

Rural-urban disparity and the crisis of education



| World Bank

EDUCATION is often described as the great equaliser, the one social institution capable of breaking cycles of poverty, prejudice and power. In Bangladesh, however, education increasingly reflects and reinforces inequality rather than dismantling it. A recent report reveals a troubling reality: although nearly 72 per cent of the country's secondary and higher secondary students live in rural areas, they remain far behind their urban peers in terms of quality, access and affordability of education. This is not a marginal imbalance. It is a structural fault line running through the heart of our education system.

The contrast between urban and rural schools is stark enough to feel like two parallel countries operating under the same flag. In cities, classrooms are increasingly digital, science laboratories are functional, teachers receive regular training and students are encouraged to explore sports, debate, music and cultural activities alongside textbooks. Education there is not merely about passing exams; it is about grooming confidence, curiosity and competitiveness. Urban students grow up believing that universities, scholarships and decent jobs are attainable goals.

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In rural Bangladesh, the story is painfully different. Many schools operate in buildings that are visibly unsafe, with broken benches, leaking roofs and classrooms overcrowded beyond reason. Teacher shortages are chronic, subject specialists are rare and technology is either absent or unusable. Teaching methods remain rigid and outdated, relying almost entirely on rote memorisation from textbooks. For millions of rural students, the idea of a digital lab or interactive learning is not delayed development but a distant fantasy.

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This disparity has consequences far beyond examination results. Education shapes self-worth and aspiration. When students repeatedly experience neglect, under-resourcing and low expectations, they internalise a sense of limitation. Urban students are guided towards higher education, competitive exams and diverse career paths. Rural students, constrained by financial hardship and lack of information, often see their ambitions shrink long before adulthood. Social mobility slows, inequality hardens and geography quietly becomes destiny.

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The problem deepens further when viewed through the lens of Bangladesh's fragmented education structure. The country operates at least 17 different streams of education, including English medium, English version, kindergarten systems, technical and vocational tracks, madrasah streams like Qaumi and Alia, and various community and NGO-run schools. Such diversity could have been a strength if there were coordination and shared standards. Instead, it has produced confusion, hierarchy and fragmentation. Students from different systems graduate with vastly different competencies, worldviews and opportunities, weakening the idea of education as a unifying national experience.

Educationists have long warned that such a disjointed system is rare globally and damaging in the long run. Its effects are already visible. A significant proportion of students fail to acquire basic skills in mathematics, science and critical thinking, even after years of schooling. International assessments and global agencies have repeatedly pointed out that many children in Bangladesh, both in and out of school, are not reaching minimum learning benchmarks. The economic cost of this learning crisis is staggering, potentially equivalent to a substantial portion of future GDP, but the social cost is even higher. A nation that fails to educate its children properly wastes not only money but human potential.

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The crisis is especially severe for rural youth entering the job market. Certificates are increasingly common, skills are not. Employers complain that graduates lack communication skills, problem-solving abilities and practical knowledge. For rural students, the gap is wider because they rarely receive exposure to technology, internships or career guidance. Even higher education does not guarantee employability, resulting in rising unemployment and frustration among young people who did everything society asked of them but were equipped with little in return.

Gender adds another layer to this inequality. When education systems fail, girls suffer disproportionately. Dropouts increase, early marriage becomes more likely and risks of early pregnancy and social vulnerability rise. Education is meant to be a protective force, especially for girls. In rural Bangladesh, that protection is uneven and often inadequate.

These inequalities did not emerge overnight. Their roots stretch back to the colonial period, when education was designed to serve urban administrative elites rather than the rural majority. After independence, Bangladesh made impressive gains in expanding access to primary education, increasing enrolment and improving literacy rates. Yet historical bias was never fully dismantled. Rapid population growth, rural-urban migration and weak oversight have only widened old gaps. Urban families, with higher incomes and access to information, invest heavily in private tutoring, coaching centres, online courses and international curricula. Rural families, struggling to meet basic needs, depend almost entirely on under-resourced public schools.

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The Covid pandemic brutally exposed this divide. While urban students continued learning through online platforms, many rural students were cut off entirely due to lack of devices, electricity or internet access. For some, that disruption became permanent. Education systems are supposed to absorb shocks and protect the most vulnerable. Ours did the opposite.

Successive governments have not been silent on this issue. Policies have been announced, plans drafted and promises repeated. Primary education has been made compulsory, stipends introduced and textbooks distributed free of cost. These initiatives are not insignificant. Yet their impact has been blunted by slow implementation, administrative weakness and corruption. Funds meant for infrastructure, teacher training and learning materials often fail to reach the schools that need them most. Projects exist on paper while classrooms remain unchanged.

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The National Education Policy acknowledges the need to reduce rural-urban disparity, but acknowledgement without execution changes little. There is still no clear framework that prioritises rural schools in terms of teacher deployment, digital access, monitoring and accountability. The gap between rhetoric and reality continues to widen.

Education is not merely a service provided by the state. It is a moral commitment. A society that accepts unequal education accepts unequal citizenship. Bridging the rural-urban education divide is not only about constructing buildings or installing computers. It is about restoring dignity, confidence and possibility to millions of children whose talents remain undernurtured.

Families and communities also have a role to play. Parental involvement, encouragement to explore learning beyond textbooks and community efforts to maintain school facilities can make small but meaningful differences. Local volunteers, alumni networks and civil society initiatives can supplement state efforts. But community action cannot substitute systemic reform.

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Ultimately, the responsibility rests with the state. Without strong political will, transparent governance and sustained investment in rural education, inequality will continue to reproduce itself across generations. Education is the foundation upon which social justice, economic growth and democratic participation are built. When that foundation is uneven, the entire structure becomes unstable.

The day rural children receive the same quality of education, the same technology and the same respect as urban children will be the day Bangladesh moves closer to its promise of equity and enlightenment. Whether that day arrives depends not on slogans or statistics, but on the choices we make now about whose futures truly matter.

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