners, government leaders, and faith communities examine and act on the particular risks and plights of girls. The massive and prolonged school closures are a pivotal issue. Looking to practices that have worked in the past—such as cash transfers for school retention, girls' clubs in schools, and the targeted tracking of girls' school enrollment—can help tailor more community-specific measures to keep girls safe and educated during and after the pandemic. Pressure galvanized from all groups aiming to end child marriage in Bangladesh can be a powerful force to push for legal reform surrounding child marriage prevention and national COVID-19 response strategy.

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About the Authors

Sarah Thompson is a project manager for Bangladesh at the World Faiths Development Dialogue.

Aisha Binte Abdur Rob is a research associate at the Centre for Peace and Justice at BRAC University in Dhaka, Bangladesh.