The Multidimensionality of Schoolgirl Dropouts in Rural Bangladesh

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The Multidimensionality of Schoolgirl Dropouts in Rural Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT: This thesis outlines the underlying causes for girl dropouts in the secondary school system of rural Bangladesh and assesses the barriers that affect adolescent girls and their families. The complex dynamics of the historical context within the patriarchal-dominant structure of society creates a system that hinders girls’ education and forces them into marriage at an early age. Poverty and lack of parental involvement in schools, as well as societal traditions and lack of government infrastructure play an enormous role and are the main structural factors that are linked to schoolgirl dropouts in this study. This thesis also analyzes previous education schemes as well as present initiatives that have impacted the rates of girls progressing within the secondary education system. Therefore, this study should be of interest to policymakers, academics and implementers of development strategies for various NGO’s working in Bangladesh as well as other developing countries.

I. Introduction

Girls’ educational achievement in Bangladesh has been improving throughout the past few decades, however, girls’ completion of secondary and higher education levels are considerably poor. Although enrollment rates throughout the country have risen due to initiatives enacted by the government and the international community, this has not translated into gender parity. The high female dropout rates within the secondary education are linked to a wider societal context and weak political infrastructure. This thesis examines the underlying causes for girl dropouts at the secondary level in order to further understand the complex interplay of factors affecting girls’ education within regions of rural Bangladesh.

Between 1970 and 2005 female-to-male ratio of school gross enrollment rose from .39 to 1.05, closing the gender gap in secondary school admissions.1 Girl’s secondary school gross enrollment was only at 13.6 percent in the early 1990s and rose to 46.9 percent by the year 2000.2 This drastic improvement in enrollment shows that rapid societal change within Bangladesh is possible. Currently rates of enrollment for girls at the secondary level (grades 6 through 10) are at 51 percent.3 However, measuring school enrollment alone, does not gauge the

1 Sajeda Amin and S. Chandrasekhar, “Looking Beyond Universal Primary Education: Gender Differences in Time
2 Ibid.
true reality of the situation, as it does not account for repetitions, absenteeism, quality of education and dropouts. Currently the attendance ratio for girls at the secondary level is only at 47 percent, and girls’ completion of secondary school is at a mere 18 percent. Girls specifically in rural areas continue to dropout in conjunction with age, which affects the growth of the nation. It is crucial to establish what are the underlying factors affecting schoolgirl dropouts at the secondary level in rural Bangladesh, in order to better understand overall societal development of the country.

The government currently provides free primary education (grades 1 through 5), and also offers a stipend for 5 million students from low-income families to help with costs of books, clothes and food. Primary school enrollment has reached 98 percent for girls; however, there is only a 66 percent completion rate. It is estimated that 45 percent of children dropout before completing level 5 and only 51 percent of girls progress from primary to secondary education. It is during secondary school that boys and girls tend to dropout increasingly due to expenditures for tuition, books, uniforms, travel and private tutoring, which can all be quite costly. Schooling is no longer free when transitioning from the primary to the secondary level in Bangladesh and tuition can range drastically depending on the location, type of school, quality, class size, teachers and infrastructure.

Although the enrollment rates in secondary schools seem to be gender indifferent, completion of the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exam taken in grade 10 shows clear disparity. Studies show that males are supported further in their educational endeavors as

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compared to girls in the community and more broadly.\textsuperscript{8} Only 10 percent of girls who complete their primary schooling have passed the SSC exam as compared to 25 percent of boys.\textsuperscript{9} The SSC exam marks the completion of secondary school and is an important marker for smoother transitions into the work force.\textsuperscript{10} Boys and girls both suffer from high dropout rates, due to different factors. As men and boys in rural areas have a wider range of job possibilities, the opportunity costs for educating boys are higher, meaning they have a higher risk of dropping out to help contribute towards family expenses. For girls however, there are a variety of different factors affecting the excessive rate of dropouts. I argue that poverty, insufficient parental involvement, ideologies of womanhood and marriage as well as lack of government infrastructure and funding are the main reasons why girls in rural Bangladesh are being withdrawn from secondary schools at such high rates.

With the new state and constitution of 1971, the government pledged to meet the basic needs of the society including education.\textsuperscript{11} The government instituted the Compulsory Primary Education Act in 1990 and with the help of international organizations; it became one of the first countries to implement school incentive programs, paying children and their families in exchange for attending school.\textsuperscript{12} By 1997, over 18 million children were enrolled in 78,000 primary schools and the gender gap had been eliminated at the primary level.\textsuperscript{13} In the decade

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
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between 1990 and 2000, girls’ primary enrollment ratio rose from 64 to 98 percent. With the 
introduction of the Food for Education (FFE) project created in 1993 and the Female Secondary 
School Assistance Program (FSSAP) in 1994, it became easier for families to send their children 
to school. Girls’ attendance rates in both primary and secondary education increased at rates 
previously never before seen. International organizations aided in the implementation and 
finances of these projects due to the importance of female education, because it not only 
increases opportunities for women, but also contributes towards economic development and the 
health of the nation. International organizations and scholars have criticized these programs and 
the government because not enough teachers have been recruited, and overpopulation has 
ocurred within schools, diminishing the quality of education for all.

School incentive programs have been readily accepted throughout Bangladesh because 
parents are persuaded by the benefits that come from educating their girls, however, parents still 
perceive that marriage and not attending school is the best way to enhance a daughter’s 
wellbeing. Young girls are being forced into marriage, as their parents cannot afford the costs 
of education and gender norms of patriarchal dominance continue to allow the practice to persist, 
despite that it is illegal. Bangladesh has the highest percentage of child brides under the age of 15 
in the world, which is not surprising when considering the average age of first marriage 
throughout the country is only 15. A girl has a 65 percent chance of being married before the 
legal age of 18. Although Bangladesh ranks fourth in the world with the highest amount of 
child brides under 18, progress has been made with the help of education incentives and

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14 M. Asadullah, N. Chaudhury, “Reverse Gender Gap in Schooling in Bangladesh: Insights from Urban and Rural 
17 Ibid., 84.
programs by the Bangladeshi government and international organizations.\textsuperscript{18} It is important to recognize the interconnectivity of child marriage and schoolgirl dropouts, as the two problems coexist and underlying factors are grounded within the historical framework of the country.

**Significance of Girls’ Education**

According to international human rights organizations, girls not only in Bangladesh but around the world, should have the ability to make their own decisions regarding education and marriage, as these are internationally recognized rights. Social pressures often inhibit girls while they generally cannot make their own decisions when it comes to continuing education and deciding whom they will marry. “Gender ideology appears to be constrained by patriarchal ideology that awards priority to males over females in almost all environments… Men are considered to be economic producers, while women are regarded as reproducers who are dependent on men.”\textsuperscript{19} These views emerge to a greater extent in rural, more tradition areas. “Women consider themselves inferior to men,”\textsuperscript{20} further stratifying the hierarchy and inequality between men and women. In a study measuring attitudes towards gender equality, ranking countries on a spectrum of traditional or egalitarian, it found that Bangladesh was one of the lowest on gender equality.\textsuperscript{21}

Gender equality is the idea that all human beings, both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by gender


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

stereotypes, roles and prejudices. Promoting gender equality is not only about improving the wellbeing of women and girls, but also about promoting respectful and caring behavior between genders. This includes having equal investment in children regardless of sex. The social norm that girls will eventually leave the family once she is married is linked to the persistence of schoolgirl dropouts and gender ideologies surrounding the lack of investment in girls. Sex discrimination within the labor market also supports gender favoritism in children’s education.

Various initiatives have been geared towards increasing school attendance, which have been linked to increased completion and progression of schooling as well as decreased levels of child marriage throughout the country. Although access to education has improved, gender parity has not yet been reached, as access does not translate to parity. Girls still underperform compared to boys and boys are completing secondary school at higher rates. Access and completion is not the only concern, but the content of what is being taught in schools is vital to producing social and economic change. If a girl does not learn anything about menstruation, sexual intercourse, childbearing, or the risks of early marriage, it is difficult for her to conceptualize marriage responsibilities and her future as a mother and wife. In many cases during the interviews conducted, it was noted that a male teacher had taught girls about reproductive health and puberty. In some instances, teachers feel that it is not appropriate or comfortable for them to discuss these sensitive subject matters, which leaves students curious and unaware of the processes of growing up.

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Once a girl reaches puberty, it becomes a troubling time in her life due to social pressures of marriage and increased risk for sexual harassment. Adolescence increases girl’s vulnerability to sexual harassment, eve-teasing and physical violence, which parents and the community see as a major problem due to the distance from school, lack of female teachers, poor or nonexistent toilet facilities at schools and possibly boarding away from home. Eve-teasing refers to sexual harassment of women and girls in public spaces, which can include teasing, stalking, threats of physical violence and sexual innuendos that are intended to shame. Male teachers and students use these tactics to harass and discipline girls. The security and sexual safety of daughters was of great concern to parents in this study, as girls sometimes travel 1-2 hours to and from school every weekday. Girls who experience sexual harassment or physical violence may feel that they cannot speak about these instances due to family honor, shame, and risks of being withdrawn from school.

Parents fear for their daughter’s safety, security and honor within the community, as it can affect her marriage options and dowry costs. The Bangladeshi society honors chastity and sexual purity for women and girls. Fathers and husbands are deemed protectors, and must maintain their wives and daughter’s sexuality. In rural Bangladesh, some parents feel that securing a qualified groom for their girls is more urgent than furthering her education. Finding a groom for daughters is occasionally thought of as a burden for parents. Some families receive offers while their daughters are very young, and parents may feel that there will be no other

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groom as qualified or educated. The pressures of securing a daughter’s future create a system of discontinuance in education, as very few girls remain in school after they are married.

The benefits of educating women are endless. Women’s education has been shown to improve their children’s mortality, health and nutrition and determines her child’s level of schooling more so than a father’s education level. Improved education for girls is associated with delayed marriage, increased contraceptive use, reduced infant mortality and decreased family size which can in turn allow families to allocate more finances towards fewer children, enhancing their ability to pay for schooling. Education allows for girls to build up their confidence and their ability to be vocal about issues revolving their future, rights and expanded choices. It gives them a pathway to form relationships outside of their immediate neighbors and family, which is sometimes only accessible through school. Schooling allows girls to grow as individuals, develop their self-esteem and discuss problems with others their own age that would otherwise be left unspoken. Girls’ education reduces the risk of entering into child marriage, and gives them access to report any suspected or attempted cases of child marriage through teachers, headmasters and girls clubs.

It has been established that improving education for women and girls in developing countries not only increases family’s health and wellbeing but also improves the economic and societal development of the entire country. Nearly 70 percent of the population lives in rural villages and about 40 percent of adults are illiterate. The countries development has partly been attributed to the lack of education throughout the country. Education leads to more job opportunities and economic growth. If women are reaching higher levels of education and have increased access to job opportunities, societal and economic development will follow.

Currently women have limited work opportunities. During the 1980’s there was a vast increase in the number of women traveling to main cities in order to work for the dominating garment industry now accounting for 76 percent of all exports in the country. There are currently more than 5000 garment factories employing over 4 million people, 80 percent of them being women. The scale at which this industry has grown provoked numbers of women to migrate on their own, in a way that the country has previously never seen. To take advantage of these new economic opportunities, the need for at least a primary education perhaps became an incentive for parents to educate their girls. Previously, with the predominant agricultural system of labor, parents did not have this incentive to educate their children, as it was not needed and income was scarce.

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The famine of 1974 was an evident turning point among poorer women as they developed new patterns of behavior, venturing into the public domain for employment opportunities.\(^{35}\) With the formation of the country in 1971 along with the great famine in 1974, the crisis-ridden country had drastic changes in attitude when it came to desperation for money in their uncertain circumstances. Males began converging towards main cities, which partly led to scarcity of potential grooms. This increased dowry costs, and created a system where girls became merely a transaction.\(^{36}\) The institution of marriage began to weaken as males were having multiple marriages and often times divorcing or separating, using marriage as a form of unearned income.\(^{37}\) Educating girls then became a source of security for parents in ways that their own lack of education had denied them. When girls are given the opportunity to complete their education, it increases their chances of choosing the person and time in which they will be married and allows them to pursue various career paths. If the situation is improved, it can lead to a major shift in the economy and how Bangladesh is seen in the international community. Current political and economic conditions within the country, as well as gender structures inhibit opportunities for women and girls, especially in rural areas where poverty is formidable.

Bangladesh has been known to rely heavily on international aid and non-governmental organizations (NGO’s). It has become a ‘test case for development’ ideas, counter to the increasingly pessimistic view of wasted international aid.\(^{38}\) NGO’s have helped improve the quality of education and life for many individuals in Bangladesh. International organizations and

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NGO’s have prioritized educating students and parents on the health risks, psychological risks and developmental barriers that come with child marriage and withdrawal from school. Despite that I cannot generalize towards all international organizations and NGO’s as there are numerous throughout the country, the efforts and strategies from NGO’s visited during the course of this study were noticeably effective.

Although the concept of human rights is a relatively modern social construction, formally established by the United Nations in 1981, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “Everyone has the right to education.” The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) declared that the single most important factor that a nation can invest in, while simultaneously improving the life and health of its citizens is women and girls’ education. Within the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Bangladesh signed and ratified in 1990, it recognizes the right to secondary education as well as the right to a childhood. Article 28 provides that State Parties shall encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, make them available and accessible to every child, introduce free education and offer financial assistance in case of need. State Parties are also obligated to take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and reduce dropout rates. In order for the government to take these initiatives, the underlying causes for dropouts must be examined further.39

The Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study is to contribute towards a deeper understanding of gender norms in the secondary school system and identify the underlying factors that are causing girls to dropout before the completion of their secondary education. The intermingling factors including poverty, parental involvement, child marriage, and the lack of government infrastructure

continue to inhibit girl’s education throughout the country. Despite all the efforts previously and currently taking place in the country to improve the situation for girls, the large amount of schoolgirl dropouts persists, and I hope to clarify and examine the multi-faceted aspects of why this is the case. Chapter 3 will introduce the multidimensionality and levels of poverty and its relationship with school dropouts, chapter 4 includes the newly founded idea of home-school relationships within rural Bangladesh and the importance of parental involvement. Chapter 5 comprises of motivations, risks and disadvantages of child marriage and the association with secondary schoolgirls. Chapter 6 will focus on the absence of government infrastructure within the education system, including corruption, lack of funding, parental involvement and natural disaster management – which all affect the rates at which girls remain in schools.

It is important to focus on gender equality not only in terms of numbers, such as the number of girls in school compared to that of boys, but in a more ethically and socially encompassing manner. Elements that affect girls’ empowerment, health and future opportunities will be further explored within the context of this thesis. Various NGO’s, as well as previous and current incentive programs will also be analyzed in their attempts to improve the outcomes for girl’s rights and education. Understanding the complex dynamics of gender norms and the historical background will also be examined in order to understand the obstacles that continue to prevent girls from completing their secondary education throughout their childhood. Advancing the understanding of gender and education within the country of Bangladesh is significant because the research and literature disseminating from Bangladesh is limited in scope. In the West, information and media coverage about Bangladesh is often overshadowed by its neighboring countries, India, Nepal and China. It is unfortunate that knowledge of the country is
significantly lesser than other countries in the region, and it is important to consider why this is the case.

Through this study, I hope to shed light on the problems that young girls face in rural areas throughout Bangladesh and identify the main causes for schoolgirl dropouts in rural areas. This thesis is grounded in the context of the semi-governmental secondary education system in rural Bangladesh and based on ethnographic study and semi-structured interviews within 6 districts of Bangladesh. Insights from interviews within this study are meant to contribute towards the literature concerning girl’s education and help recognize the obstacles faced by girls and their families. The complex interplay of gender structure and economic factors affects the outcomes for girls. Poverty and parental involvement, child marriage and governmental aid and enforcement all reinforce the structural constraints on girl’s education and will be explored further in depth within this thesis.

*Poverty*

Bangladesh is the eighth most densely populated country in the world, and has over 43 percent of its population living below the international poverty line of $1.25 USD per day.\textsuperscript{40} Poverty is normally defined as the income, expenditures or consumption of a person falling beneath a certain threshold that is necessary for basic needs. However, poverty is a much more multidimensional concept than a simple number or threshold, as it can vary between people and cultures.\textsuperscript{41} Amartya Sen, a renowned Nobel Prize winner devoted to development, poverty and


economics stated, “You cannot draw a poverty line and then apply it across the board to everyone the same way, without taking into account personal characteristics and circumstances.” In Bangladesh, if individuals who cannot provide for their basic needs including food, shelter, education and health are taken into consideration, there would be many more that fall below this ‘invisible poverty line.’

Poverty includes those who lack the opportunity and capacity to change their situation due to social constraints and does not result from the lack of one thing but many interlocking factors. High dropout rates in Bangladesh are a direct factor of the low income of families specifically in rural areas, as they are unable to afford the costs of books, tuition, private tutoring, uniforms and other associated costs. Low-income families are also highly susceptible to natural disasters and shocks because many rely on agriculture as their main source of income. During times of financial instability, both boys and girls are at risk of entering into the ‘work force,’ however, opportunities are different depending on gender. Boys usually help within the agricultural sector or as drivers or daily laborers in factories or repair shops, whereas girls are at risk of becoming domestic house workers or entering the garment sector in urban areas and leaving their homes. Government issued exams are also quite costly, and a factor in parent’s decisions in continuing their child’s education. Students living in poor families are the ones that need desperate help from the international community, as government infrastructure is lacking. Education, although majorly affected by poverty, has the power to lead families out of poverty and affect future generations.

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Parental Involvement

Gender, age, and income are not the only determinants of dropouts; parental involvement and interest is a significant factor as well.\textsuperscript{43} Neither home nor school can operate at its optimum when isolated in the context of education and therefore, school and home must work together for a healthy environment of learning for students.\textsuperscript{44} Poverty not only affects parent’s ability to pay for their children’s education but can also affect parent’s ability to become involved in their children’s education and school activities. Parents in lower-income families are often times forced to work to provide for their children and are therefore, unable to attend school activities. During the course of this study, it was observed that most parent activities took place during school hours. Although the government of Bangladesh has implemented policies instituting committees that involve parents, these have been criticized for being ineffective and unbalanced in power. Schools as well as NGO’s have made efforts to incorporate parents in activities using media and innovative strategies that were observed during my time in Bangladesh.

Changing perceptions of the community can be gained through more communal discussion, specifically with parental activities involving discourse that goes beyond the day-to-day events of rural households and delve into a deeper meaningful context. However, gaining traction with working parents still poses problems for schools and students. It can also be difficult for parents to support their children with homework and studies, as parents cannot understand it themselves.\textsuperscript{45} The lack of education simply perpetuates the systematic occurrence

of dropouts. By involving parents through meetings, activities and events while engaging the entire community, it can begin to produce structural societal change within rural communities in Bangladesh in regards to increased education.

Child Marriage

Bangladesh has the highest rate of marriage involving girls under the age of 15, and comes fourth in total rates of child marriage for girls under the age of 18.\textsuperscript{46} The problem of early marriage is associated with many structural factors specifically familial economic situations, education costs, and engrained traditions of patriarchy, dowry and societal norms for women. Early and forced marriage takes place throughout the country, however, it has a greater effect on girls who come from families of a lower socioeconomic class living in rural areas, where opportunities for women are limited. The median age at marriage for Bangladeshi girls in the richest quintile is 17, whereas the poorest girls marry at an average age of 15 years,\textsuperscript{47} which demonstrates the association with class structure as a social determinant for early marriage.

There are many factors involved with child marriage and there is not one specific solution to the problem as the tradition is very dynamic in nature and has many elements involved. Dowry is one of the cultural components that is critical in nature because it involves parents decisions in educating daughters versus marrying them off. A daughter’s dowry can surpass a family’s annual income and increases, as a girl gets older.\textsuperscript{48} Because available income can vary

at times due to the agricultural seasons or available daily labor at the time, a marriage can result
due to funds acquired sporadically. Parents may feel pressure that they will not have enough
money if they wait longer and the dowry for their daughter escalates. A daughter’s risk of sexual
harassment and eve-teasing also increase as she reaches puberty. This creates an insecure time
for girls as they develop, in addition to neighbors perceiving her as a woman and potential bride.
Education has been linked with lower rates of child marriage, therefore, keeping girls in schools
should be a number one priority for the government, international organizations and local
communities in Bangladesh.

Lack of Government Infrastructure

With many incentive programs in the past few decades, the enrollment rates have
increased dramatically for girls; however, the educational system has suffered greatly due to the
lack of infrastructure by the government. The number of teachers and government funding is
insufficient, resulting in large class sizes. The quality of the secondary schools in rural
Bangladesh is suffering because of this, in addition to the quality of government issued textbooks
and the reliance on private tutoring. After school tutoring and the purchase of supplementary
guidebooks are seen by parents in this study as a necessity in order to pass government exams
and progress to the consecutive grade level. The absence of reliable structurally sound school
buildings and functional toilet facilities has also posed problems, specifically during and after
times of natural disasters.

Bangladesh is one of the most natural disaster-prone countries in the world. The
population continues to suffer from cyclones, droughts, floods, river erosion and waterlogging,
and the amount of natural disasters and shocks are expected to increase in the future. Roughly
900 educational buildings have been destroyed and 4,700 damaged each year, due to floods, erosion and natural disasters.\textsuperscript{49} Community efforts in natural disaster management and rebuilding schools is often times overshadowed by communal perceptions of basic needs and prioritizing other aspects of their lives other than education. Many international organizations have stepped in to aid with the current education system because of the lack of government infrastructure, however, due to the immense number of school-aged children and families within the country, widespread implementation of projects is difficult. Community projects and organizations have specifically increased aid for girls because of the high importance in girl’s education and the effects on the nation’s fertility and population, their child’s health and wellbeing and the general development of the economy. The current initiatives provided by the government, NGO’s, schools and communities have improved the situation for girls, yet further assistance is needed if Bangladesh is expected to continue on its path of growth and development not only for young girls but for every citizen within the country.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Despite the restrictions on women’s decision-making and mobility in rural Bangladesh, there have been remarkable achievements made. Education levels have been on the rise, yet, further improvement is needed within the education sector to improve the quality of education and to help at-risk girls within low-income families complete their secondary education. In spite of the major improvements, enhanced access has not translated into parity in achievement for girls. Girls still underperform on average in relation to boys by 9.5 percent in basic learning.

competency\textsuperscript{50} and adequate completion levels have not yet been achieved. NGO’s as civil society actors play a critical role in furthering gender parity,\textsuperscript{51} especially in Bangladesh, where government infrastructure is lacking.

Even though there is a “female schooling advantage” in regards to enrollment in the secondary school system in Bangladesh, there is a shortage of completion and increased risk of child marriage that goes on uninterrupted. Does improving the number of girls enrolling in schools change ideas of gender norms, quality of education, achievement levels and probability of early marriage? Gender parity is to have girls and women present in similar numbers in education and other social, economic and political spheres to contribute towards the development of the nation.\textsuperscript{52} Goals must go beyond parity, ensuring girls’ full and equal access to achievement in basic education of good quality.\textsuperscript{53} The social changes studied here revolving education and child marriage are linked to not only immediate issues of female fertility, mortality and empowerment but wider relationships are also at stake both within the households of Bangladesh and the nations image and relationship towards the rest of the world.

Social change cannot be limited to a straight-forward cause and effect, as there are numerous interactions between different forces and institutions, and I do not in any way mean to limit the magnitude of varying aspects that revolve around girl dropouts. This thesis is meant to show the connection and interplay in a multisectitional approach by identifying the many factors and traditions that inhibit girls’ equality in education throughout Bangladesh. Through narratives and analysis, I wish to shed light on the issues at hand and explain the problems of education in

rural Bangladesh through the stories of girls and parents. This study explicitly addresses girls’
disparity in education and society in order to better understand why girls are dropping out of
school. I hope to facilitate more positive discourse, interventions and practices within the school
system to improve the lives of girls. Finding the underlying reasons why girls are dropping out of
secondary schools will only further universalize access and completion of education throughout
the country.

II. Methods

This thesis is based on an ethnographic study of the secondary schools in rural
Bangladesh and accounts the experiences of current and previous girl students and their parents.
The audio-recorded semi-structured interviews focused on the difficulties that girls and parents
face in sending their children to school. The participants included students, previous students,
teachers, headmasters, parents, ex-teachers, and NGO employees. Some participants played dual
roles as parent and teacher, therefore providing insightful information from different
perspectives. Concerns related to the cost of education both direct and indirect, travel and safety
to school, school initiatives and incentive programs as well as parental involvement and after
school activities were discussed. If girls had been withdrawn from school, questions revolving
reasons for dropping out were examined, as well as the events that took place since that period of
time. Pseudonyms are used in all testimonies and quotes within this study to prevent any
obstacles and identity recognition and promote safety for girls and parents involved.

Interviews were conducted in 6 districts of Bangladesh, Moulvi Bazar, Naogoan,
Meherpur, Satkhira, Khulna and Bagerhat. With the help of Women and Girls Lead Global
Bangladesh (WGLG), translators and interviews were secured through WGLG partnerships in various villages. Women and Girls Lead Global is an NGO focused on inspiring individuals through documentary film screenings to transform lives and create social change. In Bangladesh their mission is to keep girls in schools and lower the instances of early marriage. The organization began in the United States in partnership with public media and with support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Since 2011, when the project began, the organization has broadened its horizons, now spanning 6 countries focusing on challenges facing women globally. WGLG is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Ford Foundation, Independent Television Services (ITVS), and CARE International.

The organization created a ‘Best School for Girls’ campaign, which rewards secondary schools in Bangladesh on their improvements towards bettering the lives of girls in their communities. There are over 300 schools participating in the ‘Best School for Girls’ program throughout the country, and most schools visited during this study were involved in this initiative. Because 70 percent of the country lives in rural areas and the rates of child marriage and dropouts are more frequent within rural areas, I felt that Dhaka did not fully represent the country as a whole. The city of Dhaka compared to rural villages is drastically different when it comes to living standards, poverty, day-to-day activities, parental engagement and social norms. Women and Girls Lead Global also focuses in rural areas as opposed to urban city centers and has partnerships in various villages more so than within the city limits of Dhaka. For these reasons, interviews were not conducted with girls living in the capital.

A categorization and screening process was created forming 3 groups of girls. Group A consisted of girls who were still in school, group B were girls who had been withdrawn from
the rural context of Bangladesh. Schools in Bangladesh begin with primary school, which the government offers free of cost to parents. Primary classes start at grade 1 and continue through grade level 5. After passing a government issued exam, students can continue on to the secondary school system, which consists of grades 6 through 10. Higher secondary schools include grade 11 and 12, and from then students may pursue courses at the university level. Primary and secondary schools are in session year-round with 1 month-long summer and winter vacations in July and December during *Ramadan*, the Muslim holiday. This study was conducted from the end of July to the beginning of September, while school was in session. Primary and secondary schools were visited, however, all girls who participated in this study were at the secondary school age or higher.
There are various forms of schools found in Bangladesh consisting of governmental, semi-governmental, madrasas, and non-formal schools. Primary schools are regarded as governmental, however, most secondary schools are semi-governmental, which have some funding from the government for teacher’s salaries and student scholarships. Madrasas are another form of schooling within the country and can vary from government-funded to private. If madrasas accept public funding, they must follow a madrasa board curriculum, however, various madrasas called “quomi’ do not accept public funding and follow their own religious curriculum that is based on the Quran. Although all schools visited in this study were semi-governmental, there were girls interviewed who had dropped out from *quomi* madrasas. Within the country, there are also non-formal schools provided by non-governmental organizations. These schools usually consist of one-room classrooms with about 30 students ranging in age and usually within the lower socioeconomic status. All schools visited taught the state-provided curriculum, which includes government-issued textbooks for all students.

It was decided that secondary schoolgirls would be the main focus of this research study, as girls at the secondary level have an increased risk of dropping out compared to those in primary schools. Although most girls interviewed were in or had dropped out at the secondary level, there were girls that had dropped out at a different grade. One girl had dropped out at the primary level and another girl at the higher secondary level.

Participants were chosen with the help of partner organizations in the rural villages, and some parents were selected after film screenings conducted by WGLG for their clear commitment towards their daughter’s education. In-depth discussions with parents were also attended at various schools with mothers and fathers ranging in size but averaging at 30 parents. After-school clubs and mentor facilities were visited in order to better understand different
initiatives created to promote gender equality and prevent child marriage. Interviews were performed at secondary schools or in a home of the participant, neighbor or family member. During the interview no one was present except the interviewer, translator and participant. On average interviews lasted approximately 35 minutes with the exception of one interview being over an hour due to translation difficulties.

Various schools were visited, as well as parents meetings and training sessions for Girls Clubs formed by Women and Girls Lead Global Bangladesh. Teachers, headmasters and people of high standing within the community were also interviewed, to get a better understanding of the cultural and educational context within each *upazila*, which is the Bangla term for sub-district. A girl’s safe-house in the division of Khulna was also visited during this study, where girls were not actively participating in school and living at the safe-house for various reasons. Seventeen girls in all were interviewed ranging in age from 13 to 24 with the average age being 16 years old.

The study had several strengths and limitations. The first limitation being that I, as head researcher was an obvious outsider and privileged white individual coming into areas of poverty. Perceptions at first were confusing to many people, as some had never seen a foreigner before, which created a high level of shyness and curiosity. It was difficult at times to make sure that interviews were conducted one-on-one with no outside intrusions, due to the curiosity from neighbors as well as lack of doors in some houses. In some instances, neighbors and family members walked into the rooms in which interviews were being performed, however, the interview was stopped each time and with the help of the translator, they were assured that I would be outside directly after the interview, to speak with them and answer any questions they had. Overall, communities were very welcoming and even more open than previously expected.
In all interviews, it was stated that interviewees did not have to respond to any question if they felt it was uncomfortable, however, not once did a participant refrain from answering. During one case there was a mother who kept interrupting an interview with her daughter and this caused a change in what was being discussed. At first she had said that all of her sisters were taken out of school to be married right before their Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exam and like them, she was also pulled out of schooling, however, when her mother walked in her story changed. Her dropping out of school was now due to health reasons. As different indicators can influence the interview, her mother was one of them but this shows that the daughter’s honesty towards the interview was true at first and was not affected by the ethnicity, status or otherness of the head researcher.

Another limitation of the study was the difficulty in acquiring translators in each location. Because of the high costs of travel and accommodations, it was decided to hire a translator on site with the help of Women and Girls Lead Global and their partners in various villages. Towards the beginning there were no issues, however, finding a translator for the last set of interviews became a challenge, as there were no females who spoke English in the area. Originally it was determined that the translator would always be female but due to the difficulty and rural nature in the village of Kapaschdanga, Satkhira, in the Khulna division, a male translator was used with the accompaniment of a female leader of an adolescent center, whom the interviewee had known previously. There seemed to be no masking in this interview, as the girl was very open with the details of abuse in her marriage and family.

Due to the limited time frame only 17 girls were interviewed and even less parents were interviewed as they were often working. Because most interviews were conducted during the day, this is the time that parents usually work and because of their financial situation, a day
without work was not feasible. It was noted that for all girls who were still in school and in group A, both parents were always seen within the home during the interview as opposed to group B and C where parental involvement was less evident and usually only one parent was available to be interviewed. Although fewer parents were interviewed, the parents meetings and discussions were very informative and I felt that it was an even better representation of parent’s overall perceptions of the secondary school system and the problems within their communities.
Map of Bangladesh
III. The Multidimensionality of Poverty

“Poverty is hunger, poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom.”  

The vulnerability of the rural poor in Bangladesh highlights the importance of taking a multidimensional approach when measuring poverty. Determining if an individual is ‘poor’ should not be evaluated by an invisible line, or income level, as this can fluctuate daily for individuals in Bangladesh. Because families depend highly on agriculture they may have difficulty in providing for their children during different seasons of the year. Sending children to secondary schools can be quite costly for head-of-households because wages are often very little, and costs for private tutoring, books and tuition increase in conjunction with the grade-level of students. Families struggle daily in having enough money and food to support their children. Schooling can be an expense that is not necessary when considering the health and wellbeing of the entire family. Many factors are correlated with the high incidents of girl dropouts; however, poverty was the number one answer respondents gave during this study to explain the situation for girl dropouts. Studies in the past have shown that families with low-income are less likely to have more years of schooling than those who grew up in families with higher income. It is an

undesirable consequence, yet an inevitable reaction to the culmination of all the factors that arise from poverty.

With the number of people in Bangladesh and little job opportunities in rural areas, it has become increasingly difficult to keep girls in schools, as costs increase with age. Children who are at risk of dropping out tend to suffer from lack of learning materials and their parents are simply unable to pay for school fees.\(^{56}\) Bangladesh has over 168 million people living within the country,\(^{57}\) and has an area of 55,598 square miles making it the eighth most populous country in the world.\(^ {58}\) The growing number of people within the country is astounding, with roughly 42,000 births and only 12,000 deaths per day,\(^{59}\) population in the last few decades has exponentially surged. During the 1950’s the population of Bangladesh was around 38 million. In the year of 1971 with the liberation from Pakistan, population was at 67 million.\(^ {60}\) Currently, the population has not only doubled, but is 100 million people above that figure. The increase in population, declining farm sizes, increased landlessness and strained labor market gradually transformed the economy from a peasant farmer small-scale endeavor to localized impersonal labor relationships.\(^ {61}\)

The population growth has been overwhelming for citizens and government infrastructure. Free contraception and family planning programs by the state and international organizations increased drastically during the 1970’s and birth rates were beginning to decline at

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\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Ibid.

one of the fastest rates in history.\textsuperscript{62} In Bangladesh, fertility rates are \textit{only} associated with women’s education at the secondary level or higher,\textsuperscript{63} therefore having girls finish their secondary education is key in creating a country of informed and educated female decision-makers. Many girls drop out of school during or before entering secondary schools, which threatens the progress of the country. The government has had issues with the school system in Bangladesh because of the structural poverty as well as the dramatic increase in population, which affects the rates at which girls are dropping out.

Rural areas in Bangladesh have higher rates of poverty, with 36 percent of people living in poverty as compared to 28 percent in urban areas.\textsuperscript{64} In 2007, nearly half of the population (46.9 percent) of Bangladesh lived in extreme poverty.\textsuperscript{65} Forty-three percent of the population lives on less than $1 per day (2012) and 31.5 percent (2010) of the population lives below the national poverty line.\textsuperscript{66} The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), a division under the Ministry of Planning has been distributing household surveys used to measure the poverty rates, which look at income and expenditures of households.\textsuperscript{67} Focusing solely on income or expenditures can create a disassociation within the household and daily livelihoods of families struggling throughout the country. For example, there exist gender differences in intra-household allocation

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{64} International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). “Rural Poverty in Bangladesh,” Last accessed October 2015. \url{http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/bangladesh}.
\end{thebibliography}
of food, resources and education, which affect individuals differently within the home. The concentration on income and expenditures has created a lack of focus on education and health when observing poverty levels and construct fixed ideas of defining poverty.

Numbers cannot accurately describe the depth and magnitude of poverty in rural Bangladesh. In the context of this thesis, poverty is defined as the inadequate fulfillment of basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, health, education, and social involvement. If the numbers of those who cannot afford adequate shelter, clothing or a basic education up to the secondary level were included within these ‘levels of poverty,’ the rate would be considerably higher. The multidimensionality of the measure of poverty can vary with perception and is justified through many factors. From observation while traveling throughout the country there are people living in poverty in every region visited. Although non-income measures have been recognized, the income and expenditures function of defining poverty is mostly used and lacks the opportunity to assess countries realistically or in measuring the improvement of societies at a deeper level.

Government Measures of Poverty and Malnutrition

The Bangladeshi government has used a variety of measures for poverty levels within the country. Before the 1990’s, direct calorie intake was the main method of the poverty line estimation, however, it is argued that it measures ‘under-nutrition’ and not poverty. Since the

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90’s, the government has switched to the cost of basic needs method (CNB), using the norm of 2,122 kcal per day for individuals, which is the recommended intake and also the estimation of the poverty line by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).\textsuperscript{72} The Bangladeshi poor are the most at-risk for major hunger challenges. Half of all rural children are chronically malnourished and many are underweight and have micronutrient deficiencies,\textsuperscript{73} which can affect their hunger and concentration levels during school and study hours. Malnutrition can cause students to not reach their full potential in their physical and cognitive development.

During a school assembly attended by Women and Girls Lead Global Bangladesh Director Mahmud Hassan, 11 out of 43 girls had fainted while standing outside during the national anthem. He noted the concern for the nutrition of families in rural areas. Girls often walk long distances to school and can go the entire day without food, in the heat and humidity of Bangladesh. If parents notice this weakness and change in a girl’s demeanor, they may think this as a reason to withdraw them from school. Seven percent of girls who dropped out of school in the context of this study had done so due to health or medical reasons. The lack of money contributes to the risk of health problems for these girls not only in terms of nutrition but also during times of illness, when they may need necessary medications or health-care visits. One girl from the study pointed out that:

“Lots of people die with no medical treatment. Some people die from 100 or 200 taka ($1.30 - 2.60 USD), because they don’t have that money. So I want to be a doctor to provide free treatment for my community”
- Mahdu, 16 years old, Tilagoan


Distance to school along with the health and nutrition of these girls is a major concern for schools and families, when their risk of dropping out and wellbeing is taken into consideration. A simple perception or measure of poverty cannot adequately take all these factors into consideration.

**Agriculture and Climate Change**

Parents bringing home income in rural areas are usually limited to agricultural work, rickshaw driving and daily labor in places such as brick factories and bike repair shops. “In rural areas, income of households is dependent on land ownership and productivity of land, number of earning members, quality and composition of labor, nature of employment, and availability of infrastructure and other services to enhance the scope and return from income earning opportunities.”74 Forty-four percent of the national labor force works in the farm sector even though agriculture accounts for only 20 percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP).75 Rice is the predominant crop, but farmers lack access to high yield seeds, and usually have very little farmland if any. The population escalation has led to a decrease in the amount of cultivable land as the amount of space for creating shelter has increased and inheritance traditions continue to divide current land plots.76 While parents further divide their land among their children, the space gets smaller and smaller with each person and generation, creating a systematic rise in

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landlessness. Climate change has also contributed to the amount of cultivable land and yield of crops, making it more difficult to provide for food and other necessities.

Bangladesh is one of the highest disaster-prone countries in the world because of the lack of infrastructure, poverty, and the structurally unsafe houses and school buildings. Climate change has increased natural disasters such as monsoons and flooding. These disasters cause displacement, homelessness, and separation of children from their families, affecting the rights of children including their right to education. Two-thirds of the country is only 5 meters above sea level, making it highly susceptible to flooding. During floods or monsoon season, the poor in rural areas are most affected, as their houses are densely populated, clustered, and not structurally safe, leaving their schools and houses flooded or destroyed. This desperately affects girls’ education because not only are their homes destroyed but their schools can also be damaged and flooded and family’s expenses can surge drastically in order to sustain themselves during these times of need.

Families’ abilities to pay for tuition, guidebooks, uniforms, and private tutoring can be especially difficult during times of natural disasters or shocks, making these families inclusive within the collective definition of poverty. Parents may often times be forced to withdraw their child from school due to lack of funds for education, and also in order for their children to contribute towards household expenses. A family’s ability to make money during these periods is not the only concern; sending children to school can become a risky and challenging process. During the rainy season it can be problematic while traveling to and from schools, and may take an extended time for those who walk long distances. Sometimes the school buildings can flood, disturbing the quality of education as well as the spaces for after school activities and sports. If parents notice that their child’s safety is at risk because of the flooding or dangerous roads, it
may lead them to keep their daughter’s (more so than their sons) home for that day or week, causing girls to fall behind. The risk during natural disasters and the lack of government infrastructure affecting the education system will be further discussed in chapter six.

Risk for Boys versus Girls

Males and females have different paths and options in the Bangladeshi society. It is only recently that women have joined the work force in greater numbers, due to the garment industry, girls reaching higher levels of education and the large-scale micro-loan-credit industry offered specifically to women by NGO’s. The opportunity costs for boys are higher than girls in rural Bangladesh, as boys have more choices when entering the workforce. In a study conducted by Samir Nath (2002), following the lives of boys and girls transitions from primary non-formal education into madrassas and semi-governmental secondary schools, it was concluded that scarcity of money was the number one reason parents gave for withdrawing their boys from school (65.3 percent). The two other main reasons for schoolboy dropouts were, “disliking of graduate to continue schooling (16.4 percent) and “had to work” (12 percent). In this same study, the reasons that parents gave for girl dropouts were “marriage” with 59.2 percent and “scarcity of money,” accounting for 26.5 percent of girl participants. Not one of the boys in the study had dropped out due to marriage, however, scarcity of money and the need to contribute towards family income was a notable factor for males. This study shows the gender differences within the culture of Bangladesh and the factors that affect both boys and girls living in poverty.77

Although child labor affects boys more so than girls, it was noted during this study that girls were also at risk of leaving school due to entering the work force. However, the concept of

‘entering the work force’ can be drastically different for boys and girls. Boys are more likely to help with agricultural labor, as drivers or in factories while still living at home. Girls on the other hand are more likely to work in the garment sector, venturing into urban areas or as domestic workers for wealthier families. This leads girls to live away from parents, increasing their risk of becoming victim to violence. Other jobs for women include becoming teachers, headmasters, small-business owners, selling handmade crafts or working with various NGO’s.

Although none of the girl participants in this study had been withdrawn from school to become a domestic housekeeper, this is still a common practice within the society. It was observed that many households in the higher socio-economic strata, mainly in Dhaka, had one or multiple live-in domestic housekeepers, who were in fact very young. I did have the opportunity to interact with many of these girls, but due to the inability to attain their parents’ signatures, a semi-structured recorded interview was simply not feasible. Chari, a sister of one of the interviewees in this study, was sold by her mother to a family far away. Her mother was promised that Chari would attend school, yet promises like this are made frequently and not likely to be kept. Working as a domestic house-worker can have its benefits, such as constant food and shelter, however, this work comes with a high-risk for domestic abuse by the males within the household. Although this is not always the case, young girls have the opportunity to live in houses far beyond what their families can provide and this is what perpetuates the practice. Parents feel that the child will be better suited living with a wealthy family than her current life without accessibility to her needs, and this contributes to the high rates of schoolgirl dropouts.
Excessive Costs and Fees

As previously stated, the immediate and associated costs for students in secondary schools within Bangladesh can be too much for parents to bear, and thus can deter parents from sending their children to schools. During secondary school enrollment, parents must pay roughly 800-1000 taka ($10-12 USD) per student and about 700 taka ($9 USD) for guidebooks.\textsuperscript{78} With uniforms, pens, pencils and notebooks to purchase as well, it can be a problematic time for impoverished families to provide all of these items for their children at the beginning of the year and during the government issued state-exams. The government issued standardized tests are provided for students in semi-governmental funded schools, however, required costs are the parent’s responsibility. Schools receiving support from the government are required to follow a standard curriculum with government issued textbooks and examinations. The state exam in grade 8 is called the Junior School Certificate or JSC and the Secondary School Certificate exam or SSC is administered in grade 10. The costs for these government exams can range from 1,500 to 1,800 taka ($19-23 USD). This is an exorbitant amount of capital for families in rural areas, where they are living on less than $1 per day.

“When it is time to enroll their children in school and pay their fees for public examinations they usually face problems because at that time they need money and they usually have to borrow money from other people to enroll them in school at the beginning of the school year in January, and for examinations we have to pay a big chunk of money.” - Father at parents meeting in Sylhet.

In this study, it was noted that 23 percent of girl dropouts had withdrawn from school during the time of the SSC exam in 10\textsuperscript{th} grade. Yahma, a 16 year-old participant described her situation to me, explaining that all of her 4 sisters had been married before the SSC examination. Due to constant interruption by her mother during the interview, as previously stated in the former chapter, her reason for dropping out then became due to health reasons. The 60 year-old

\textsuperscript{78} This information was gathered through interviews.
mother of 9, Asis, could simply not afford to continue her daughters’ education. This is the reality for millions of girls throughout the country. A respondent at a parents meeting declared that 10th grade was a suitable amount of education and a proper time for a daughter to be married. Although this is not the opinion of every parent, some parents do feel that ending their daughter’s education at 10th grade is sufficient. Many girls and boys face a high risk of not progressing to the next grade due to lack of funds during examination time. Some students may fail the exam and the costs for a second examination is simply too high for parents to bear, leaving students with no other option than to dropout of school.

Low-income families may also have a difficult time in purchasing the ‘necessary’ guidebooks for their children. Parents at a school meeting discussed the unethical scheme of how their government provides a system of education and basically forces children to purchase guidebooks to help them understand what is taught in the textbook (which is provided free by the government). The guidebook is a reference book that teachers, students and private tutors rely heavily upon. It closes the gap of understanding and provides information and questions that are not given in the textbook. Students in rural areas who have parents making little money have a difficult time in attaining these books, which affects their ability to stay at the level of their fellow classmates.

“Our government gave us compulsory books, but students sometimes need those guidebooks, the books that have the question answer format. Daily laborer people who are not very rich, they usually have problem to buy those books, but our school and our teacher depend on those books. If we do something to help them buying those books it would be better.” - Father at Parents Meeting in Sylhet

Private tutoring has also become a ‘necessary expense,’ as the quality of education and number of students in classrooms are simply too many to direct attention towards each student and answer specific questions. Families may compensate for the quality at school by extending
study time outside of school and hiring tutors. Private tutoring has become extremely common among girls in rural Bangladesh. Of the girls interviewed who were still in school and in group A, 100 percent were currently taking private tutoring sessions before or after school and sometimes both. Private tutoring has created a system of privatization of the Bangladesh education system, as success in school becomes a function of both time spent studying outside school and direct expenditures on private tutoring. The private tutoring and guidebooks produce a system where only the wealthy can afford an education, leaving the low-income students behind, generating more school dropouts.

Conclusion

Poverty impacts the lives of many throughout rural Bangladesh, but has a specifically serious liability for girls and boys education. The risks and reasons for dropping out differ for boys and girls living in poverty, however, the objective is the same. All children must attain a quality education regardless of their parents’ annual income, it a right set out by the United Nations and has been internationally recognized for decades. The costs of tuition, books, uniforms, exams and tutoring is a burden for parents who are also at risk for shocks such as erosion, lack of crop yields, climate change and natural disasters. If families cannot support themselves during these difficult times, doesn’t that make them a part of poverty defined as those who cannot provide for their basic adequate needs? Poverty should not be defined by an

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80 Ibid.
invisible line, but have a fully encompassing interpretation that includes the fluctuating circumstances faced by millions throughout Bangladesh.

There are 47 million people that live ‘below the poverty line,’ and many more who are affected by these pressures and unexpected shocks. Poverty affects parents decisions in keeping their children in school, as allocation of resources and income can often times be a struggle. The unreasonable costs of government issued exams, guidebooks and private tutoring all contribute to the high dropouts especially during the periods of examination and enrollment. These factors need to be further analyzed and modified in order to keep boys and girls in schools and allow them to complete their secondary education. The creation of a system of free, quality education is yet to be seen. However, rapid change and drastic improvements have been made in the past, validating that there is still hope for the developing generation of youth and their hunger for education.

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IV. Parental Involvement in Secondary Schools

Parental involvement in secondary schools is a relatively new concept for rural Bangladesh, and each parent faces different struggles related to students learning and success. Poverty is not only related to parents’ difficulty in paying for the costs of education, but can also contribute to parents’ involvement in school activities. Parents of students in the lower socio-economic strata are usually forced to work daily to support their children’s education, thus, are unlikely to attend school activities which are usually held during school hours. This can affect parents’ motivations towards keeping their children educated and can consequently affect children’s desires and incentives to do well in school. Lack of awareness of both parents and

schools and the overload of homework and teaching books are found to be major challenges for parents in Bangladesh. Parental involvement in rural Bangladesh has been inadequate due to the high rates of low-income families and the need to work daily, the lack of education levels of parents, the difficulty that parents face in understanding schoolwork, and also due to the uncommon nature of parental involvement and activities. In order to decrease school dropouts within the country, developing stronger home-school relationships is necessary.

Many researchers have argued of the importance in involving parents in student’s activities and schoolwork. Children whose teachers visit student’s homes to discuss school-related work are less likely to dropout, and teachers view that the lack of parental engagement and interest is a key factor that leads to absenteeism, grade repetition and dropouts. There are different strategies in involving parents, whether it is parent-teacher meetings, progress reports, or cultural events and activities for parents and the community. Parental outreach currently consists of telephone calls, emails (limited to certain schools in urban areas) and several schools have introduced the progress report, home-visits and parents meetings. The significance of home-school relationships is that they help educators to understand family perspectives of the students and reduce the gaps between students, parents and teachers. Parental involvement in children’s learning at home and at school motivates children to study regularly, which ultimately helps children to improve their academic results.

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83 Ibid.
Student’s success has been shown to correlate with parental involvement because of children’s motivation levels and the decision factor of costs resting in the hands of parents. In order for Bangladesh to develop as a country and reduce the amount of those living in poverty, the government of Bangladesh along with international organizations will need to respond to the growing population, create a system of quality education for adolescents and promote strong parental involvement in schools. If parents become more involved in their children’s schoolwork and activities, and have continuous conversations with teachers, they can develop a vision of promise and optimism for their child’s future and promote the idea of completing one’s education.

**Government Initiatives to Improve Parental Involvement**

The government of Bangladesh has created 6 national education commissions and committees to address how to ensure quality education, overall educational achievement, and reduce dropout rates. However, little attention has been paid in these committees and policies in how to engage parents in secondary schools. The government of Bangladesh began to incorporate home-school relationships when they introduced the Secondary School Management Committees (SMC) in 1977, which first instituted a system of parental involvement. The SMC’s functions are to:

- Conduct schools development work including schoolhouse and road construction/repair and keeping school environment conducive to children’s learning;
- Ensure all school-aged children in the community attend school;
- Monitor and supervise school activities and performances;
- Help manage sub-cluster training, PTA, stipends, and co-curricular activities;
- Coordinate and resolve various school-related problems by involving community people and the upazila (subdistrict) education office.

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88 Ibid.
The SMC’s were the first implementation of systematic parental involvement in Bangladesh. Although the SMC’s have been instated for quite some time, they have been criticized for not having sufficient authority over financial assets and human resources and also for being dominated by teachers and the political elite.\(^\text{89}\) Currently the Ministry of Education (MOE) requires a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) in secondary schools, which should be a way that schools and the community can form better relationships to support children’s education. However, most PTA’s in rural Bangladesh are ineffective, and only exist on paper, having no actual power.\(^\text{90}\)

Currently there are two projects at the state level that are attempting to promote parental engagement, the Teaching Quality Improvement – Secondary Education Program (TQI-SEP) and the Secondary Education Sector Development Project (SESDP). These programs have acknowledged parental involvement as part of creating a safe learning environment for the students at school and at home.\(^\text{91}\) State-level implementation has been insufficient, as it is exclusive and elite in nature and does not include a representative group of parents. While government enforced policies have not conveyed the best results, different organizations have created positive and effective ways to increase parental involvement in schools. For example, various non-formal schools have introduced monthly mothers’ forums to discuss concerns and explore ways children can be supported at home and at school.\(^\text{92}\) These less structured meetings and cultural activities allow discourse between parents, teachers and students in a more effective and open approach.

\(^{90}\) Ibid.
The Role of NGO’s in Establishing Home-School Relationships

Children and teachers are not exclusively the only actors in the educational system; parents, organizations and the community at large play an enormous role in promoting education in rural Bangladesh, as it is a communal-based society rather than individualistic. Partnerships between schools, organizations and communities have strengthened school activities, as seen in many instances during this study. Partnerships can develop through mutual collaboration of teachers, families and community members during events that promote learning. Although scholars have concluded that parental activities in Bangladesh are confined to a limited number of activities such as parents’ meetings and teachers’ conventions, I would argue that this is not the case. I have seen many examples in which NGO’s are originally engaging with parents throughout rural Bangladesh with innovative strategies such as film screenings and theater productions while initiating dialogues on improving the quality of education for students.

Women and Girls Lead Global (WGLG) Bangladesh has been using media strategies and screening various films to create awareness and discourse on issues surrounding girl’s education and child marriage. Parental involvement and reducing child marriage are important pillars for their organization because developing relationships with parents, students and teachers can create a caring environment where students are able to grow, learn and flourish. WGLG organizes film screenings and events for parents, students and communities in rural areas of Bangladesh in partnership with local organizations and schools. Two parent film screenings and two ‘Girls Club’ film screenings were observed during the course of this study.

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95 Ibid.,
During both parents meetings, the film ‘I was Worth 50 Sheep’ was shown along with various locally produced short videos highlighting local girls as examples in their schools and communities. Although the feature film was created in Afghanistan, the themes revolving early child marriage, girls’ education, abuse and poverty created a forum of discussion that these families could relate to. Parents who attended meetings were engaged and interested in the conversations led by Women and Girls Lead Global capacity building specialist, Ranju Alam. It is important for parents to visually see the repercussions of marriage, in order for them to understand the pain and suffering that their daughters may face if married too young or to the wrong person. Media captures the attention of viewers, in this case parents, in order to serve a variety of social purposes including but not limited to representation, communication, community formation, imagination, and social action.\textsuperscript{96} Marshall McLuhan argued that media technologies are so powerful; they constitute a revolution in social relations around the world and can be a social phenomenon that is both a cause and effect of social change. The act of watching a film together as a community allows participants to interact and share a practice simultaneously and observe, form ideas and discuss the content and problems shared within their own society.

The discussions held after each film screening were insightful and taught the parents about many issues such as the harmful health effects of child marriage and possible death during childbearing, domestic abuse, and the male defining X or Y chromosome in forming the sex of a child. Questions were directed at parents regarding what difficulties they face in keeping their children in school. The main hardships or burdens that were mentioned by participating parents in these meetings were:

- Costs of private tutoring

• Costs of guidebooks (not textbooks)
• School tuition fees and
• School Examination Fees (JSC and SSC)

The underlying benefit however, is that these meetings give parents the opportunity to discuss their problems together and form solutions as a community.

A father who participated in the parents’ meeting argued that the reason some parents had not attended was probably due to their work schedule. Parents in the meeting stated that those who could not be at the parent activities were working as day-laborers, usually in the agricultural sector and did not have the luxury of attending school functions during school hours. The parents who attended were “well-off” and did not have to work that day. This is a central and recurring issue for schools and NGO’s working towards bringing in larger numbers of parents for activities. When asked who has difficulty in keeping their children at school, one father answered:

“There are limited people here. This school has 1000 students. If all the parents came here, maybe we could get some parents like that. Most of them are working. It is farming time and people are cutting their [rice] patty.”

- Father at parents meeting in Sylhet

Poverty affects the way that parents can become involved in their child’s school activities. Often times it is not a matter of whether or not these parents would like to come in, but the time constraints that exist. Parental involvement is a new phenomenon, and parents are not always accustomed to coming in for ‘unnecessary’ meetings, as they must work to provide for their families.

Parents in another meeting established that there are parent assemblies twice a year with roughly 200 in attendance, in school of 500 students. Through these meetings, teachers can establish relationships with the parents; however, one-on-one meetings are also necessary yet nonexistent. It has been argued that the teachers have too much on their plates and are busy with
their student overload, so it is difficult to facilitate these one-on-one meetings with parents. In order to decrease the workload for teachers and promote more frequent personal parents meetings, the government needs to create a system with more teachers and smaller class sizes.

Creative initiatives have been organized by NGO’s and community members in order to engage this lower socio-economic class of daily laborers who must work long hours to provide for their families. In the upazilla of Patnitala, Women and Girls Lead Global organized a Youth Summit and Letter Festival. Girls from different schools in the upazilla wrote letters asking parents not to marry them until they are at least 18 years old and told them of their aspirations and reasons not to engage them in marriage. Over 3,000 letters were posted from girls in 53 different schools in Naogoan along a main road. The festival was held outside where parents and community members could read of the goals and pleas of these young girls. Displayed on colorful banners, these letters became eye-catching to all who happened to pass by. A ceremony was held selecting 20 winners of the campaign. People from all over Naogoan saw the letters and were engaged in some way, even if for a short time. Parents who could not attend the ceremony as well as members of the community who did not have daughters were able to see the letters and engage with girls’ education in a nontraditional method.

Another unique way that Women and Girls Lead Global has involved parents is through hosting film screenings at the local bazar or marketplace. If activities are held where parents already go to purchase food and supplies, work, or have tea with friends, then it has not interrupted their daily schedule as a typical parents meeting would. Parents and community members became interested in the activity, because of the unusual nature of a film screening at the local marketplace. This was a very successful community engagement initiative, where many people stayed to watch the film and became curious to learn more. By showing a film that
informs families on the importance of education and delaying early marriage, it can create
discussion on the issues in ways that previously did not exist.

On this year’s International Day of the Girl (October 11th 2015), schools in Gangni,
Meherpur, along with community members and Women and Girls Lead Global organized an
event that brought forth tremendous numbers of students and parents for a celebration. Three
hundred girls rode their bikes down a rural highway as community members and passerby’s
cheered them on. They biked towards a high school where 500 family photos were displayed,
each captioned with an expression from her parents stating their vision for her future. Two
thousand students and parents were present at the event, gaging a large audience and creating
extensive awareness throughout the district. When Women and Girls Lead Global launched the
Best School for Girls Campaign, two years ago, girls were prohibited from riding bikes in this
region, as it was considered inappropriate. Through community involvement, parents meetings,
and training on how to ride a bike, there was a clear change in the community’s ideology and
attitudes on the appropriate norms for girls’ behavior. This event engaged each parent who
participated in the family photo contest, using an original concept of publicly pronouncing their
dreams and aspirations for their daughters. By openly announcing this, community members can
remind parents of their promise if they ever decide to marry their daughter at an early age.
During this event, parents reinforced their promise with an oath-taking ceremony led by the
director of another NGO, The Hunger Project.

Women and Girls Lead Global is taking massive initiatives in promoting girls’ education
and parental involvement through community led events that use media such as letters, and photo
posters to raise awareness and discourse surrounding girls’ education and prevent child marriage
throughout the country. In the region of Gangni Meherpur, where the Best School for Girls
Campaign is currently engaged with 49 partner schools, there is a 30 percent prevalence rate of child marriage as compared to 71.5 percent district-wide. This suggests that with the help of the Best School for Girls Campaign, more parents are choosing to keep their girls in school.

Although poverty is a huge factor, as parents cannot afford guidebooks, uniforms, bikes or other expenses, keeping a girl in or out of school is the parent’s decision. Through community engagement, and involving parents in new creative ways, organizations like Women and Girls Lead Global continue to inspire young girls and parents in rural Bangladesh and reduce the rate of dropouts throughout rural areas.

Rupanthar, another NGO in Bangladesh is using theater productions to inspire and strengthen girls, while creating parental interaction and involvement. Girls clubs were formed in 10 secondary schools throughout the district of Khulna. The 10 ‘Student Change Maker’ groups create stories and performances based on the problems that girls face in their communities and show their presentation to parents in schools. The stage design, script and performances are created by the Student Change Makers either at school or in a family’s home. Their shows open a dialogue for parents, teachers and students to communicate about various forms of sexual harassment. It was previously difficult to speak of these issues, however, it has become much easier for girls because they are not afraid to convey their feelings and experiences. One girl from the Student Change Maker group in an all-girls school on the outskirts of Khulna announced:

“Before we didn’t have enough courage to protect the situation, now we have courage to take action.”
- Secondary School Girl, Khulna

The school and NGO organized a ‘parents fair’ where parents could share their views on sexual violence. Songs and performances were held around the theme of violence against women.

Parents, teachers and students discussed the fact that victims should not be stigmatized, and made them more confident in discussing these topics. It was observed that the girls in the Change Maker group were very confident and outspoken after having been involved in various theatrical performances their self-esteem and conviction truly showed.

All of these events and programs discussed here not only targeted parents but were also meant to create awareness and momentum regarding problems for girls in Bangladesh. As involving parents can be a dynamic and multifaceted process, it was noticed that using different forms of media was extremely effective. The word media, derives from the Latin word *medius* meaning “middle” and assumes two or more poles of engagement. Media technologies and productions are not meant to mediate between themselves and people, but give individuals the opportunity to mediate between people. “Media is seen as a revolutionizing force in society that can be effectively harnessed for the betterment of everyone.” For audiences in impoverished areas, media can be the most cost-effective way of achieving large-scale population behavioral change, as it allows for new discourses within schools and at home. It has been used as a major aid and facilitation tool by schools and organizations to involve parents in various ways. The success of these secondary schools in cooperation with various NGO’s are examples of initiatives that can be implemented elsewhere in other developing countries to affect change and increase community and parental involvement.

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99 Ibid. 8.,
Conclusion

There are approximately 48 million adolescents in Bangladesh. A huge portion of the population is of school age. Involving parents, although a newly found concept in rural Bangladesh, has been shown to impact the lives of secondary students. The government has attempted to engage parents, however, these efforts have been criticized for being ineffective and unbalanced in power. NGO’s have improved the outcome for students, partly by creating new ways to involve parents in schools. Despite these efforts, parental involvement is still lacking and girls are continuing to dropout of the secondary school system. Continuing to engage parents in additional schools is crucial in order to create a more sustainable system of education within these communities.

Although education is a right set out by the United Nations, Bangladesh is struggling to keep up with its educational infrastructure. The dropout rates of girls in rural Bangladesh must be reduced, however due to the traditional norms of womanhood beginning at the early stages of puberty, it is continuing to affect parents’ decisions in keeping girls in schools. Involving parents and educating them on the detrimental effects to girls’ health and wellbeing, if taken out of school or married young begins with having the parents engaged and attentive at school meetings and teaching them the importance of education.

V. Child Marriage

The practice of child marriage has persisted despite the laws and efforts to end the cultural tradition within Bangladesh and the surrounding countries. A young girl in Bangladesh has a 65 percent chance of being married, taken out of school, forced to live with a new family

whom she has perhaps never met, and expected to give birth before she even reaches the age of 18. One in nine girls living in the developing world will be married before she turns 15. Bangladesh is struggling to defeat the continuing practice of child marriage, particularly in more rural and impoverished areas. The country ties for having the highest percentage of child brides under the age of 15, and has the fourth highest rate of child marriage in the world.

Child marriage also referred to as early or forced marriage, is defined as a formal marriage or informal union before the age of 18, and is a reality for millions of girls in Bangladesh. There have been conflicting reports in various sources of the correct number of child marriages in Bangladesh and the exact numbers are unknown due to many factors, which include underreporting in combination with the increasing knowledge that the practice is illegal, as well as lack of birth registrations. Plan International reports that over 65 percent of girls are married before the age of 18 and 10 percent of married young women give birth before the age of 15. The National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT) in Bangladesh report that 74 percent of women aged 20-49 were married before the age of 18, as opposed to the same cohort of men with only 6 percent being married by the age of 18. By the age of 20, 86 percent of girls are married. Although engaging in marriage by the age of 20 is not considered child marriage, it is necessary to acknowledge that these marriages may still be


107 Ibid.
entered without the female’s full consent, which constitutes the act as a ‘forced marriage.’ Figure 1 shows that the age at first marriage has in fact, been declining over time, yet scholars argue that the rate of decline is limited and needs to be improved further.

**Figure – Trends in proportion of women age 20-24 who were first married by age 18**

![Bar chart showing trends in marriage age](chart.png)

*Source: NIPORT Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2011*

All reports examined did acknowledge the increase in median age at first marriage, albeit slow, there has been progress made. In 1950 when Bangladesh was called East Pakistan under the Pakistani regime, only 11.3 percent of females aged 15-19 had never been married and this rate rose to 41 percent in 1991.\(^{108}\) It is vital to recognize how education effects age at first marriage and to what affect. NIPORT reported that the average age at marriage for those with no education is 14.8, for those who complete primary education, 15.4, and for girls who complete secondary school or higher the average age at first marriage was 19.9. Women’s education level is clearly related to age at first marriage and has been argued to be the most significant factor.

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involved with cases of child marriage in Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{109} Figure 2, displays the variation of residence, educational attainment and wealth quintile in its relationships to the median age of marriage for women in Bangladesh.

**Figure 2 – Median age at first marriage by background characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background characteristic</th>
<th>Women age 20-49</th>
<th>Men age 25-49</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barisal</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhaka</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khulna</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangpur</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrihat</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational attainment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No education</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary incomplete</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary complete\textsuperscript{1}</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary incomplete</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary complete or higher\textsuperscript{2}</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth quintile</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: NIPORT Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2011

Educational attainment is a vital component, as education levels and child marriage rates are interconnected in their relationship and both determine the quality of life for young girls. If a girl is forced into child marriage or forced out of school, it predisposes her to the other associated factor, as their interaction is noticeably correlated.

The threat of child marriage for girls in Bangladesh is imminent for millions of girls. It exposes them to complications during childbirth, physical and mental stress and increased violence within the home. Within the Bangladeshi society, having a child marry at an early age, although it may be looked down upon, it is still a normal practice and occurs everyday. Because childhood and education are internationally recognized rights, daughters around the world and in Bangladesh must be given equal opportunity and have access to basic human rights. Decreasing the chances for child marriage begins with keeping girls in school. Despite the potential underreporting of child marriage, it is important to realize that no matter how many millions of girls there are, each of them have a unique story and struggle that can engulf her life and future forever.

Why is Child Marriage a Problem?

Child marriage limits a girl’s life and choices; it withdraws her from further education, her immediate family and increases her risk of violence within the home and death during childbirth. Not only are her mental and emotional wellbeing at risk but her livelihood and life itself is threatened. Forced marriage is considered a health and human rights violation of great concern for developing countries and international organizations, in that it dismantles a young girl’s opportunities, happiness and childhood. Child marriage brings about physical and mental health complications, partly because she is thrown into a new life of isolation and housework in her in-laws home and also due to her undeveloped body she may be unable to handle the stresses of pregnancy and childbirth. The idea of child marriage has been known to be simply a transaction, a way for males and families to gain money from dowry exchanged.\textsuperscript{110} The life of a

girl should not be considered a transaction, a household help, or something to be disregarded. Childhood is a right set out by the United Nations, and should be enjoyed by individuals under the age of 18 regardless of gender, race, religion or national origin. Girls forced into marriage forfeit their childhood, education, families and opportunities.

Despite being a foreigner and outsider, during the course of this study I realized that it doesn’t matter where you are born or what country you live in; girls want to be educated, to be professionals, to fulfill dreams and go beyond what society wants them to be. Adolescents interviewed in this study who were still in school, were extremely appreciative of their parent’s help and support in their education. A young girl in Tilagoan, Sylhet expressed her appreciation towards her father for keeping her and her four sisters in school:

“My father is a good father because some fathers and families pay attention to boys only. My father treats me like a boy. He gives me all the facilities that families would provide for boys. He is a good person. Once we complete our education we will give back what he has provided for us. Before, women used to stay at home, but now women are getting an education, they are helping our country progress more, so girls’ education is necessary.”

– Manju, age 16, Tilagoan Syhlet

Adolescent students understand that they are the lucky ones; other girls, neighbors or classmates are not always given these opportunities. As a young girl reaches the beginning stages of puberty, society sees her as a potential wife and mother. There is nothing shameful about becoming a mother and wife, I applaud those who go great depths to provide for their families, but young girls want to be able to choose their paths for themselves, chose their partner and chose when they will be married. Puberty, and societal pressures place construed limits on young girls choices, as they are not always given the resources and opportunities of education and the free will and decision in whom and when they will marry. Pressure from family members and neighbors, encouraging parents to marry their daughter because she costs too much money, is
physically mature or may elope with an unapproved male can cause parents to question their daughter’s marriage and future education.

Early marriage can place girls under severe physical and mental stress and increase their risk of domestic violence and death. Girls are removed from their familiarity, leaving the home of their parents and siblings and are often times unable to see or communicate with them. They are given responsibilities of caring for most household chores, such as cleaning dishes, hand-washing clothes and caring for animals owned by the family. Girls can be reduced to the status of bonded laborer by her new in-laws, this happens in many instances for particularly young girls.\footnote{\textsuperscript{111} United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). “Women and Girls in Bangladesh” \url{http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/Women_and_girls_in_Bangladesh.pdf}.} Some girl must learn how to accommodate to her new life and please her husband, even before she’s had her first menstrual period.

Young girls within their new homes have very little bargaining and decision-making power. The patriarchal social system determines power relations within Bangladeshi households, making women subordinate to men and creating less power for women in terms of health, education, sexual relations and mobility decisions.\footnote{\textsuperscript{112} Amir M. Sayem and A. T. S. Nury, “An assessment of attitude towards equitable gender norms among Muslim women in Bangladesh,” \textit{Women’s Studies International Forum}, 40 (2013): 102-110.} Women in general within rural regions of the country often times do not make decisions regarding their own healthcare or their children’s healthcare; it is predominantly decided by husbands.\footnote{\textsuperscript{113} National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), “Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2007” (2009): 185. \url{http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/B DHS2007_Final.pdf}.} This can lead to insufficient doctors’ visits and increased complications during pregnancy and childbirth. Girls who are married young, tend to give birth at younger ages and also have less power within their home due to their age and gender. The 2014 NIPORT Demographic and Health Survey report concluded that 9.2 percent of girls age 15 have begun childbearing and 57.8 percent of girls by age 19 have begun
childbearing. Young mother’s smaller bodies are not physically developed, which drastically increases their risk for complications during pregnancy and labor. Girls under the age of 18 have a 60 percent increased risk of death during childbirth because their bodies are not physically ready to produce. Their newborns also have a 50 percent higher risk of being a stillborn or dying in the first few weeks. The cultural narrative perpetuates child bearing at an early age, as mother-in-laws and families often pressure couples to have children immediately after marriage.

Infant mortality and morbidity within the country is high, due to the combination of increased violence against women, early age at pregnancy, malnourishment, unattended homebirths and little access to medical facilities in rural areas. The United Nations estimates that there are 340 deaths per 100,000 live births within the country. Children of adolescent mothers, if they survive, also have higher chances of delayed physical and cognitive development. Girls giving birth with underdeveloped physical traits can have obstetric fistulas, where their bodies are not large enough or properly developed to handle the stresses of childbirth. The fetus, therefore, gets ‘stuck’ causing trauma to both mother and child. This can make physical recovery a long, difficult and painful process, if death does not occur.

The lack of power and lower status that women carry in society not only creates a situation where young girls are forced into marriage but a structural system that allows young girls to become victim to domestic violence. In a study conducted by NIPORT, more than half

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(53 percent) of girls married or previously married had reported that they had experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence from their husbands. More than one-third of women believed that a husband is justified in beating his wife for either disobeying elders, arguing with her husband, going out without telling her husband, neglecting the children or refusing to have sexual intercourse with her husband. The threat of domestic violence is extremely high for young wives and mothers, which should be an example to parents and deter them from engaging their daughters in marriage, however, this is not always the case.

The study conducted within this thesis found that 50 percent of girls interviewed who are married or had previously been married reported domestic violence by either their husbands or mother-in-laws. Despite parents’ perception of marriage offering security and safety for girls, this study found that girls married at a young age had an increased risk of violence within their husband’s home. Girl’s physical, mental and social state had not improved after marriage and their parent’s perception of being ‘better off’ was just a misconception. Suran et al. (2004), argues that families who paid dowry for marriage, under the cultural belief that dowry helps brides, had an increased likelihood of reporting domestic violence. Dowry violence is also common among young girls in the region, occurring when the bride’s family does not meet dowry requests. The idea that males alone perpetrate violence against women and girls does not encompass the complete picture and represent all cases, as this is not true with sister or mother-in-law dowry-related violence.

In regards to the girl’s point of view, living with her parents was far preferred than her time spent in her new home with her husband and in-laws. Due to violence within the home of girls who are married young, some think that suicide is an escape, a better option than the life they currently live. The devastation that victims of sexual violence face often leaves young girls mentally unstable and depressed. The Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey conducted by UNICEF found that 75 percent of suicide victims under the age of 18 were girls and 92 percent of child suicides take place in rural areas.\(^{121}\) Everyday there are 4 girls who commit suicide in the country, however, this is considered a ‘very large underestimate’ as exact numbers are difficult to attain.\(^{122}\) Girls in rural areas often have no choice in whom she will marry, since marriages are arranged by the parents or other family members. Eighty percent of girls in this study at first refused to the marriage arranged by her family members. Girls want to pursue their education, and they want to delay marriage, yet it is inevitably forced upon them by family or society and often leaves them with no choice.

Family pressure and feelings of hopelessness can lead girls to give in and comply with the marriage. Girls have been known to commit suicide when they feel that they have no hope or future when being forced to marry, their mind finds an exit strategy, which partly explains the high rates of suicide for young girls in rural areas. Despite the risks that come with child marriage, parents often disassociate the negative stories they hear and think that these problems will not happen to their daughters. This perpetuates the structural system of child marriage, violence and risks for adolescent girls in Bangladesh. It is important to show parents how


\(^{122}\) Ibid.
common these negative circumstances occur and how it can easily be prevented by keeping daughters in school and out of marriage.

**How has the Practice of Child Marriage Continued, Despite that it is Illegal?**

The underlying reasons for early marriage can vary with each case but it’s key to recognize and understand that these various factors are interrelated and affect one another. This study found that poverty and costs of education, girls’ safety and security and family or societal pressures were the main motivations in why parents chose to marry their girls before the age of 18. Although the practice of child marriage is illegal in Bangladesh and under international law, it continues to thrive within the country due to ‘customary law,’ lack of government enforcement and rural ideologies of womanhood. Dowry costs and incidences of sexual harassment within the community can also bring families to consider marriage for daughters. Gender, class and region all influence the social determinants involved with child marriage.

As previously mentioned, poverty thrives throughout the country. It not only affects girls being withdrawn from school, but also affects the frequency of child marriage. Poverty is linked with a higher prevalence of child marriage incidents because families with little to no capital have fewer resources and incentives to invest in alternative options for girls. Girls are seen as an economic risk and parents feel that the child would be better supported if she were married, and cared for by the groom’s family. This would allow parents to more fully support other siblings or family members financially.

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Parent’s education level is also a determinant for child marriage in Bangladesh, due to their lack of financial assets and capabilities to find higher paying jobs. Parents’ inability to attain adequate money for their daughter’s education leads them to see marriage as an alternate option. If the sons and daughters of this generation continue to attend school, they will be able to better provide for their children, and the cycle will become less pervasive. Education levels of parents are linked to child marriage, however, in a study conducted by Kamal et al., it was concluded that women’s education level was the single most significant negative determinant of child marriage. When girls are taken out of school, their likelihood of marriage increases exponentially. It is not solely the school itself that prevents girls from getting married but external factors developed through education that reduce the chances of child marriage such as self-awareness and development, after school activities, more freedom of mobility, social learning and increased bargaining power.

Keeping a girl in school is vital towards reducing her risk of entering into marriage before she reaches the age of 18. However, if schools are considerably far, the travel to school can perpetuate the problem of child marriage. Safety for girls during their walk to and from school can be troublesome because of eve-teasing and sexual harassment along the way. It becomes important for families to protect their daughters from not only premarital sex, but also the thoughts and perceptions of their daughter within the community. Something as simple as gossip can be detrimental to a girl’s wellbeing and can determine the rest of her life. Parents worry about the perception of their daughters because if a young girl is seen to cause sexual arousal among men in the community or has lost her sexual purity, this can bring shame and

125 Ibid., 120.
126 Ibid., 135.
gossip, creating a negative impact on the girl’s future prospects for marriage and increasing her dowry dramatically.

Due to these matters of safety and security, social seclusion of adolescent girls is of greater concern than for boys. Women and girls in the Bangladeshi society are often isolated, in a practice known as purdah, especially once girls reach the age of puberty. Although the practice of purdah, is not as stringent as compared to other countries, parents fears are still great in rural areas. When boys or men make sexual threats or innuendos it can cause gossip within the community and shame can be brought upon the girl and her family. In a study conducted by Alston et al., (2014), threat to family honor was the leading factor to cause child marriage in Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{127} In order to maintain the family’s honor, parents will use marriage as a safeguard, particularly if girl’s routes to school are perceived as insecure. In a quote from the previously mentioned study one man argued:

“The father will naturally want to have their daughter carted off before rumors start to spread. That is the basic reason why we can’t wait for our daughter’s marriage” - quote from older man, Gaibandha – Alston et al. (2014)

When a daughter reaches the age of puberty, it becomes a vulnerable time in her life. In the Bangladeshi culture, a girl reaches womanhood during puberty and society feels that she is potentially ready for marriage. Marriage and wifehood is seen as a necessary life route that is vital to a woman’s safety and security, honor, social acceptance and status. When a daughter is not married, her family’s honor is brought to shame and she becomes more susceptible to abuse and isolation within her community.\textsuperscript{128} The cultural belief that a woman’s role is to be a mother and wife, eventually leaving her parent’s house to become members of her groom’s family,


further strains the concept of providing a costly education. Often times parents feel that they may not receive a proposal like this again, the man may not be as good or well-off, and they worry if there will be any more proposals at all. This stress causes some parents to perceive this process of finding a suitor for daughters as a burden, and want to rid themselves of this responsibility when a ‘good offer’ is received. Because wifehood is a necessary aspect held with the parent’s responsibility, it is also the father’s duty to keep her safe and sexually pure until marriage. Within the Bangladeshi society, virginity in a girl is revered and sacred and can only be broken within the bonds of marriage between a man and women. Parents feel that marriage is a protection from premarital sexual activities and strangers that approach their daughters who are unknown to the family and may not be a suitable groom.

In an interview conducted in Satkhira, in the Southwestern border of the country, a young girl, Sharina and her father, Akash tell the story of when Sharina was married. Sharina had started seventh grade and was taken out one month after classes began. Her mother had died when she was only five years old and her new stepmother had never supported her education. Her stepmother, grandmother, uncle and aunt would always pressure her father to marry-off Sharina. Her father, Akash, sold other people’s rice in the village, and having adequate money for food and education was difficult. He made little money to support Sharina and her younger brother’s education, but tried hard to keep them in school. One day her uncle brought over a neighbor of his, a 27-year-old bicycle mechanic, in order to meet Sharina. After constant pressure from family members, Sharina felt mentally tortured, however, Akash still held his ground.

Without Akash’s approval, Sharina’s grandmother had accepted the proposal. He repeatedly said no, but if the family revoked their approval it would bring shame upon the family.

“My mother, younger brother and his wife, and mother’s side cousins did it. They chose the bridegroom. I shouted at them and didn’t want to marry her but they said ‘You have no money, you must marry daughter’… I had the wish that my daughter would be educated but sister’s husband came with the proposal. The groom was not much educated and not good but my family tried to convince me again. My mother accepted the proposal of the bridegroom’s family, after 15 days of all convincing me, what could I do. Some said it’s not good for your daughter you should continue her education for 2 more years but my mother had already told the bridegroom yes.”

– Akash, father of Sharina, age 15

The bridegroom’s family asked for 20,000 taka ($257 USD) and a gold necklace as the dowry price. Sharina’s father could not afford to buy a necklace, so her stepmother gave the groom’s family a ring instead. Sharina did not want to be married, she tried to prepare herself, but in her mind she thought:

“I am a little girl, it will not be easy to handle another family. I had sufferings in my head”
- Sharina, age 15 [married at 13]

After she was married and moved to her new family’s home, her mother in law found faults and exaggerated small mistakes in order to convince her son that Sharina was not competent or fit for their family. Sharina’s mother in law would beat her every single day with a stick that held the door shut, and suggested to other family members to hit her body in places that no one would be able to see. Her mother in-law became angry that she did not receive the gold necklace agreed upon in the set dowry price. Sharina tried to secretly call her father and finally she escaped by bus and walked for two hours by herself to get back to her father’s home.

Akash always thought it was a bad idea, but did not recognize the situation would come to physical torture. His feelings of remorse and regret were eminent in his interview. In a way, the father felt that he had no other option but to marry his daughter. Sharina was subject to physical and mental torture by her father’s family at first to be married and then by her in-laws...
within her new home. Sharina was crying during her interview, she is still suffering and has not yet been re-enrolled in school. This is the story of not only fifteen year-old Sharina, but of many girls even younger than her.

Young girls are sought after and more revered by older men as they are seen to be more compliant and less resistant, have more procreative power, and unfortunately by some males, they are seen as more physically attractive. During the parents meeting in Syhlet, a father argued that:

“A younger girl has more demand in society. A man at 70 tried to marry a 12 year old. The mother had four other girls. The girl was forced to marry because mother could not afford. This happens around here. Another 85 year old got the same girl for 24,000 taka.” – Father at Parents meeting Moulvi Bazar, Sylhet.

Girls are often forced to marry men above their own age bracket because men are not seen as ready for marriage unless they are able to financially support a family or have some financial capital. This vast age difference causes young girls to have little bargaining power in safe sex practices, family visits and health choices. Parents also marry their daughters at an extremely young age because they worry of the increase in dowry as a girl gets older, and are unwilling to delay marriage for they fear that the family will lack money when it is time for a girl to be married.

Dowry is classified as the transaction of goods or money from the bride’s family to the groom’s family either before or after the marriage to ensure the daughter’s security, happiness, a good timely marriage and as a safeguard against divorce. However, it is proven that dowry

131 Ibid.,
does not in fact safeguard against divorce, and increases the likelihood of violence. Grooms’ families often ask for money, jewelry, motorcycles, furniture or other goods. Scholars have argued that dowry demands have increased dramatically because of greed, growing consumerism, materialism, status seeking, rising living standards, poverty and even climate change affecting families relying on agriculture. Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world, and turning to marriage has become a way for groom’s families to accumulate capital through the dowry system that exists within the rural regions of the country. Dowry has been used as a form of income by men or as a way to set themselves up for a business, which has led to an increase in multiple marriages, divorce and separation. The insecurity that women have from the institution of marriage has led families to see education as a source of security for families and girls.

Dowry is a regional culturally engrained practice rather than a religious one that increased and spread dramatically during the 1960’s. Previously, dowry was actually called *pon*, where the males paid the bride’s family if she came from an equal or higher social position, in exchange for a marriage agreement. Around the 1950’s, the amount exchanged was roughly 600-700 taka, however, the payments slowly diminished in value and finally ceased around the

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1960’s for wealthier families and during the 1970’s for lower-income families. In the past, the focus of a marriage was for a desirable bride, and now greater attention is directed towards a desirable groom. This change in transactions exchanged occurred due to the surplus of unmarried daughters still living with their parents. Unemployment was at around 44 percent during the 1970’s, causing men to converge towards cities in order to find work. Because of this, there was a perception among Bangla parents that there was a shortage of men within their rural communities. Although the practice of dowry is illegal according to the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980, the tradition is actually increasing because of rising male unemployment rates.¹⁴¹ Not only is prevalence of dowry increasing, but also the costs associated with dowry increase with age. The financial capital required for the exchange of dowry can jump nearly 50 percent every year as a girl gets older, and costs of dowry can exceed a family’s annual income.¹⁴² This leads parents to consider the costs of education verses marriage and can provoke parents to turn to early marriage instead of furthering their daughter’s education.¹⁴³ Families who are poor with multiple daughters are at a higher risk for marrying them before the legal age of 18, in order to ease the financial burden.¹⁴⁴

Because education for adolescents is increasing, younger girls are often times more educated than their older husbands. In the society of Bangladesh it is more appropriate for husbands to have a higher level of education than wives, or the household stability will be

threatened as the groom's authority can be put into question; this perpetuates the idea that wives should be submissive to husbands. As having a higher educated husband is preferred, and the costs of dowry increase with groom’s level of education, it can create the idea that restricting a daughter’s education is seen as a financial benefit. Some families take out loans or sell land in order to have enough money for the ‘transaction.’ Despite the increases in dowry, child marriage is seen as financially beneficial for families, because the young girl will live with the groom’s family and be their responsibility.

High dowry payments can become an indicator to grooms families that her family will be able to support her once again, if for any reason the marriage fails. Yet, some families commit to dowry knowing that they will be unable to pay. Often times, as witnessed during the interviews, if payments are not met, the groom’s family may inflict torture both physical and mental upon the new bride in their home. In some cases grooms families ask for more dowry even after the marriage price was already agreed upon. In the interviews conducted, it was the mother in-laws of girls who were most likely to make ongoing requests for dowry items such as jewelry, furniture and motorcycles. Half of all girls interviewed who were currently or previously married, reported physical violence from a husband or mother in-law. Most cases were due to dowry related violence, or continual requests for money from parents even months later. Occasionally girls escape or are returned if dowry is not met, leading to separation or divorce, which can bring shame upon the family.

146 Ibid.,
Although many Bangladeshis condemn the practice of dowry, it is still widespread and extremely common for arranged marriages. Out of all girls married or previously married in the study, 70 percent of cases involved dowry, 20 percent had ‘eloped’ where no dowry was involved and 10 percent were unknown (due to young age, unawareness and inability to speak with parents). The practice of dowry is extremely common in rural regions of Bangladesh, which comprises two-thirds of the population. Cultural factors as well as lack of structural reporting systems all perpetuate the problem for young girls and impoverished families and affect the rate of girl dropouts.

Because Bangladesh is a relatively newly formed state, and government institutions are insufficient and corrupt, it is difficult to have accurate measurements and reporting systems of early marriage. Some marriages are performed in secret or under the table, with no legal paperwork produced. Birth registration facilities are also very weak within the country; only 31 percent of births are registered. This leads to girls ages often being unknown or distorted. Some parents stated that they only roughly knew the age of their children, and recount their child’s birth in the year of a natural disaster or memorable event. Schools can also underreport instances of dropouts or child marriages because the government requires a minimum of 75 percent of students to remain in school in order to retain government funding. The Bangladeshi government and organizations continue in their attempts to help young girls stay in school and out of marriage, however, implementation and structural factors continue to obstruct progress.

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Government and International Organizations Efforts to End Child Marriage

The government of Bangladesh has acknowledged the issue of child marriage. They have enacted laws prohibiting the practice of child marriage and dowry and have created initiatives to keep girls in schools, however, the tradition still continues. The United Nations has also created the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which condemn the practice of child marriage and claim the universal right to education. The government of Bangladesh has signed and ratified all of the previously listed treaties, despite the high rates of dropouts and child marriages within the country. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights gives individuals the right to free and full consent to marriage. Article 16 affirms that:

“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women:

a. the same right to enter into marriage
b. the same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent
c. the same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution.”

It has been established that child marriage and education are interrelated and in order to find a solution, it is key to focus on both of these obstacles and all underlying components.

The government of Bangladesh has implemented programs and policies that tackle one issue or the other, but has not properly engaged all factors in extinguishing the problem of child marriage and girl dropouts. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, implemented in 1930 still lacks proper enforcement, even almost a century later. The Act defines a child as a male under the age of 21 and a female under the age of 18 and states that it is illegal to conduct, direct or contract a
marriage if one or both members of the union is a child. For individuals engaging in activities related to child marriage, a ‘simple imprisonment which may extend to one month, or a fine which may extend to one thousand taka’ ($12.8 USD) may be imposed.’ Despite this, parents still choose to marry their daughters because enforcement is insufficient and lacks justice.

Local governments have also tried to take initiatives in preventing child marriage. In the district of Satkhira, it was reported that the magistrate, Syed Faruq Hamed, had declared that the district be a child-marriage-free district. He also reportedly spoke at all the secondary schools in the region, giving students a hotline number to report cases of child marriage. Girls in an adolescent training center in the village of Kaliganj spoke of their excitement in regards to the announcement and felt that in their district it had become harder for parents to marry their daughters if she was below the legal age. In this same village however, it was noted that 5 of 29 girl students in a WGLG club meeting with girls from 29 different schools in the area had been replaced in the past few months due to child marriage.

Girls at this meeting spoke of instances where they had called this hotline and reported a child marriage. Some were stopped, however, there were also cases of police bribing. One girl from the meeting along with others went to the house of a classmate who was going to be married, in order to convince the family to stop the marriage. The day of the wedding, they called the hotline and the police came and took the father. The police only released him on one condition; that the father not marry his daughter before the age of 18. In this case, the girls were successful in stopping the marriage of their classmate. Another girl, Tripty, from Muhunba Madhnseedanpur, also went to a family’s home in order to stop the marriage of one of her classmates. The father said ‘Who are you and will you feed my daughter?’ Tripty called the police hotline, but nothing happened. She later found out that the police had accepted a 2000 taka
($25 USD) bribe from the family and they did not do anything about the marriage. Although the girls in the meeting felt that the situation had changed in their district, and it was a bit more difficult to marry-off daughters, the practice was still continuing due to corruption within the justice system.

Informal reporting measures such as telling a schoolteacher or headmaster were found to be effective in many cases. Girls clubs, set up by Women and Girls Lead Global, train girls how to improve their schools, and also how to help stop instances of child marriage. Girl students are taught to go in groups to the families’ homes and speak with parents on the risks involved with early marriage. The ‘Child Marriage and Eve Teasing Prevention Committee’ was set up in a secondary school in Satkhira. The club consists of 25 girls and 10 boys. They present in groups to different classes in their school and have meetings with the entire school two to three times a year to educate them on the risks of child marriage and what to do if they hear of an instance of early marriage. The club also presents in parents meetings averaging at about 100 parents, who come during school hours and usually consist of mostly mothers. The president of the club along with other students visit parents if they hear of a classmate about to be married and try to convince them to return their daughter to school. If the Child Marriage and Eve-Teasing Prevention Committee students cannot convince parents to stop the marriage, the head-teacher of the club and headmaster will attempt to convince the parents informing them of the illegality and reporting the case to the police if the situation is not stopped. The club president, Chandi, reported that last year there were 6 cases in which she went to stop a child marriage. She reported that 3 or 4 marriages had been prevented.

These informal reporting structures can produce change if structurally implemented correctly. When teachers and headmasters care enough and go out of their way to protect their
students from harm it causes societal changes. Teachers and headmasters were extremely helpful, often going out of their way to help girls at risk of being married and withdrawn from school. Teachers were seen offering free tutoring and extra help to those in need. Government enforcement for child marriage has clearly proved to be ineffective, however the blame cannot only rest with the government. Cultural ideologies of womanhood, puberty, virginity and shame as well as poverty and natural disasters all come into play when assessing the factors for causes of early marriage and school dropouts.

Child Marriage manifested in relation to Girl Dropouts

It was noted within this study that girl dropouts and early marriage were intertwined within the cultural narrative. This study concluded that 76 percent of total girls interviewed, were currently not in school or had previously dropped out of school. Of the 23.5 percent of girls who had previously dropped out of school and returned, 75 percent was due to divorce or separation from a spouse and 25 percent was due to marital engagement that was stopped by teachers. In the cases of girls who returned to school due to separation or divorce, physical and mental torture were committed by either the spouse or in-laws in 100 percent of these cases. Of the 76 percent of girls who had dropped out of school, 69 percent had been engaged in early marriage. Over two-thirds of girls who had dropped out of school in this study, were forced to become wives and leave their homes at such a young age. Although these figures do no mean to be fully representative of the rates throughout the country, it does shed light on the pervasiveness of the practice of child marriage, dropouts and domestic violence.

The average age at first marriage in this study was 14.3 years. Girls and youth in general are very impressionable; during this time in their lives they develop into individuals, discovering
their interests and future pursuits. School is a big part of creating one’s identity and these girls deserve the opportunity to do so. The Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exam taken in 10th grade, was seen an important marker in girls education, as parents perceive that reaching grade 10 is an appropriate final level of education and costs of the exam are quite expensive (1800 taka or $23 USD). Parents may feel that this is an appropriate level, because the exam is an important indicator for smoother transitions into the work force.153 Some girls interviewed did not pass the exam, and were taken out and others did not have the money to afford the exam. In one instance, a girl who dropped out of school directly before the SSC exam, mentioned that all of her older sisters had married before the SSC exam, and it seemed as if her time was next.

The manifestation of early marriage creates a high-risk situation for daughters once they reach puberty. Girls in group C, who had been separated or divorced had returned back to their family’s home due to physical violence and torture. Although most girls who were separated or divorced returned to school eventually, their experiences of trauma truly reflected in their interviews. Classmates welcomed their friends back to school, however, the schoolwork and homework was difficult for them to understand. It was noted that some girls had to revert to the ‘general track’ as opposed to a specialized stream such as science or humanities. The general track is easier and offers less job opportunities upon completion. Young girls taken out of school for marriage are having a difficult time returning after missing so much information. It was noted that these girl’s parents were now opposed to the idea of marrying their daughter before the legal age, although they are still in the same predicament, having considerable difficulty in paying for costs of education. Parents were more open to helping their daughters and doing whatever it

takes, filing for divorce themselves and working with schools to have their daughter reenter into a safe environment.

Most parents who attended the parents meetings in this study acknowledged the importance of educating their children, even if they themselves had little education:

“All countries that are developed now, they invested in education. We know that. If boys and girls get an education our whole nation will be prosperous so we need education” – Father at parents meeting in Sylhet

Parents are aware that education can further their daughter’s wellbeing and be an asset in the marriage market. Because women can earn more with a higher education, society has embraced the idea of women working in higher positions. Within the past few decades the female labor market has changed drastically. As more girls are reaching higher levels of education and becoming more involved in the labor market in the country, it is perceived that their power within the home is also likely to increase.

Although some girls did not understand various aspects of marriage, most girls said they were not prepared to handle the pressure and responsibilities at such a young age. Girls explained that they did not want to marry, but wanted to continue their education and become something respectable in society such as a doctor or teacher. These girls notice the problems within their communities, how people die because they don’t have access to medical facilities or even 100 taka to pay for treatment. Girls want to better their country and help their communities and neighbors in need. Research shows that women are aware that education decreases their vulnerability and increases their personal agency and bargaining power,\textsuperscript{154} they are aware that through education their opportunities increase.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.,
Conclusion

Withdrawing girls from schools decreases their opportunities and choices for their future and reduces their chances of employment. Child marriage increases the risk of domestic violence, pregnancy and childbearing complications, as well as mental and physical stresses. This study demonstrates the high risks that girls face upon entering into marriage. When child marriage occurs or a girl drops out of school, the other event seems to follow concurrently. School dropouts and early marriage are interconnected in the rural regions of Bangladesh. The underlying reasons for girl dropouts and child marriage are associated with each other, reasons involving safety, sexual harassment, purity and honor create the idea that marriage can be a safety net for young girls instead of continuing their education. Child marriage perpetuates the slow economic growth of the country. In order for the country to thrive in the international sphere, children both boys and girls must continue their education. The Bangladeshi government and organizations often times try to attack one problem and not the other, however the causes for child marriage and schoolgirl dropouts are all intertwined. The risks for girls remain extremely high, and the only way to inhibit these obstacles is to ensure that girls remain in schools and stay out of marriage. Although progress has been slow, there is hope for young girls across the country.

VI. Lack of Government Infrastructure

Bangladesh celebrated 40 years of independence in 2011. However, infrastructure still remains a work in progress since its separation from Pakistan in 1971. The education sector is suffering due to insufficient teachers, lack of natural disaster support, and an ineffective governmental child marriage reporting and justice system. Funds geared towards education have
increased throughout the past few decades, however the country is heavily dependent on international organizations and NGO’s to improve the situation. Schoolgirl dropouts persist partly due to the lack of quality within the secondary school system and departmental sectors. Large class sizes and ineffective textbooks create a system of privatized education, as the need to purchase multiple guidebooks and increased private tutoring becomes a necessity in order to progress to a higher grade level.

Education rates in Bangladesh have improved dramatically and rapidly in the past few decades with the help of international organizations to implement various projects such as the Food for Education (FFE) Project and the Female Secondary School Assistance Program (FSSAP). These initiatives have increased the number of girls enrolling and completing school. In 1991 secondary school female enrollment was at roughly 1 million, which increased to 4 million girls by 2005. Although the efforts made by the government and international organizations have helped the country dramatically, some scholars have criticized the efficacy of these programs. Due to the drastic increase in number of students attending schools, the infrastructure – teachers, classroom sizes and space for children are insufficient. The overcrowding in schools has affected the quality of education for students, consequently affecting the rate of school dropouts.

Most secondary schools are not considered public, even though they do receive some funding from the government, they are known as semi-governmental schools. The Ministry of Education runs most primary schools with some financial and administrative contributions from

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the community. There is approximately one secondary school for every four primary schools in the country. Teachers training, salary and scholarship support are partly funded by the government if certain requirements are met by the school, however, tuition is still required from students and their parents in order to keep the schools afloat. Primary schools within the country are free for all, and have seen dramatic improvements in attendance and progression, although they remain overcrowded. Secondary schools, however, come with high costs to parents, making it challenging for low-income families and greatly affecting the rate of dropouts. National data may also be inaccurate because schools only retain funding if they maintain 75 percent of students every year, this can lead schools to underreport instances of dropouts.

School infrastructure including buildings, teachers, headmasters, and natural disaster management is insufficient throughout the country. Some may argue that natural disaster recovery should not be a top priority, however this is a pivotal issue for students because school buildings, homes, and routes to school are severely affected in each natural disaster causing students to fall behind. Bangladesh is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world due to the dense population, unsafe structure of housing, reliance on agriculture and poverty throughout the country. One disaster could affect millions of individual’s shelter, food security, schooling and income. Bangladesh has the highest disaster mortality rate in the world. Within the country there have been 516,239 deaths between 1970 and 2005 in 171 natural disasters. Cyclones, droughts, floods, river erosion, tidal surge, water loggings and cold waves all occur consistently in Bangladesh affecting the general population. Between the years 1970 and 2007, at least 800,000 houses were destroyed each year due to natural disasters. The average number of

people killed and affected by natural disasters has been shown to be decreasing; yet governmental response to help citizens with recovery after these situations is still insufficient.\textsuperscript{159}

More that 10 million people were affected by disasters in Bangladesh every year from 1986 to 2007. These disasters cause displacement, homelessness, and separation of children from their families affecting the rights of children, including their right to education. School buildings often become flooded, and the walk to school can be difficult, especially for those who travel long distances to schools. During disasters and emergencies, schools may shut down due to the structural damage of the school building and inability for teachers and students to reach classrooms. In 2004, 23,236 school buildings were damaged due to floods and 1,259 were completely destroyed. In 2007, cyclones destroyed 496 school buildings and damaged 2,110 other schools in the country. Since 1971, 900 educational buildings have been destroyed each year by cyclones, floods and river erosion, and 4,666 schools are damaged each year.\textsuperscript{160}

Although there is somewhat a lack of reliable data on these occurrences, school buildings and classrooms are clearly being affected. Temperatures are expected to rise and cyclones and monsoons will become more frequent and intense. Rainfall will increase, contributing to major flooding and riverbank erosion and major droughts will ensue creating problems with food security and income for those dependent on agriculture.\textsuperscript{161} Climate change and lack of government support is further affecting girls’ ability to remain in schools and influencing the livelihood for many families in rural Bangladesh. How people within the country adapt to these events will depend on their resilience, and capacity to adopt sustainable long-term solutions. As

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.
government assistance has been lacking, the people of Bangladesh will have to rely on assistance from various organizations and NGO interventions. If the government and organizations do not aid the millions of people affected by natural disasters, families may adopt unsustainable coping strategies when their income has halted and the need for food, money and shelter becomes desperate. Alston et al. (2014) argue that in rural Bangladesh, unsustainable coping strategies are appearing in conjunction with climate change as it appears to be facilitating child marriage and dowry transactions. Reporting systems for child marriage is weak at best, as the government and police force is largely profiteering. Public perception of the police force is that they are very corrupt and politicized, making it ineffective in combating crime. The country was ranked 145th out of 175 nations in terms of corruption perception. The corruption in Bangladesh has led to international donors aiding NGO’s rather than the government out of preference and fear for mismanagement of funds.

Bangladesh’s weak state-building is visible within their political system as corruption and political rivalry is highly visible between the Awami League (AL) and the oppositional Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Political party competition has led to fluctuation, and government inefficiencies impacting a variety of sectors including education. During an interview with a female headmistress of a school in the district of Satkhira, the government corruption was evident and clearly manipulating the schools capacities, funding and benefits. The headmaster’s father, and founder of the school was one of the ‘freedom fighters’ and one of the original 300 members of Parliament. He was a member of the Awami League and also

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helped to create the League of Commerce and the Workers Labor Union within the country. Unfortunately, rival members in the oppositional party murdered him. The disdain for her father was clearly evident and still affecting the school. She has requested for the monthly payment order (MPO) from the Ministry of Education, to help with teacher’s salaries. However, the opposing party members who disliked her father continue to halt any funding from the government to this particular school, they claim that the school does not exist. She still faces hardships from these political enemies of her father in her personal and professional life. Even with these setbacks, the school of equally distributed boys and girls (330 students) continues to pursue its promise in educating as many girls and boys in the surrounding areas.

Government corruption is blatantly affecting the secondary school system, this is just one case in which the opposing parties and rivalry between the AL and BNP continue to create a void and lack of quality within the educational system of Bangladesh. Robert Jackson uses the term quasi-state to identify the lack of government efficacy and internal institutional weakness, which creates an external dependency on aid. This is the case in Bangladesh; the increased reliance on NGO’s, create a system where the government continues to be insufficient. Improving the quality of education goes beyond enhanced access to children, it requires improved classroom facilities and sizes, increased aid for schools, a system of natural disaster aid and the cessation of government corruption in order to progress and continue forward.

**Government and International Aid towards Education**

Education levels have only recently improved in the past few decades through incentive programs and non-formal education (NFE) classrooms sponsored by the government and various NGO’s. The Constitution of Bangladesh enshrines the right to education for all students, and has
in fact created a system of free primary education schools throughout the country. The
government of Bangladesh instituted the Compulsory Primary Education Act in 1990 and has
been a great example of a developing country that has dramatically progressed primary education
levels in a short period of time. Public spending on education has increased as a proportion of
GDP from 0.9 percent (1972-80) to 2.2 percent. Education has been an increasingly high
priority, rising from about 9 percent of total spending in the first FYP (1973-80) to 16 percent
(1995-96). Despite these increases in aid, there are still young students being withdrawn from
primary and secondary schools. What has been done in the past is not sufficient to sustain the
large numbers of people within the country who cannot afford an education.

**Access to Schools**

Programs like the Female Secondary School Assistance Program (FSSAP) and the Food
for Education (FFE) program were meant to counterbalance for the costs of education, making it
easier for families to send their children to school. International organizations aided in the
implementation and finances of these projects because of the importance of female education as
it contributes to economic development and health of the nation. The Food for Education (FFE)
program was implemented in 1993, with aid from the World Bank. The program gave 15-20 kg
of wheat per month to poor families in rural areas of Bangladesh for students enrolled and
attending primary schools at least 85 percent of the month. Families either consumed the grain
or sold it for profit to cover other household expenses. The FFE program covered 27 percent of

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166 Ibid.,
all primary schools and enrolled about one-third of all primary school students, targeting the lowest income households within poor areas.\textsuperscript{168} From 1992 to 1996 female enrollment rates increased from 48 to 71 percent as compared to boys’ enrollment, which increased from 49 to 63 percent during the same time period.\textsuperscript{169} The increase for girls was dramatically improved even though the program was not meant to be gender specific.

An analysis by the International Food Policy Research Institute found that the FFE program led to increased enrollment and attendance rates, however FFE schools had become overcrowded, as the infrastructure could not handle the repercussions. FFE school classrooms had 22 percent more students, with 67 children per class, as opposed to non-FFE schools with only 55 students per class. Although the FFE program was geared towards primary education and the study conducted in this thesis focused on secondary schools, overcrowding in schools is clearly an issue within rural Bangladesh. From the study presented in this thesis, classrooms ranged from 60-120 students in secondary schools. Many girls interviewed, stated that their classrooms had too many students per teacher. Future programs need to target these obstacles that affect teachers, class size and infrastructure in order to better the quality of education for boys and girls.\textsuperscript{170}

The Female Secondary School Assistance Program (FSSAP) was another incentive program created in 1994 to help close the gender gap and reduce the fertility rates and number of child marriages within the country. Bangladesh has one the highest population densities in the world; during the late 1970’s there were almost 7 children per mother, which has now decreased


to 2.3 children per mother.\textsuperscript{171} The government launched the FSSAP initiative with financial aid from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the government of Norway to help girls in rural and non-metropolitan areas. The scholarship required that girls attend 75 percent of classes, retain an average of 45 percent on their examinations and remain unmarried until they complete their Secondary School Certificate exam (SSC). The stipend program was eligible for religious and secular schoolgirls in grade 6 and 9 and then expanded in 1996 to also include girls in grade 7 and 8. Families were able to cover the costs of tuition, books, school supplies, uniforms and other expenses through the program. The tuition portion was paid directly to the school and the excess amount was then transferred into a bank account opened in the daughter’s name. In 2005, nearly 2.3 million secondary school girls were enrolled in this program. A key aspect of the program required that participating parents document and sign an agreement, stating that they will not marry their daughters before the age of 18, however, this pledge was probably more often broken than not.\textsuperscript{172}

The FSSAP increased secondary female enrollment from 1.1 million in 1991 to 3.9 million in 2005. Girls Secondary School Certificate (SSC) rates grew from 39 percent to 62.8 percent in the project areas.\textsuperscript{173} This initiative has been not only associated with closing the gender gap, but with unintentionally cutting back participation of boys in secondary schools.\textsuperscript{174} The opportunity costs for boys are greater, as they have more options in the job market and are more likely to be forced to work in order to contribute towards family expenses. This in


combination with the increased aid for girls has encouraged parents to favor keeping their adolescent girls in school rather than their boys. This can cause resentment of the program as it favors girls over boys and can create tension among adolescent boys and girls, perpetuating stereotypes and teasing within those communities. Although the drawbacks from these initiatives have decreased the quality, more girls are in fact attending schools because of them.

Another success in strengthening girl’s access to education has been shown with the design of non-formal education (NFE) programs. Non-formal schools tend to be offered by non-governmental organizations rather than the government, emphasizing parental and community involvement and the engagement of female teachers from the community. They have also been noted to include learning material and issues relevant to the student’s background and social contexts. This is an important issue, because the state textbooks provided by the government are translated books, with issues that are often difficult and irrelevant to the students. When the content has foreign matters, it can confuse students, however, when it reflects their own traditions and lives it becomes easier to grasp.

The focus of BRAC primary schools is quality education and allowing for 70 percent girl students in each classroom. They also ensure that teachers are female and come from the same village as students, allowing them to understand the needs of the community and for parents to feel safe while sending their daughters to school. Teachers are also intensively trained and require at least an 8th grade education. There are no fees and no long holidays as well as little to no homework because parents are usually unable to assist them. BRAC students are taught about social values and responsibilities in addition to the standard curriculum. Children with special

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needs are closely looked after, as BRAC assists with providing wheelchairs, hearing aids, glasses and ramps. These non-formal classrooms have been highly effective in targeting low-income students who would otherwise not be able to attend school.

BRAC formerly known as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (currently BRAC does not represent an acronym), created an education program within the country that has been highly recognized and influential in not only gaining access but creating a safe and quality education system. BRAC schools have been among the most effective non-formal education programs in the country. BRAC is one of the largest NGO’s in the world, created in 1972 and began with only 22 non-formal one-room schools. BRAC has set up over 35,000 non-formal primary schools in areas of need employing 33,000 teachers and educating over 1 million students. BRAC schools have been applauded for their strong commitment to promoting girl’s education and their poverty-centered, demand-driven initiatives. A school is only opened in a village if there is an identifiable teacher, someone willing to donate a schoolhouse, and 30 eligible students who are all living in poverty and not currently in school. Because BRAC schools are created in small villages, it allows for parents to feel more secure about their daughters travel and safety to school, as distance is often reduced.

Access to primary and secondary education has clearly been improved dramatically in Bangladesh due to help from international organizations and aid from abroad. Various NGO’s have sponsored many programs to increase access for girl’s education. The previously mentioned programs have been highly acclaimed for their dramatic response and change in access and societal understandings of the importance of education. Despite the governmental corruption and

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179 Ibid.
lack of funding from the government, the situation in Bangladesh has rapidly changed and needs to continue on this path of improvement if further advancement and opportunities are expected.

*Natural Disaster Aid*

Due to the perilous and frequent natural disasters in Bangladesh, international organizations have stepped in to implement projects that help families and students with natural disaster preparedness and management. Families risk losing their houses, food supply and income during a natural disaster, but students also risk losing their school buildings. NGO’s have begun to raise awareness in communities on the importance of continuing classes even after a disaster and they have taught schools, students and families’ safer practices and safety planning in case of emergencies. Plan International Bangladesh, Save the Children United Kingdom and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) implemented the Education in Emergencies Project (EiE) to help keep children in schools during times of natural disasters. The program covered 1000 primary schools in 10 districts in the country focusing on schools that were most vulnerable to flood and cyclone damage. Part of this project was to gather students’ perspectives and also to identify and implement measures needed in order to continue education during and after a disaster.

Creating or selecting alternative places that are easily accessible to students was a key part of this program. Members from School Management Committees (SMC) sometimes offered their land during emergencies. To make the schools less vulnerable during disasters, the school teachers and headmasters implemented various disaster preparedness projects such as school ground raising, school side wall repairing, floor raising, classroom extensions, tube well installation or repairing, and latrine installation or repairing to ensure safe drinking water and
sanitation facilities. Schools also purchased learning materials to be used during disasters and repaired the connecting roads and bamboo bridges. Some schools even implemented boat scheduling to ensure safe transport for children. Students were also involved with drawing and essay competitions revolving disaster safety to raise awareness among the children.

With each school having various needs with differing levels of importance, teachers, headmasters, SMC’s and also students created an initial plan. After a disaster, students were encouraged to come to school and teachers noted that parents were very encouraging the year of the project (2010). SMC’s set up classes if teachers were late or unable to reach the school. Through collective efforts, improvements were made; immediate repair of chairs, tables and benches were done through financial assistance from the teachers and members of the communities. A focus on saving learning materials after disasters was a major priority for schools and some used the grants given to them through the EiE program to purchase new learning materials.

During this project, community members seemed generally resistant at first to the idea of continuing school during an emergency, as they prioritized more dyer necessities. Communities were not aware that education could be continued during an emergency situation, even when the school building was destroyed or unavailable. Because families and communities believed that fulfilling basic needs like food and shelter were of greater importance, continuing education after a disaster was somewhat of a foreign concept to them. However, by showing families that education is also a basic necessity, and should thus be prioritized, most of them understood and put forth full effort. Educating teachers and parents of the importance of continuing education after natural disasters can create a greater social awareness and improve the lives and quality of education for students throughout Bangladesh.
Quality of Secondary Schools

Because of the complexities and dynamics of these factors that cause children to remain out of school in Bangladesh there is not one single intervention that can create change for secondary students in Bangladesh. It has been shown that programs that encourage girls to stay in school and help better their learning environment will support the overall societal development of the country. Quality of girls’ education is the next step that the government and NGO’s must focus on to keep girls in schools within regions of rural Bangladesh, as it affects parents’ decisions in keeping their daughters in schools. The government has implemented various requirements for secondary schools in order to have parents feel less anxious in sending their girls to school, such as the 2 female teacher minimum that is required in secondary schools. The problem however, is enforcement, as schools do not always abide to the Ministry of Education’s policies.

Other ways of improving the quality of education has been through NGO programs and incentives. One example that was seen to improve girls overall wellbeing and the condition of education was through the ‘Best School for Girls’ campaign created by Women and Girl’s Lead Global. The organization began with implementation in 22 schools and has grown to implementing their project in over 300 secondary schools in the country. The purpose of the project is for clubs at each school to help classmates, promote cultural activities, initiate outdoor sports, create a better environment at school and help initiate a process to facilitate teacher-student connections. A club is formed in each school to help improve the lives of girls within the schools (usually all girls, however, in some schools clubs are both genders). Clubs have implemented complaint boxes, created monuments, planted gardens, create toilet-cleaning
schedules and some donate 2 taka every month for future projects. Various projects have been established within each school in order to promote an improved environment for students.

One of the most effective initiatives by these clubs was their attempt at preventing cases of child marriages. When girls within the club notice that a classmate has not been attending school, they often times go in groups to the classmates home in order to try and stop future cases of child marriage. They all receive training by Ranju, the capacity building specialist, and have group meetings with girls from other schools in their district in order to see what other clubs have been working on. Another major step forward in these clubs have been made with the implementation of a complaint boxes. These complaint boxes are read by the faculty of the school and give girls the chance to anonymously report problems or establish claims that are in need of improvement in their schools. Complaints of eve-teasing, lack of clean or functioning toilet facilities or common rooms have created a structured system that allows teachers and headmasters to review and fix problems that girls perceive as risky or in need of improvement.

Through this system, change has been made; common rooms have been established, which allow girls to gather in a more private manner to discuss problems that they otherwise would feel uncomfortable speaking about. In one instance, the establishment of the common room allowed girls to discuss their problems with the toilets in their schools. The school had very little running water, and because they do not use toilet paper, running water is a necessity for schools. Girls in this particular school mentioned that the teachers are currently working on the situation. Many girls in the trainings spoke of the instances where their school had been improved because of the establishment of complaint boxes. This initiative is highly regarded because the changes come from students’ complaints and initiatives, and not from government or
international policies. The problems being fixed are truly the voices of girls and their perceptions of what needs the most improvement within their schools.

Each year Women and Girls Lead Global gives awards to participating schools within each subdivision. A best teacher, best parent, best school, and best initiative are presented at an awards ceremony. This creates incentives for schools; however, it is not just about the incentive. The purpose of these clubs is not only to improve the quality of schools but to also open up dialogues for students both boys and girls as well as parents and create an interactive environment where everyone including the community can become involved. School headmasters and faculty are inspired to continue enacting change and progression for girls in their school. The campaign set forth by WGLG is not meant to be a short term fix, schools have committed to continuing with the Best School for Girls Campaign even if the NGO discontinues, as the schools have seen how many improvements have come about from this program. Many people find a short-term fix, however, the long-term solutions are the only way to tackle schoolgirl dropouts, child marriage and better the environment for students within the context of Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Due to the lack of quality infrastructure in the Bangladeshi education sector, many NGO’s have established effective initiatives throughout the country. The high rate of corruption within the police enforcement and the strong party rivalry that occurs was evident in this study, and has affected girls in secondary schools. Although this thesis only covered a small proportion of effective programs, the country is filled with numbers of organizations that are in route to bettering the country’s development and educational sector. I argue that the previous school-
incentive programs that improved girls education has been more beneficial than not, despite the criticisms of the projects. It is important to move forward in creating positive methods that further improve girls’ education in Bangladesh.

VII. Conclusion

The education system in Bangladesh has improved dramatically in the past few decades, specifically in regards to girls’ access to education. However, despite all the efforts from international organizations and the government of Bangladesh, girls still continue to dropout at high rates from secondary schools. The themes and narratives expressed in this thesis are meant to be representative of a broader Bangladeshi reality for those living in rural areas. The outcomes for girls vary drastically than for boys within these regions, as they have a higher chance of being withdrawn from secondary schools due to child marriage. Girls forced into marriage end up having their childhood taken away from them. The right to an education and the right to a childhood are both internationally recognized rights, regardless of country, ethnicity or socio-economic status.

The lack of government infrastructure perpetuates the problems for girls within Bangladesh. A solid and quality education system with free textbooks, guidebooks and exams is necessary, yet absent within the education system. Teachers are overloaded with students, giving them fewer opportunities to deal with individual classmates and promote parental engagement. Decreased class sizes, more teachers and access to free tutoring are necessary to improve the situation for girls and decrease the rate of girl dropouts. Children in Bangladesh want to learn, and want to continue their education, not be cutoff and removed from schooling because their family lacks money. Developing ways to reduce direct and indirect costs to parents for tuition,
books, uniforms and tutoring will benefit girls and boys throughout Bangladesh. Poverty should not be a determinant for acquiring an education.

Lack of income, not only affects parent’s abilities to pay for tuition, state-exams, books and associated costs of education, but it also affects the ability for parents to attend school activities. Studies have shown the importance of parental involvement in students’ motivation and success throughout their education, it is key in order to improve the outcome of students. Parental engagement not only motivates students and improves communication between teachers, students and parents but it can also provide a way to help educate parents on existing issues that inhibit girls in their communities. Involving parents, is one way to enhance the situation for girls, however, this has proven to be a difficult task within rural Bangladesh, due to the need for parents to work daily and the recent concept of parental engagement being unfamiliar to families. NGO’s have attempted to engage larger audiences of parents and the community through creative strategies, yet sufficient involvement is yet to be seen.

Safety for girls is also a great concern for students and parents, and continues to be a problem throughout many areas. The fear that parents have for their daughter’s sexual safety and reputation affects their decisions in keeping their daughters in schools versus engaging them in marriage. Parents may see marriage as a way to protect daughters from sexual harassment, eve-teasing and shaming which can all affect her prospects and options for marriage, as well as drastically increase her dowry. NGO’s and schools have begun to address these issues, making the topics of eve-teasing and sexual harassment a more commonly discussed matter and promoting practices that have aided and halted these incidents. Gender norms, stereotypes and lack of government enforcement throughout the justice system create a community that does not rely on governmental justice and continues to promote these negative consequences for young
girls. Police corruption and lack of enforcing child marriage laws are a major concern throughout the country where girls are being forced into marriage at one of the highest rates in the world.

Domestic abuse and sexual violence are prominent throughout rural Bangladesh and young girls forced into marriage are particularly susceptible to abuse by husbands and other family members in their new homes. The rate at which suicides for young girls in rural areas are taking place was very surprising, but shows the desperation that these girls face. Dowry-related violence and marriage separations were also very common, and led families to be wary of the institution of marriage. Education is seen as a way to protect girls from these negative outcomes. Ending child marriage and promoting girls education is the strongest way to end the intergenerational cycle of violence that persists in Bangladesh and will allow women and girls to participate more fully in society, the work force, political positions and have more decision-making and bargaining power in and outside of the home.

Throughout this study, it was noticed how NGO’s and school partnerships have a strong influence on girls’ education, safety and futures. The girls’ education system and underlying factors affecting girl dropouts can be further studied in order to improve secondary schools within more rural areas of Bangladesh. Future studies on female head-of-households can be further investigated, as they are a particularly vulnerable group within society. It was difficult to gauge the differences in attitudes towards mother’s and father’s desire to marry their daughters, because it was often the case that only one parent was present for interviews, or both chose to be interviewed together. The differences between mother’s and father’s perceptions of their daughters’ education, safety and expectations can also be examined further.

This study did not comprehensively or explicitly explore the gender differences in secondary education and focused solely on female dropouts, however, it is important to note that
males are also at an extreme risk for dropping out and not progressing further in their secondary education. The programs, stipends and initiatives are greater for girls in rural Bangladesh, which can cause resentment and inequality within these regions. It is essential not to disregard educational access and programs for boys, or they will continue to be at-risk for dropping out. Further research, both qualitative and quantitative, are needed in these areas, as well as further implementation of effective strategies from the government, NGO’s and schools throughout the country.

Because of the complex nature of girl dropouts, there is not one solution to end the problem, however, civil society both international and national organizations, as well as school faculty and committees need to help keep girls in school, as this will prevent many cases of child marriage. It is also the duty of the Ministry of Education to take charge of the situation and for government enforcement to increase in regards to child marriage laws and justice. Government implementation and enforcement at the national level may be ineffective and insufficient, which is why local governments must increase their dedication and persistence. District officials in 18 union parishads have pledged to take action to prevent and respond to child marriage, however every local government must pledge and take action by visiting schools, providing reporting mechanisms and enhancing their police enforcement within the area.

Despite the practice of child marriage being illegal, which is a critical factor, changing the norms and social values will occur with smaller, incremental steps of organizations and local governments and communities. Drastic and sudden nation-wide change is unrealistic, however, through the work of dedicated organizations, the enhancement, empowerment and rights of women and girls will continue to improve throughout Bangladesh. Having girls complete their secondary and tertiary education will only benefit the countries growth and relationship with
other countries. It will improve the lives of millions of girls and decrease their susceptibility to violence within the home. Greater enforcement of justice mechanisms, stronger home-school relationships and decreasing the associated costs of education are necessary. Girls in Bangladesh must have a stronger voice and the right to choose whom they will marry and when, they must remain in school and have increased options for their future. Girls want to know that their voices matter.

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