

Why boys are falling behind in the classroom

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Many rural boys grow up seeing fathers and neighbours making a living without formal education, reinforcing the belief that earning matters more than education. FILE VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

Prior to 2016, boys typically held a marginal performance lead in Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations in Bangladesh. However, this trend has significantly reversed in recent years. Since 2017, girls have consistently outperformed boys, and by 2021, the gap had widened notably: girls achieved a pass rate of [94.50 percent](#) compared to 92.69 percent for boys and secured around 103,500 GPA-5 awards, while boys achieved 79,762—a disparity of nearly 24,000 top performers. These figures not only reflect a sustained shift in academic performance but also signal a broader transformation in gender dynamics within secondary education.

This reversal is not unique to Bangladesh; it is a global phenomenon. [A study](#) explained that one significant factor is the relatively lower parental expectation for boys' academic achievement, coupled with the higher economic expectation placed on them to contribute to family income—a pressure not equally exerted on girls. In rural areas, boys often see their fathers, uncles, or neighbours earning money abroad or running small businesses without formal education. This creates a strong belief that earning money matters more than attending school. Consequently, they become less focused on exams and more interested in finding ways to earn money, even informally.

I witnessed a case in Abdullapur village, Kishoreganj. Rahim (not his real name), a 16-year-old boy, exemplifies how these societal expectations play out in individual lives. Despite living in financial comfort—his father works abroad in Italy and regularly sends remittances, ensuring a stable household—Rahim dropped out of school. It did not happen due to poverty, but rather because of a perceived lack of value in formal education. He dreams of migrating abroad like his father to build a future through income, not schooling. Rahim's story highlights a broader issue: in many cases, boys are choosing income-generating aspirations over academic achievement, reflecting the social and economic pressures that contribute to their declining academic performance in Bangladesh's secondary education system.



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The issue begins even earlier in the education cycle. According to the Annual Primary School Statistics (APSS) 2024 released by the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE), the primary school dropout rate increased to [16.25 percent](#) in 2024, up from 13.15 percent in 2023. The report also revealed that dropout rates tend to increase as students advance to higher grades, indicating that many face escalating challenges as they progress through school. This trend disproportionately affects boys, who are more likely to abandon education in pursuit of earning opportunities, compounding their disadvantage at the secondary and higher levels.

Another [research study](#) in Khulna found that parental guidance was positively and significantly correlated with students' academic achievement. In many families—particularly in South Asia, including Bangladesh—sons are expected to be independent, strong, and self-reliant. As a result,

parents may assume that boys do not need close supervision, encouragement, or academic help, especially in early schooling.

Another underlying cause is that girls are relatively more self-disciplined than boys, as claimed by a [study](#) by Duckworth and Seligman (2006). Unlike girls, who often approach education with a strong desire to succeed and gain approval from teachers and parents, boys are more likely to question the value of school. Many feel that the subjects they study do not relate to their future goals or practical lives. This low intrinsic motivation—a lack of internal drive or interest in learning for its own sake—contrasts with girls' stronger orientation towards academic success. Instead, boys are often motivated by external rewards such as money, status, or immediate job opportunities, which they do not associate with school.



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As a result, they put in less effort on school tasks, lose interest in exams or classroom activities, and may even believe that success in life does not require good grades or higher education. In contrast, many girls are socialised to value school success and are more likely to see education as a path to empowerment, independence, and respect in society—especially in Bangladesh, where female education is promoted as a tool for gender equality.

A growing body of research also indicates that excessive smartphone use among adolescents is associated with lower academic performance, reduced concentration, and increased distractibility. For instance, a [recent study](#) found that young people, irrespective of gender, who frequently used mobile phones during study hours experienced decreased attention spans, poorer memory retention, and lower overall grades compared to peers who limited their smartphone use. Boys, however, tend to spend more time on digital entertainment, particularly gaming and social media, which detracts from academic engagement and study time, ultimately hindering academic achievement.

In Bangladesh, data from UNESCO show that over [90 percent](#) of primary school teachers are women. In rural areas, this percentage is often even higher. While female teachers play a critical role in improving girls' education, boys growing up without strong male figures at home or in school often struggle to find educational role models they can emulate. A [research study](#) published in the British Educational Research Journal found that male teachers serve as positive role models, particularly for boys who lack male figures at home. Boys are more likely to respond positively to teachers they can identify with, especially in schools in low-income or single-parent communities.

Given these multifaceted causes, policy interventions must adopt a gender-responsive approach targeting the learning needs and motivational challenges of boys at the secondary level. First, increasing the number of male teachers and establishing male mentorship programmes can provide positive role models, especially for boys lacking such figures at home. This can foster a sense of identity and belonging within the school environment.

Second, there is a critical need to enhance parental involvement in boys' education. Community-level parenting workshops and school-led parent-teacher engagement strategies can correct misconceptions that boys require less academic supervision. Schools can play a catalytic role by providing parents with tools to support structured learning environments at home.

Third, addressing the lack of self-discipline among boys in secondary education requires a coordinated effort involving schools, families, and communities. One effective starting point is the use of reward systems, such as "Most Focused Student of the Week," which can motivate boys who may respond better to external incentives in the early stages of behavioural change.

In conclusion, reversing the trend of boys' academic underperformance demands targeted interventions, such as reshaping the broader social messages boys receive about education, success, and masculinity. A gender-equitable education policy must therefore focus not only on empowering girls but also on ensuring that boys are equally engaged, supported, and valued in the education system.

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