

# Understanding Female Student Dropout in Dhaka, Bangladesh: Secondary School Teachers' Perspectives on Contributing Factors

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**Abstract:** *The persistent issue of female dropout from secondary schools in Bangladesh continues to hinder gender equality in education and overall societal development. This study investigates the perspectives of secondary school teachers to uncover the key factors contributing to this challenge. A qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews reveals that socio-economic hardships, early marriage, safety concerns, inadequate school infrastructure, and deeply embedded cultural norms are among the primary reasons for female students leaving school. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified the situation, exacerbating financial instability, increasing child marriages, and prolonging educational disengagement. Although government initiatives, such as stipends and free education, have made strides in addressing the problem, their effectiveness is limited by resource constraints, infrastructural deficiencies, and a lack of teacher readiness for digital learning. This study highlights the urgency of targeted policies that tackle both systemic and societal barriers to education. Future research could extend these findings by examining dropout trends in different regions, incorporating student and family perspectives, and evaluating the long-term impact of the pandemic. By offering a nuanced understanding of this issue, the study provides a foundation for shaping more effective educational policies and interventions.*

**Keywords:** female dropout, secondary education, Bangladesh education system, socio-cultural barriers, COVID-19 impact on education

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## 1. Introduction

An educational institution plays a vital role in helping students realise their potential, both individually and as contributors to society. As a cornerstone of personal and societal advancement, education equips individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills for future success. Beyond personal growth, its very structure has the power to enlighten and reshape entire communities. By cultivating human potential, education enhances productivity and fosters progress within a nation. Recognising this impact, governments worldwide continue to prioritise access to high-quality education for their citizens.

Like many other South Asian nations, Bangladesh has made notable progress in its education system. Despite these advancements, the country's constitution does not explicitly define education as a fundamental right. Instead, it is acknowledged as a Fundamental Principle of State Policy (FPSP) in Part II of the Constitution, specifically under Article 17 (Legislative and

Parliamentary Affairs Division, 2019). This article mandates the government to take active measures toward establishing a standardized, global, and inclusive educational system. It aims to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to a certain age, aligning education with societal needs and producing motivated, skilled citizens to fulfil those needs. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of eradicating illiteracy as swiftly as possible, as permitted by law. These initiatives reflect the nation's commitment to ensuring free and mandatory education as outlined in Article 17 of the Constitution.

A study by the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), conducted just before the onset of the pandemic, reported that 9,230,427 students were enrolled in secondary schools across the nation (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), 2023). In 2023, the number of dropouts stood at 8,166,188, with girls accounting for 55% of this total. Although the dropout rate has decreased over the years, it remains a significant issue, particularly for girls. The dropout rate, which was 55.26% in 2010, dropped to 32.85% in 2023. Data for 2023 was collected between September 3 and September 23 from all post-primary educational institutions nationwide (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), 2023).

Agriculture remains the backbone of Bangladesh's economy, particularly in rural areas where it is the primary livelihood for many. Boys often join male family members in earning a living through agricultural work, while girls are tasked with household responsibilities, including cooking and childcare (Ansary, 2017). Although the government has introduced initiatives like free textbooks, reduced fees, stipends for girls, and scholarships for high-achieving students to mitigate dropout rates, the issue persists.

In 2018, the overall dropout rate in Bangladesh was 37.62%, with girls accounting for 40.19% and boys 36.01% (Nurul Kabir, 2019). In previous years, the dropout rate was approximately 47% in 2011, 34.9% in 2012, and consistently between 33% and 34% until 2017. Enrolment rates also showed a slight decline, from 68.78% in 2017 to 66.19% in 2018.

A common trend in rural areas is that students, both boys and girls, leave school shortly after enrolment—sometimes within days, months, or a year of starting secondary school. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), this is largely due to children's involvement in farming and household tasks. Additional factors contributing to the dropout problem include the quality of teachers and school management, economic challenges, late enrolment, parental illiteracy, lack of awareness, inadequate policies, early marriage, poor school environments, poverty, gender disparities, and the perceived opportunity cost of education (Abdur Rashid, 2019; Zuilkowski et al., 2016).

Like many developing countries, Bangladesh continues to face a significant number of dropouts at the secondary school level. Efforts to reduce the dropout rate remain a pressing challenge, and the situation was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Experts predicted that more than 45% of secondary-level students might not return to school if lockdown restrictions extended beyond 31 August 2020 (Mamun, 2020). Unfortunately, from March 2020 to June 2021, no regular classes or exams were held, except for some private institutions conducting online sessions. Bangladesh eventually lifted its strict lockdown in August 2021 (Hasnat & Singh, 2021) but the extent of student dropouts, particularly at the secondary level, remains unclear (Kamol, 2021).

During the pandemic, a rise in child marriages further worsened the dropout situation. Many girls who were married off during this time have not returned to school (Sumon, 2021; Trainee, 2021). A recent report highlighted that at one madrasa, none of the girls sat for the Dakhil examination (equivalent to the Secondary School Certificate) because they had all been married off (Rahman, 2021). These developments underscore the complex challenges Bangladesh faces in addressing dropout rates in the aftermath of the pandemic.

School dropout in Bangladesh is a multifaceted issue influenced by various socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. A significant body of research highlights the complexity of these factors, which can be broadly categorized into economic, social, and educational dimensions.

Financial hardship remains one of the leading causes of school dropout in Bangladesh. Struggling with economic constraints, many families are forced to prioritise immediate survival over education, compelling children to leave school and join the workforce. The situation worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the resulting economic crisis heightened financial pressures, making education costs increasingly unaffordable for impoverished households (Kamrujjaman et al., 2024). Additionally, the high rates of rural poverty and the inadequacy of public-school funding contribute to a situation where families prioritize immediate economic survival over long-term educational benefits (Islam Sarker et al., 2019; Thi et al., 2023). The expectation that children, particularly boys, contribute to family income often leads to early dropout, as parents may perceive education as a financial burden rather than an investment (Ansary, 2017; Haque et al., 2022).

Cultural expectations and social norms significantly influence school dropout rates in Bangladesh. Gender disparities remain a major concern, as girls often encounter societal pressures that increase their likelihood of leaving school compared to boys. Deeply rooted beliefs about marriage and traditional gender roles frequently lead families to prioritise marriage over education, resulting in early school withdrawal for many girls (Alam & Hoque, 2023; Rani & Akmam, 2023). Furthermore, the stigma associated with girls pursuing education in certain communities can discourage families from supporting their schooling (Rahman, 2021). The influence of familial expectations and community norms can significantly impact a child's decision to remain in school or drop out (Farah & Upadhyay, 2017; Gil et al., 2020).

School quality and accessibility play a pivotal role in influencing dropout rates. In many rural areas, inadequate infrastructure, insufficiently trained teachers, and a shortage of educational resources create significant challenges. These deficiencies often contribute to student disengagement, ultimately increasing the likelihood of dropping out (Ahmad et al., 2023; Thi et al., 2023). The distance to schools is another critical factor; students living in remote areas may find it challenging to attend school regularly, leading to increased dropout rates (Ahmad et al., 2023; Gil et al., 2020). Moreover, the overall educational environment, including issues like bullying and corporal punishment, can deter students from continuing their education (Ahmad et al., 2023; Smita et al., 2020; Thi et al., 2023).

Psychological well-being and social support systems are also significant contributors to school dropout. Children facing mental health issues, bullying, or a lack of encouragement from parents or peers are more likely to disengage from school (Kamrujjaman et al., 2024; Thi et al., 2023). The interplay of these psychosocial factors with economic and educational challenges creates a complex landscape that can lead to high dropout rates among vulnerable populations (Khurram et al., 2023; Rani & Akmam, 2023).

Minimising secondary school dropouts remains a significant challenge for developing countries. In Bangladesh, the COVID-19 pandemic has further heightened this issue, particularly at the secondary level. Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam of the University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh, warned, “*Dropout rates will undoubtedly increase in Bangladesh and could exceed 45% if classes do not resume this academic year. The rate will climb even higher if the pandemic persists.*” He attributed this rise to job losses, particularly in the informal sector, which have left many guardians unable to afford their children’s education (Jasim, 2020).

To mitigate the impact, the government and educational institutions introduced measures such as televised lessons and online classes to help students continue their studies and avoid dropping out. However, these efforts have faced numerous challenges, including slow internet connectivity, lack of access to learning resources and devices, and limited teacher training in educational technology. Professor Emeritus Sirajul Islam Chowdhury told the Dhaka Tribune, “*If schools cannot reopen within this academic year, not only will the dropout rate increase, but an entire generation may suffer.*” (Mamun, 2020).

Experts anticipated that if the lockdown extended beyond August 2020, over 45% of secondary school students might not return to school (Mamun, 2020). From March 2020 to June 2021, classes and exams were largely suspended, except for a few private schools offering online education. Despite easing lockdown restrictions by August 2021, the dropout issue remains unresolved (Hasnat & Singh, 2021; Kamol, 2021). Alarming, the pandemic also led to a surge in child marriages, with many girls failing to return to school afterward (Sumon, 2021; Trainee, 2021). A recent report revealed that at one madrasa, all female students were married off, preventing them from sitting for the Dakhil (equivalent to the Secondary School Certificate) examination (Rahman, 2021).

Despite these setbacks, Bangladesh continues to work toward reducing the dropout rate, which has declined to 36%, a notable improvement from earlier figures. While previous research has examined dropout factors from the students’ perspective (Islam Sarker et al., 2019; Sheikh et al., 2022), there is a lack of studies focusing on teachers’ perspectives. This qualitative research aims to fill this gap by exploring teachers’ insights into the issue of female students dropping out of secondary schools in Bangladesh, contributing new knowledge to this critical area.

## 2. Methodology

This qualitative study explored secondary school teachers’ perceptions of the factors contributing to female dropout in secondary schools in Dhaka, Bangladesh. To ensure participants had relevant insights on the issue, a purposive sampling method was employed.

### *Data Collection*

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with secondary school teachers in selected schools across the Dhaka division. The interview protocol focused specifically on identifying and understanding the factors contributing to female dropout. Key areas included socioeconomic conditions, family-related challenges, school environment, and cultural influences.

### *Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis was used to identify and categorise the major contributing factors to female dropout. Responses were coded into key themes such as early marriage, financial constraints,

lack of parental support, and safety concerns. Sub-themes, including school infrastructure issues and societal pressures, were also identified.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Participants provided informed consent and were assured that their responses would remain confidential. The research process adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring cultural sensitivity and respect for participants.

## **3. Findings on Contributing Factors to Female Dropout in Bangladesh**

Several key factors contributing to female student dropout in secondary schools across Bangladesh were identified in this study. Insights from interviews with secondary school teachers were analysed and organised into distinct thematic categories:

### ***Early Marriage***

Early marriage was identified as the most influential factor leading to female dropout. According to teachers, deeply ingrained societal and cultural norms often prioritise marriage over education. As one teacher noted:

*"Many of my students left school because their parents believed marrying them off early would secure their future. They thought education was unnecessary beyond a certain age."*

Early marriage remains the most significant driver of female dropout in Bangladesh. Studies consistently identify this as a critical barrier to continuing education. As noted by Rani and Akmam (2023), the prevailing belief that education beyond a certain age hampers marriage prospects is a strong cultural determinant. In Pabna, familial priorities often place marriage above education, with parents perceiving marriage as a safer and culturally acceptable path for their daughters.

### ***Poverty and Economic Constraints***

Economic hardship repeatedly emerged as a significant factor. Many families struggle to cover both the direct and indirect costs of education, including transportation and school materials. Teachers observed that, due to financial constraints, parents often prioritise their sons' education over their daughters'. As one participant explained:

*"In poorer families, girls are usually the first to be pulled out of school when money becomes tight. Parents often argue that investing in a son's education has better long-term returns."*

Economic hardships are consistently identified as major contributors to school dropouts. Families struggling to meet basic needs often see education as an unaffordable luxury. The lack of financial resources to cover tuition fees, uniforms, and transportation disproportionately affects girls due to societal biases prioritising male education. Farah and Upadhyay (2017) emphasised that poorer households with low parental education levels experience the highest dropout rates.

### ***Safety Concerns***

Concerns about girls' safety during their commute to school and within school premises were highlighted. Eve-teasing (sexual harassment) was a significant deterrent for parents, leading to withdrawal from education. A teacher elaborated:

*"Many parents have expressed their fear of sending their daughters to school due to the risk of harassment on their way. They would rather keep them at home to ensure their safety."*

Safety concerns, particularly in rural and urban slum areas, significantly impact female students' education. Eve-teasing and harassment during commutes create fear among families, leading to withdrawal from schools to ensure daughters' safety. A study in Dhaka slums highlighted this pervasive fear, making parents reluctant to send their daughters to distant schools (Smita et al., 2020).

### ***Lack of Parental Support and Education***

Parental illiteracy and lack of awareness about the importance of education for girls played a crucial role. Parents with limited educational backgrounds often undervalue formal education for daughters. One teacher shared:

*"Some parents told me that educating their daughters beyond basic literacy was pointless as they would not pursue careers after marriage."*

Parental involvement is a critical determinant of students' academic success. Research indicates that the absence of parental monitoring and academic support significantly increases the likelihood of dropout. For example, Khurram et al. (2023) found that only 44.29% of students experiencing dropout received supportive academic engagement from their parents, while 15.24% reported no parental support at all. This aligns with the observation that many families, particularly those with lower socio-economic status, lack the time, resources, or awareness to prioritise their children's education.

### ***Inadequate School Facilities***

Poor infrastructure and lack of gender-friendly facilities, such as separate toilets for girls, were cited as barriers. Teachers mentioned:

*"The absence of proper facilities like girls' toilets discourages students, especially during their teenage years when they need privacy the most."*

Infrastructural deficiencies, such as the lack of gender-segregated sanitation facilities and poor-quality school buildings, disproportionately impact female students. Ansary (2017) highlighted that inadequate school facilities discourage attendance, particularly among adolescent girls. Furthermore, Khurram et al. (2023) noted that 55.24% of students reported schools located far from their homes, exacerbating the accessibility issue.

### ***Cultural and Social Norms***

Prevailing cultural norms often associate higher education for girls with challenges in finding suitable marriage prospects. One teacher observed:

*"Parents sometimes believe that the more educated their daughter is, the harder it will be to find a husband for her. This mindset perpetuates the cycle of early marriage and dropout."*

Cultural expectations regarding gender roles often undermine the importance of female education. Studies have shown that early marriage is not only a cultural norm but also a practical choice for many families who view education as unnecessary beyond primary levels (Alam & Hoque, 2023; Haque et al., 2022). Haque et al. (2022) emphasized that societal norms

reinforcing early marriage and limiting mobility further marginalise women, perpetuating cycles of low educational attainment.

#### 4. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should build upon this study's findings by examining the complex factors contributing to female secondary school dropout in Bangladesh. The following key recommendations are proposed:

- 1) **Expanding Geographic Coverage:** Future studies should include rural, urban, and semi-urban areas to capture the diverse socio-economic and cultural influences on dropout rates.
- 2) **Incorporating Student and Parental Perspectives:** Understanding the perspectives of students and their families can provide deeper insights into the economic, cultural, and societal drivers of dropout.
- 3) **Integrating Quantitative Analysis:** Complementing qualitative findings with statistical analysis can help measure the prevalence and significance of factors such as early marriage, household responsibilities, and school infrastructure challenges.
- 4) **Evaluating Government Initiatives:** Assessing the impact of existing policies, such as stipends and free textbooks, can highlight their effectiveness in reducing dropout rates and identify areas for policy enhancement.
- 5) **Investigating Post-Pandemic Trends:** Longitudinal research is needed to examine the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on dropout rates, particularly in relation to digital education accessibility and the resurgence of child marriages.
- 6) **Enhancing Teacher Training and School Resources:** Exploring how improvements in teacher training and school infrastructure can create a more supportive learning environment may help mitigate dropout rates among female students.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study has shed light on the critical challenges contributing to female secondary school dropout in Bangladesh, drawing on teachers' perspectives. Key factors identified include socio-economic constraints, early marriage, safety concerns, cultural norms, and inadequate school infrastructure. Although government initiatives such as stipends and free education have made some progress, significant challenges persist, particularly in rural areas and among economically disadvantaged families.

The findings also highlight the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified dropout rates due to prolonged school closures, financial strain, and a surge in child marriages. Addressing this crisis requires urgent, targeted interventions that tackle the root causes, including improvements in school facilities, enhanced teacher training, and community engagement to challenge cultural barriers that hinder girls' education.

By capturing teachers' insights, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dropout crisis and provides a foundation for future research. Tackling these challenges will necessitate collaborative efforts among policymakers, educators, and communities to ensure that every child—particularly girls—has access to quality education and the opportunity to reach their full potential.

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