

Educational Access and Quality Challenges in Achieving SDG-4 in Bangladesh: Evidence from Urban and Rural Communities

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ABSTRACT

Achieving the sustainable development goal (SDG-4) in the developing countries like Bangladesh is a great challenge. The goal is initiated to ensure inclusive and equality based quality education for all. This research examines the barriers to achieving SDG-4, focused on entrance to education and education quality. Information collected from 500 respondents, including students, teachers, guardians, policymakers and related parties from the urban and rural areas of the Mymensingh division. The research focused on five core aspects, including availability of schools, the reason for student dropout, quality of education, availability of modern teaching aids and the gender-related barriers for girls. For data analysis descriptive statistics are used, including frequency and percentage analysis. Research findings show substantial disparities between urban and rural areas. In overall, financial constraints, early marriage and child labor become the most significant reason for students to drop out from school, but lack of available modern teaching aids and dissatisfaction with quality education are prominent in rural areas. Despite notable progress, gender-based barriers are significantly affecting the entrance to girls' education. This research emphasizes the specific policy intervention, extended teachers' development activities and importance of more investments in digital education aids. This research provides valuable insights about policymakers and education stakeholders, who are interested in the advancement of quality education in Bangladesh in the achievement of SDG-4 in Bangladesh between 2023 and 2030.

Keywords: SDG-4, Quality Education, Educational Access, Gender Equality, Teaching Quality

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As a key driver of human rights and sustainable development, education is widely accepted all over the world. In 2025, the United Nations adopted sustainable development goals as a yardstick of development. The goal of SDG-4 is to make inclusive and equality based education for all and expand the opportunity of education for all by 2030. For poverty reduction, expansion of social inclusion and strengthening economic growth, achievement of SDG-4 is essential.

In the last two decades Bangladesh achieved significant advancement in expanding access to education; the admission rate in primary school has increased with gender equality. Different government initiatives increased the opportunity of the disadvantaged population. Despite this opportunity, significant barriers hinder the realization of SDG-4. These barriers include insufficient educational infrastructure, financial barriers, limited entrance to modern teaching tools and gender inequalities, which are especially prevails in the rural areas.

In the education sector of Bangladesh, a significant amount of disparity is available in urban and rural areas. While the schools in the urban areas get developed infrastructure, qualified teachers and digital facilities, the schools in rural areas very often suffer from a lack of resources and below standard quality education. These kinds of disparities affect the effort to provide quality education for all.

In case of this adversity, research based output is required to find out the major barriers which affect education opportunity and quality. This research finds the different stakeholders' views about the barriers in the education field and provides policy recommendations to achieve SDG-4.

1.1 Research Problem

Despite significant investment in the education sector, Bangladesh is facing the barriers to achieving inclusive and equality based education. In the previous research, the issues related to school dropout, inadequate education facilities, teacher shortages and gender discrimination are focused on. But the research on education issues from the perspective of various stakeholders about the disparity of rural and urban people is rare. As a result, it is very much important to identify the barriers which hinder the advancement of SDG-4, especially from the perspective of Bangladesh.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

General Objective

To assess the major challenges that affect educational access and quality in Bangladesh in the context of achieving SDG-4.

Specific Objectives

1. To evaluate the availability of educational institutions in urban and rural areas.
2. To identify the major causes of student dropout.
3. To assess stakeholders' perceptions regarding the quality of teaching.
4. To examine the availability of modern teaching aids and digital learning resources.
5. To analyze the impact of gender related barriers on girls' education.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Education plays a crucial role in the promotion of social development, economic growth and poverty reduction. According to UNESCO, quality education contributes to sustainable quality education and social inclusion for each country. SDG-4 gives importance to equitable and quality education and lifelong learning for all.

Several studies have identified financial distress as the major reason for school dropout. Many researchers suggest that direct and indirect educational expenses are the main possible reason for school dropout. Moreover, financial instability forces children to engage in income-generating activities, which reduce the engagement of educational participation.

Educational infrastructure is another important indicator of learning outcomes. According to the survey of UNESCO, insufficient classroom facilities, poor sanitation management, lack of electricity and limited opportunity for educational resources negatively influence student attendance and academic performance. These problems are acute in rural areas.

As an important factor to influence student achievement, teacher quality is widely accepted. In much research it is found that qualified and professionally trained teachers significantly develop the education results. In many developing countries, especially in remote and disadvantaged regions, the lack of trained teachers is still prominent.

The importance of the growing necessity of digital education, especially in the case of inclusive education, makes it more intense. Many studies found that availability of computers, internet connections and digital educational equipment develops the learning experience and institutional performance. Nevertheless, digital deviation between rural and urban communities limited the educational opportunity. In many developed countries gender discrimination is an alarming issue. Although the percentage increase of girls' admission achieved considerable progress, sociocultural norms, early marriage and security concerns create hindrances in education in the rural areas.

Collectively, existing research suggests that various reasons, like financial, infrastructural, technological, and sociocultural reasons, affect the quality and availability of education. It is mandatory to remove the barriers to achieve SDG-4.

2.1 Research Gap

Although numerous studies have examined the issue of barriers in the education sector in developing countries, there are several gaps in the context of Bangladesh.

Firstly, several studies examined individual issues like school dropout, gender discrimination or teacher shortage rather than taking on the issues simultaneously.

Secondly, limited research has been conducted between stakeholders across students, teachers, guardians, policymakers and community members.

Thirdly, very few studies are conducted about the disparity in urban and rural communities in the related issues of availability of schools, quality education, digital learning resources and gender discrimination.

Finally, empirical evidence related to these perceptions based on recent stakeholders are limited.

This study tries to address the gaps between the urban and rural communities related to the issues of quality education and educational opportunity.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This research adopts the descriptive survey policy to investigate the influencing obstacles about the education access and quality education in Bangladesh.

3.2 Study Area

The research was conducted in four districts of the Mymensingh Division in Bangladesh. It was also included different upazilas of the four districts.

3.3 Population and Sample

A total of 500 respondents participated in the research survey. The respondents are constructed with:

- Students (100)

- Teachers (100)
- Parents (100)
- Policymakers (100)
- Other stakeholders (100)

Each category includes respondents from both urban and rural areas.

3.4 Sampling Technique

A stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure representation from different stakeholder groups and geographical locations. The stratified sampling technique was used to ensure the presentation of various stakeholder groups and geographical locations.

3.5 Questionnaire Development

Data was collected by a structured questionnaire based on the relevant literature of SDG 4 and quality education. The questionnaire is consisted of two sections; one is the demographic information of the respondents. The complete questionnaire contained ten close-ended questions. However, this article analyses the first five questions, which focus on educational access and quality. The remaining five questions are reported separately in another study. The questionnaire was reviewed to ensure clarity and relevance before data collection. The questionnaire consisted primarily of close-ended questions measured using a five-point Likert scale to capture respondents' perceptions of educational access and quality. For Questions 1, 3, 4, and 5, responses were coded from 1 to 5 according to the response categories (e.g., 1 = Very Poor/Very Dissatisfied/Not Available at All/Not at All and 5 = Excellent/Very Satisfied/Always Available/To a Very Large Extent). These coded responses were used to calculate the mean, median, mode, and standard deviation. Question 2 (Reasons for Student Dropout) was measured using nominal response categories and was therefore analyzed using frequency and percentage distributions only.

Data was collected by a structured questionnaire based on the related literature on SDG-4 and quality education. The questionnaire is divided into two segments: one is demographic information of respondents and another is ten close end questions. সম্পূর্ণ প্রশ্নমালায় দশটি ক্লোজ-এন্ডেড প্রশ্ন ছিল। তবে, এই প্রবন্ধে প্রথম পাঁচটি প্রশ্ন বিশ্লেষণ করা হয়েছে, যেগুলো শিক্ষার সুযোগ এবং মানের উপর আলোকপাত করে। বাকি পাঁচটি প্রশ্ন অন্য একটি গবেষণায় আলাদাভাবে উল্লেখ করা হয়েছে। তথ্য সংগ্রহের আগে প্রশ্নমালার স্বচ্ছতা এবং প্রাসঙ্গিকতা নিশ্চিত করার জন্য এটি পর্যালোচনা করা হয়েছিল। উত্তরদাতাদের শিক্ষার সুযোগ এবং মান

সম্পর্কিত ধারণা জানার জন্য প্রশ্নমালাটি মূলত ক্লোজ-এন্ডেড প্রশ্ন নিয়ে গঠিত ছিল, যা একটি পাঁচ-পয়েন্ট লাইকার্ট স্কেল ব্যবহার করে পরিমাপ করা হয়েছিল। প্রশ্ন ১, ৩, ৪ এবং ৫-এর ক্ষেত্রে, উত্তরগুলোকে তাদের বিভাগ অনুযায়ী ১ থেকে ৫ পর্যন্ত কোড করা হয়েছিল (যেমন, ১ = খুব খারাপ/খুব অসন্তুষ্ট/একেবারেই নেই/মোটেই নেই এবং ৫ = চমৎকার/খুব সন্তুষ্ট/সবসময় পাওয়া যায়/অনেকটা পাওয়া যায়)। এই কোড করা উত্তরগুলো গড়, মধ্যক, প্রচুরক এবং আদর্শ বিচ্যুতি গণনা করতে ব্যবহৃত হয়েছিল। প্রশ্ন ২ (শিক্ষার্থীদের ঝরে পড়ার কারণ) নামমাত্র প্রতিক্রিয়া বিভাগ ব্যবহার করে পরিমাপ করা হয়েছিল এবং তাই এটি শুধুমাত্র ফ্রিকোয়েন্সি এবং শতাংশ বিতরণের মাধ্যমে বিশ্লেষণ করা হয়েছিল।

3.6 Data Collection

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. Frequency distributions and percentages were used to summarize respondents' characteristics and responses. For the ordinal variables (Questions 1, 3, 4, and 5), measures of central tendency (mean, median, and mode) and dispersion (standard deviation) were calculated using the five-point Likert scale coding. Cross-tabulation was employed to compare responses between urban and rural participants as well as among different stakeholder groups. Microsoft Excel was used for data processing and statistical analysis.

3.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including:

- Frequency Distribution
- Percentage Analysis
- Cross tabulation
- Urban-Rural Comparison

Data analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel and statistical software.

4.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Availability of Schools in urban and rural areas

Table 01: Availability of Schools

Availability of schools	Student		Teacher		Parents		Policy Makers		Others		Total
	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	
Very Poor	0	5	0	8	0	15	0	0	1	10	39
Poor	10	15	2	18	14	25	0	2	5	15	106
Adequate	20	20	23	15	17	5	15	25	14	10	164

Good	15	9	20	8	15	5	15	13	20	13	133
Excellent	5	1	5	1	4	0	20	10	10	2	58
Total	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	500
Mean	3.13	Median		3.0	Mode		3.0	Standard Deviation		1.10	

Interpretation:

In the research result, it shows that the maximum respondents (32.8%) realized the availability of school as adequate. After that the respondents (26.6%) realized it was as good. But there is a clear difference between the rural and urban respondents. In the maximum case, the urban respondents realized the availability of school as adequate or good, while in the case of rural respondents, they realized the availability of school as poor and very poor. From the average score of 3.13, it is clear that the respondents treated the availability of school issues a little bit higher than adequate. From the median and mode score of 3.00, it is clear that adequate is the central and maximum answered response. The standard deviation is 1.10, which shows the average deviation of answers from the average point.

4.2 Causes of Student Dropout

Table 02: Student drop out

Reason for students dropping out of school	Student		Teacher		Parents		Policy Makers		Others		Total
	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	
Financial Constraints	15	20	10	12	13	17	10	20	12	10	139
Lack of School Facilities	10	5	15	23	12	10	14	5	23	14	131
Gender Discrimination	5	5	6	9	10	5	7	5	9	7	68
Early Marriage or Work	15	18	16	5	10	15	16	18	5	16	134
Others	5	2	3	1	5	3	3	2	1	3	28
Total	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	500

Interpretation:

From the research results, it is shown that as a reason for school dropout, financial constraints (27.8%) are shown as the prime reason. After that, early marriage (26.8%) is shown as the 2nd reason, and lack of school facilities is shown as the 3rd reason. 13.6% show gender discrimination as the key factor for school dropout, and 5.6% treated it as others. These results indicate that in the education area, financial constraints remain the prime reason for school dropout. Since this variable represents the nominal categories rather than an ordered scale, the frequency and percentage show the most meaningful description from respondents.

4.3 Quality of Teaching

Table 03: Quality of Teaching

Quality of teaching	Student		Teacher		Parents		Policy Makers		Others		Total
	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	
Very Dissatisfied	5	20	2	12	3	17	10	10	12	10	101
Dissatisfied	10	15	14	23	12	10	15	5	13	15	132
Neutral	15	5	15	9	20	15	6	15	19	16	135
Satisfied	15	8	16	5	10	5	16	18	5	6	104
Very Satisfied	5	2	3	1	5	3	3	2	1	3	28
Total	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	500
Mean: 2.65		Median: 3.0		Mode: 3.0		Standard Deviation: 1.18					

Interpretation:

There is a mixed output from the research in the issue of quality of teaching. The maximum portion (27.0%) of respondents expresses themselves as neutral and after that, 26.4% show their expression as dissatisfied and 20.8% express their opinion as satisfied. Rural respondents show greater expression toward dissatisfaction than urban respondents. On the other side, urban respondents show comparatively very satisfied. The mean score of 2.65 shows that the overall expressions are dissatisfied. The median and mode of 3.00 indicate that neutral is the central and maximum selected response of respondents. The standard deviation of 1.18 shows that there is an average deviation between the respondents in this issue.

4.4 Availability of Modern Teaching Aids

Table 04: Modern Teaching Aids

	Student		Teacher		Parents		Policy Makers		Others		Total
	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	
Not available at all	5	12	5	17	10	20	3	17	5	20	114
Rarely available	15	23	15	10	14	15	12	10	10	5	129
Sometimes available	11	9	7	15	17	5	20	15	15	15	129
Frequently available	16	5	16	5	6	8	10	5	15	8	94
Always available	3	1	7	3	3	2	5	3	5	2	34
Total	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	500
Mean: 2.61		Median: 3.0		Mode: 2 & 3		Standard Deviation: 1.22					

Interpretation:

From the research results, it indicates that there is a lack of availability of modern teaching aids in the schools which are surveyed. The respondents' maximum reported rarely available was about teaching aids, at 25.8%, the second highest reported was sometimes available, while 22.8% reported them as not available at all. Comparatively few respondents are informed about the frequently (18.8%) always available (6.8%). The urban respondents usually reported lower availability than the rural respondents. The average response of 2.61 indicates that the respondents treated it as between rarely available and sometimes available. The median value of 3.0 indicates that the central response is sometimes available, whereas the dual modal values of 2.0 and 3.0 indicate that the respondents frequently selected the answers sometimes available and rarely available. The standard deviation of 1.22 indicates medium deviation between responses.

4.5 Gender Based Barriers

Table 05: Gender based Barriers

Gender-based issues	Student		Teacher		Parents		Policy Makers		Others		Total
	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	
Not at all	1	8	0	5	0	5	0	0	0	10	29
To a small extent	5	18	0	15	14	25	2	2	10	15	106
To a moderate extent	14	15	15	20	17	15	23	25	20	10	174
To a large extent	20	8	15	9	15	5	20	13	15	13	133
To a very large extent	10	1	20	1	4	0	5	10	5	2	58
Total	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	500
Mean: 3.17	Median: 3.0				Mode: 3.0			Standard Deviation: 1.07			

Interpretation:

The research outputs indicated that there is a moderate extent effect regarding the gender based issues in quality education. In between the respondents, a majority part (34.8%) reported to a moderate extent, 26.6% reported to a large extent and 21.2% reported to a small extent. An insignificant number of respondents (5.8%) reported that there is no effect at all and 11.6% reported that there is a large extent of effect of gender based issues on the quality of education. The rural respondents compared to urban respondents, reported more concern about the gender based issues. The mean score of 3.17 indicates that the respondents reported a moderate extent of the effect of gender issues on quality education. The median and modal value of 3.00 indicates the central and maximum respondents selected the moderate extent of effects of gender issues on quality education. The standard deviation of 1.07 indicates that there is a moderate deviation in the response from the respondents.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The present study examined the major barriers to quality education and educational access as aspects of the sustainable development goal (SDG-4). In the research results, it is seen that although Bangladesh made advancements in the expansion of educational access, there are huge disparities between urban and rural community about availability of schools, educational quality, availability of modern educational tools and gender-related issues, which are the clear barriers in the case of educational disparity, while financial constraints are the major reason in the case of school dropout in both regions.

The research findings related to availability of school indicate that respondents usually think the availability of school is adequate however, rural respondents report a lower level of accessibility than their urban counterparts. It indicates that the distribution of educational institutions is unequal in Bangladesh. This research report is consistent with **UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020)**, which strongly emphasize that regional barriers is still present in the equitable access in quality education Similarly, the report from the **World Bank (2020)** argues that to reduce educational disparity and for sustainable development, it is mandatory to expand the infrastructure development in disadvantaged communities.

Financial constraints, early marriage and child labour emerged as the major reason for school dropout in the research. The research findings suggest that financial constraint is the major constraint for which students are unable to complete their study. These results support previous studies by **UNICEF (2019) and the Global Partnership for Education (2021)**, where it is reported that economic insecurity and household poverty increase the rate of dropout in the developing countries. The continuous presence of these barriers indicates that the social security system should be developed besides education policy, which includes financial support, scholarship programmes and various activities which reduce child labour and early marriage.

The study also revealed that there is a significant difference in the education quality in the rural and urban areas. The respondents provide unsatisfactory feedback about the education quality, which provides the indication about disparity in the teachers' availability, professional qualifications, and instructional efficiency between rural and urban areas. This finding corresponds with the observations of the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019)**, which emphasised the development of teachers' quality and continuous professional development, which is the fundamental yardstick of education quality. So qualified teacher recruitment, training and retention should be considered with priority and importance for the education policymakers, particularly in the rural areas.

One of the major concerns identified by the respondents is the availability of teaching aids. It is perceived that the computer facilities, internet facilities and multimedia support and other digital teaching facilities are much less in the rural schools, supporting the conclusions of **UNESCO (2020) and UNDP (2020)**. This observation reflects the disparity between the urban and rural educational institutions, which highlights the inclusion of technology and quality education as essential elements. So investment in digital infrastructure and development in access to educational technology contributes to achieving SDG-4 and also learning outcomes.

Despite the advancement of female education in Bangladesh, gender based barriers are a significant challenge. Respondents indicated that gender based issues are affecting the female education ability, especially in the rural areas where socio-cultural practices, safety issues and child marriage remain prevalent. These findings are consistent with **Plan International (2019)**, which emphasises that gender discrimination gradually limited the participation of female education in developing countries. To address these barriers, gender equality, the assurance that females can continue education without any disparity, requires the combined intervention of schools, families, local communities and government institutions.

Taken together the findings demonstrated that a vast and comprehensive and integrated policy approach is needed. Only development of educational infrastructure will not be sufficient if financial aid for deprived students, training on digital aids and gender inclusion are not included. The interrelationship between these factors highlighted that for the reduction of educational disparity and development of learning outcomes, comprehensive actions are needed with government institutions, educational institutions, development partners and the local community.

This research contributes to the existing literature by simultaneously examining students, teachers, guardians, policymakers and other stakeholders of the society from different angles. Unlike many other research outcomes, this research is not focused on a specific educational issue rather, it contributes vastly to the interconnecting barriers which are preventing the achievement of SDG-4 in Bangladesh. Therefore, these research findings provide valuable empirical evidence to support the formulation of educational planning and policy, especially for the rural and underserved communities.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The research is conducted within the Mymensingh division and it may not represent the whole education system in Bangladesh. Moreover, the research used a descriptive cross sectional survey which limited the effective relationship between the variables. Future research should incorporate larger nationwide samples and inferential statistical techniques to get a vast and more practical orientated idea about quality education and access.

Overall the findings indicate that achieving SDG-4 in Bangladesh depends on reducing the disparity of quality education between the urban and rural communities in Bangladesh. Simultaneously the socioeconomic barriers, improving teaching quality, expanding availability of digital teaching aids and promoting gender equality are also the issues have to address. To face the challenges implementation of evidence based policies in BD must be taken in between 2030. This will ensure to achieve interconnecting, equality based and quality education for all.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study examined the major challenges affecting educational access and quality in Bangladesh in the context of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4). Drawing on responses from 500 stakeholders representing students, teachers, parents, policymakers, and other community members from both urban and rural areas of the Mymensingh Division, the study identified several critical barriers to inclusive and equitable quality education.

The findings reveal substantial disparities between urban and rural communities across all five dimensions of the study. Although in overall consideration, the availability of schools was generally perceived as adequate or good while rural respondents reported comparatively lower access to educational institutions. Financial constraints and early marriage or child labor emerged as the principal causes of student dropout, indicating that socio economic factors continue to undermine educational participation. Furthermore, dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching and the limited availability of modern teaching aids were found to be more pronounced in rural schools, reflecting persistent inequalities in educational resources and learning environments. The study also confirms that gender related barriers continue to restrict girls' educational opportunities despite notable progress in improving gender parity.

These findings suggest that achieving SDG-4 in Bangladesh requires an integrated policy approach that simultaneously addresses educational infrastructure, poverty related barriers, teacher quality, access to digital learning resources and gender equity. Greater investment in rural schools, strengthened teacher training and professional development programmes, expanded financial support for disadvantaged students and improved access to modern educational technologies are essential for reducing educational inequalities. In addition, sustained efforts to eliminate gender based discrimination and promote inclusive educational policies will further strengthen Bangladesh's progress towards achieving quality education for all by 2030.

Overall, this study contributes empirical evidence on the key challenges to SDG-4 from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. The findings provide useful insights for policymakers, educational administrators and development partners in designing evidence based strategies to

improve educational access and quality, particularly in underserved rural communities. Further research employing inferential statistical techniques and larger nationally representative samples would enhance understanding of the factors influencing educational outcomes and support more effective policy formulation.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The survey questionnaire used for data collection is also available upon reasonable request.

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