

How can we deal with children dropping out of school?



We need targeted allocations and programmes to improve the quality of school education and to reduce the number of school dropouts. PHOTO: HASIBUR RAHMAN BILU

The dual problem of children dropping out of school and working children are not related to only children's welfare—they have far-reaching implications for the overall development of a country. Education and skills of a labour force are important determinants of an economy's growth. Rise in the number of working children reduces the prospects of better employment later in life, especially at a time when Bangladesh is facing a high unemployment rate among its youth labour force.

As news reports showed, the number of boys appearing in this year's SSC examinations was lower than the number of girls. Such a difference is a cause for concern. Reasons behind the discontinuation of education may depend on the young person's attitude and aspirations about education. However, continuing education is usually not the children's own choice and depends to a large extent on their parents' preferences. The role of educational institutions and teachers can also be important in this context.



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Findings from Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' (BBS) survey on working children shed light on how these factors work.

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Bring child labourers back to school



First, let's consider parents' views on working children. Among the respondents, 21 percent of boys' and six percent of girls' parents reported that "not interested in school" was the factor behind their children dropping out of school. Meanwhile, 20 percent of boys' parents and seven percent of girls' parents said lack of money and an expensive education system led to their children dropping out. Only a small share (four percent of both boys' and girls' parents) considered employment as the reason.

Children's views are somewhat different. Among the school dropouts, 14 percent boys and six percent girls mentioned employment in paid/family jobs and the scope of learning work as the cause for dropping out. Meanwhile, 32 percent boys and five percent girls said they dropped out because they were not interested in school. It is a matter of great concern that a large share of boy respondents—nearly one-third—lost interest in schooling. And 26 percent boys and girls stated lack of money or an expensive education system as the reason.

A larger share of boys dropped out due to work in family farms/business or paid employment. This may have been the intention of their parents/guardians as well, which they did not reveal. Girls are not expected to be engaged in such employment to contribute to family earnings, so this reason causes a smaller share of girls to drop out from school.

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Inequity in education is holding us back



Whether the dropout of male children is actually leading to the engagement of a larger number of them in economic activities can be verified. The National Child Labour Survey 2022 shows that the number of working male and female children in the country are 27.34 lakh and 8.03 lakh, respectively. These numbers are slightly higher than the numbers from the 2013 survey. Among the children in the country, 13.2 percent boys and 4.2 girls are working children. Among the working children, only 50 percent reported continuation of studies. Thus, child labour definitely results in a much higher dropout rate among male children.

The National Survey on Children's Education in Bangladesh by BBS and UNICEF also reveals that families' economic standing is an important factor behind children's dropout from school. This survey shows that among the lowest 20 percent households in terms of wealth, 57 percent male

children are out of school. This share is 19.6 percent among the households in the highest wealth group (quintile). Meanwhile, 43 and 18 percent of the girls in the lowest and highest quintiles in terms of households' wealth, respectively, were out of school. It is noteworthy that even among the wealthiest group, around 20 percent boys are out of school. Thus, the dropout is not only due to economic hardship.

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Children must be protected from abuse and torture



Moreover, boys are discouraged by the fact that many SSC certificate holders and even graduates do not get regular jobs. So they make the choice early in life and drop out from the present system of education that does not provide them with a promising future.

Reversing this trend requires steps to overhaul the school education system to get rid of the factors that cause the loss of interest among children. In addition, steps should be taken to discourage children's involvement in economic activities, especially paid employment, where there is a chance that it may conflict with their schooling.

The BBS survey also shows that a large number of dropouts was caused by Covid-19. It may not be too late to bring them back to school. This will require special programmes and investment.

The budget for the next fiscal year will be finalised soon. In that context, it is hoped that not only a higher share of allocation will go to the education sector, but also more targeted allocations and programmes will be put in place to improve the quality of school education and to reduce the number of school dropouts.