

RIGHT TO EDUCATION

Submission to the Universal
Periodic Review of the United
Nations Human Rights Council

4th Cycle – 44th Session

Country Review: Bangladesh

January 2023

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Broken Chalk is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 that monitors and minimizes worldwide human rights violations in education. We aim to promote universal and equal access to education for all.

We encourage and support achieving societal peace with our international sponsors and partners by advocating for intercultural tolerance, preventing radicalism and polarization, and tackling educational inequalities.

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0. Introduction

1. Broken Chalk drafted this report to contribute to Bangladesh's fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Since Broken Chalk is specifically concerned with human rights and inequalities in education, this report focuses on human rights, particularly in the education field of Bangladesh.
2. This report first explores the main issues in education in Bangladesh while also reflecting on the recommendations Bangladesh received in the last review and its progress since 2018. Then, Broken Chalk offers some practical suggestions to Bangladesh on further improving human rights in education.
3. In the last review, Bangladesh received 251 recommendations and accepted 178. 11% of the recommendations focused on reducing inequalities, 17% on gender equality and 7% on reducing poverty, all interconnected with education.
4. High-quality, accessible and inclusive education is essential for a country's long-term sustainable development. Education shapes the people of future society, helps integrate minorities and foreigners, and enables innovation and growth. According to the Human Rights Measurement Initiative, Bangladesh is doing 82.5% of what it could do with its national income to ensure the right to education¹. Although this score is relatively high, it still illustrates the gap between actual and feasible states regarding education.

I. Education trends and outcomes

5. Bangladesh has a population of about 165 million people; one-third of the population, around 53 million, are children. Providing accessible, inclusive and quality education for over 50 million children is a national challenge in Bangladesh. Despite the substantial progress in recent years, many children are still not in school. According to the Bangladeshi Ministry of Education's 2021 study, the net enrollment rate in Bangladesh is 97%, while the completion rate is only 86%². This means that 14%, over 7 million children, do not finish school for various reasons. According to UNICEF, over 6 million children were out of school in 2019³.

¹ Human Rights Measurement Initiative. (2022). *Rights to Education*

² Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), Ministry of Education. (2022). *Bangladesh Education Statistics 2021*

³ UNICEF & Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2020). *Bangladesh Education Fact Sheets 2020*

6. Another study by UNICEF found that the higher the mother's education level, the higher the family's wealth index, and the more likely children are to attend school⁴. This correlation shows that poverty is one of the main barriers to education in Bangladesh, and improving education completion rates now can have long-term positive effects for future generations.
7. Girls are much more likely to complete primary and lower secondary education, as respectively 89% and 71% of them meet these levels, while only 76% of boys complete primary and 59% of secondary education⁵. This is because of Bangladesh's cultural norms and stigma that boys should work and provide for the family from an early age.
8. The youth literacy rate in Bangladesh was relatively high, around 95% for people between 15 and 24 in 2021⁶. However, it was found that most students only acquire reading skills later than the standard grade and age. Boys, working children and children from the bottom wealth quintiles of society are much less likely to develop foundational reading skills⁷. Broken Chalk congratulates Bangladesh on its progress in increasing national literacy rates but urges the country to close the abovementioned gaps and help disadvantaged groups catch up to the rest of society.
9. Good government spending is essential to ensure access to education for all, provide high-quality services and achieve high student retention and completion. Since education is prominently a public service, its quality depends on the financial resources the government allocates to it. The Education 30 Framework for Action recommended giving at least 4-6% of the gross domestic product (GDP) to education. Bangladesh is significantly below this threshold, spending only 1.3% of its GDP on education in 2019.

II. Health and education

10. Almost 6% of people in Bangladesh are reported to live with some form of disability⁸. Dropout and repetition rates were much higher for children with functional difficulties, while their numeracy and reading skills were lower than those without problems⁹. They are also overrepresented among children who are out of school. This is because of the lack of inclusive and suitable education for these children with special needs. Despite the recommendation on this issue in the previous UPR cycle (147.153, 147.154),

⁴ UNICEF & Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2019). *Progotir Pathey, Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019, Survey Findings Report*

⁵ UNICEF. (2021). *The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health*

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ UNICEF & Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2020). *Bangladesh Education Fact Sheets 2020*

⁸ ESCAP. (2019). *Disability At a Glance 2019: Investing in Accessibility in Asia and the Pacific*

⁹ UNICEF & Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2020). *Bangladesh Education Fact Sheets 2020*

Bangladesh has yet to implement inclusive education for people with disabilities.

11. According to the WHO's and UNICEF's Joint Monitoring Programme, only 81% of the schools in Bangladesh had essential water services in 2021, while 5% did not have water services at all¹⁰. This impacts around 9 million children nationwide. In addition, only 57% were equipped with basic sanitation and hygiene services¹¹. Broken Chalk applauds Bangladesh's recent progress in water and sanitation facilities. Still, it highlights the increased need for ensuring these services to all children, especially in light of the coronavirus pandemic.
12. 14% of Bangladeshi children often report feeling depressed and lacking the motivation to do things¹². This can be explained by the bullying, discrimination, peer pressure, academic stress and racism children experience in schools. Mental health is essential for a successful learning process; therefore, Broken Chalk urges Bangladesh to focus more on children's mental health and implement measures to improve it.
13. The Bangladeshi culture is mainly conservative, and specific topics, including sexual education and sexual activity, are often taboos. Although sex education is formally part of the curriculum, it is often skipped or taught conservatively¹³, undermining its effectiveness. Improving sex education and ensuring access to it for all students is vital since it was found that sexual and reproductive health education leads to increased education rates, decreases healthcare costs and results in economic gains¹⁴. In addition, it can reduce rape and sexual violence against women, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and prevent early pregnancies. The latter is crucial since the country has one of the world's highest rates of adolescent motherhood, as 30% of girls between 15 and 19 are mothers¹⁵, which harms their education and future opportunities.
14. Around 10% of women between 15 and 19 reported not participating in school, work or social activities because of menstruation in 2019¹⁶. This affects tens of thousands of girls who skip school because of menstruation, lack of hygiene products and lack of medical and social support.

¹⁰ WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme. (2022). *Progress on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene in schools*

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² UNICEF. (2021). *The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health*

¹³ Dhaka Tribune. (2021, January 10). *Sex education the only way to tackle rape?*

¹⁴ UNESCO. (2018). *International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence-informed approach*

¹⁵ UNICEF. (2014). *Situation Analysis on Children with Disabilities in Bangladesh*

¹⁶ UNICEF & Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2019). *Progotir Pathay, Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019, Survey Findings Report*

III. Barriers to accessing education

15. Poverty is a prevalent issue in Bangladesh and poses a considerable educational barrier. In 2020 about 18% of the country's population was below the national poverty line, equal to approximately 29 million people¹⁷. Children are more likely to drop out when they belong to lower-income families because they lack learning tools, family support and financial resources, and they are more likely to be sent to work instead of school to earn money for the family. Furthermore, poor children also have poorer health because of malnutrition and face discrimination in the education system, increasing their chance of dropping out and failing¹⁸.
16. In addition, many low-income families and children live on the streets in Bangladesh and lack access to fundamental needs such as home, health, education and food. The number of children on the street in 2020 was estimated to exceed 930.000¹⁹. These children are also more likely to leave school because of a lack of resources and good health.
17. It was found that most children from ethnic minorities in Bangladesh do not have access to education in their mother tongue²⁰. Although minority children could learn better in their mother tongues, this is not always possible in Bangladesh because of the lack of trained teachers and suitable learning materials.
18. Refugees also have minimal access to education in Bangladesh. Since the start of the Rohingya ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled to Bangladesh, and although the country opened its borders to provide refuge and safety, it also made it clear that the refugees are only welcome temporarily and will not be able to stay in Bangladesh in the long-term²¹. Although the government committed to providing access to education to refugee children in 2020, no educational program has been developed for refugees as of 2021²². The government requires refugees to live in camps, preventing them from enrolling in local schools and blocking NGOs and UN agencies from entering to provide education to the children²³. This is because the government deliberately tries to prevent refugees' integration into Bangladeshi society, thereby trying to control their long-term stay in the country.
19. Bangladesh did not or only partially implement the 3rd cycle recommendations regarding improving refugees' living conditions and access to education (148.22-148.24). On top of that, the government even relocated almost 20.000 refugees to a remote

¹⁷ ECPAT International. (2022). *ECPAT Country Overview: Bangladesh*

¹⁸ Shohel, M. M. C. (2014). *Impact of Childhood Poverty on Education for Disadvantaged Children in Bangladesh*

¹⁹ Aparajeyo-Bangladesh. (2020). *Annual Report 2020*

²⁰ New Age Bangladesh. (2021, December 22). *Most ethnic minority kids deprived of education in mother tongue.*

²¹ Human Rights Watch. (2019). *Are We Not Human? Denial of Education for Rohingya Refugee Children in Bangladesh*

²² Amnesty International. (2021). *Universal Periodic Review of Bangladesh: Amnesty International's mid-term assessment of progress towards implementation of recommendations accepted at the third review*

²³ Human Rights Watch. (2019). *Are We Not Human? Denial of Education for Rohingya Refugee Children in Bangladesh*

island inaccessible to journalists or NGOs without permission and without access to education. Hereby Bangladesh breached its international obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights treaties. This violates not only the refugees' right to education but also their right to freedom of movement.

- 20.** Child labour is a prominent issue in Bangladesh, distracting children from their learning journey and threatening their health and physical-psychological well-being. The total child labour rate was almost 7% in 2019, equal to over 66,000 children. Nearly 20% of children between 12 and 14 were engaged in economic activity weekly in 2019, while this ratio is above 30% for children between 15 and 17. Boys are more than twice as likely to be involved in economic activities than girls, and the percentage is much higher for rural children than for urban children.
- 21.** Despite the recommendations received in the previous cycle (147.46-147.53, 148.8-148.10), child marriage is still a widespread issue in Bangladesh that violates children's rights and often leads to the discontinuation of their education. Bangladesh has the third highest rate of child marriages worldwide, with 59% of women marrying by age 18 and 22% by age 15²⁴. In contrast, only 4% of boys are married before age of 18. Bangladesh's main drivers of child marriage are cultural norms and social expectations, poverty and economic reasons, and displacement. In addition, a relationship was found between education level and child marriage, as 75% of girls with no education were married before 18. In contrast, the prevalence of child marriage gradually decreased as the education level of girls increased²⁵. This illustrates the complex relationship between education and child marriage and that the effects of improving education could be manifold, including reduced child marriage, which helps girls remain in school.
- 22.** Lack of birth registration significantly hinders children's access to education and increases the risk of exploitation, child marriage and child labour. In 2019 only 56% of children under the age of 5 had birth registration in Bangladesh²⁶, which means that almost half of all children lacked this legal protection. However, in December 2022, the government signed a memorandum that helped to increase the rate of universal birth registration in the country by loosening the requirements. Broken Chalk applauds this improvement and encourages Bangladesh to accelerate the birth registration process further to ensure it for all children and thereby protect their human rights to nationality and education.

²⁴ Girls Not Brides. (n.d.). *Child marriage atlas - Girls Not Brides*

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ UNICEF & Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2019). *Progotir Pathay, Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019, Survey Findings Report*

IV. Violence and Exclusion in Education

23. Sexual harassment and rape are prominent issues in Bangladesh. It was found that Bangladeshi children are more vulnerable to sexual abuse, child marriage and human trafficking because the extreme weather conditions lead to displacement and poverty²⁷.
24. The experience of sexual abuse has a tremendous negative effect on children's development, threatens their physical and mental health, leads to early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases and consequently shifts children's focus from their education and future development. A 2019 survey found that almost 90% of children between 1 and 14 experienced physical or psychological aggression from their caregiver. In 2019, over 4300 children were reported to be victims of violence and exploitation, of which one-third reported sexual abuse. Broken Chalk would like to encourage Bangladesh to fully implement the recommendations it received in the 3rd cycle (147.141, 147.148) regarding violence against women and children to reduce abuse rates.
25. The Bangladeshi education system also threatens academic freedom and freedom of expression. There were several cases where university professors were arrested and detained for posting allegedly offensive comments about political actors. The government fired the teachers or their salaries for posting about the Covid-19 pandemic on their social media sites. Further, in 2020 two teachers were suspended because of posting provocative statements about Covid-19, which were not in line with the government's approach to managing and controlling the pandemic²⁸.

V. The effect of Covid-19 on education

26. The Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent school closures harmed students' learning process. Schools in Bangladesh closed first in mid-March 2020, affecting 38 million students and another million teachers²⁹. The government tried to address the issue primarily by providing educational TV programs. However, this approach proved ineffective since many students lack access to digital devices and the internet that would enable online education. A 2020 study by the World Bank showed that while 86% of 9th-grade students were aware of the TV programs available, only 43% decided to watch them as less than 45% of students had access to TVs, 21% had internet access and only 2.8% to a computer³⁰.

²⁷ ECPAT International. (2022). *ECPAT Country Overview: Bangladesh*

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ World Bank. (2020). *TV-Based Learning in Bangladesh: Is it Reaching Students?*

³⁰ Ibid.

27. A national survey also found considerable differences between urban and rural students, as almost 30% of urban students participated in remote learning while only 16% of rural pupils did³¹.
28. These disruptions in education are predicted to reduce retention and years of schooling nationwide. Bangladesh's adjusted years of teaching are expected to fall by 0.7 years from 2019 to 2021, costing the economy 67-114 billion US dollars in GDP³².

VI. Recommendations

29. Based on the above analysis, Broken Chalk would like to congratulate Bangladesh on its progress in improving human rights in the past years and encourage the country to continue its efforts to increase the quality and accessibility of education further, fully implement recommendations received in the previous cycles and address the new challenges. In particular, Broken Chalk recommends Bangladesh to:
 30. Increase enrolment and completion rates in primary and secondary education by identifying and tackling the root causes of school dropout.
 31. Develop and implement national strategies targeted at helping poor, rural and homeless children by providing them with home, health care, food and school equipment.
 32. Increase government spending on education since it invests in the country's long-term development.
 33. Implement current national plans on inclusive education for people with disabilities to increase their completion rates and help them have better opportunities later in the labour market.
 34. Speed up current school renovation projects and develop new ones to ensure all schools' basic sanitary and hygiene facilities, including toilets and clean water.
 35. Create a national plan to address students' mental health issues and provide accessible psychological support for children.
 36. Improve sexual education, including reproductive health and birth control, to prevent early pregnancies and the spread of infections and retain more children in education.
 37. Provide education to minority children in their language by developing educational materials in the minority language, making those accessible and encouraging minority people to become teachers through financial incentives.

³¹ UNICEF & Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *National Survey on Children's Education in Bangladesh 2021*.

³² Rahman, T., & Sharma, U. (2029). A Simulation of COVID-19 School Closure Impact on Student Learning in Bangladesh

- 38.** Take measures to ensure access to education for refugee children, even temporarily, to ensure they do not fall behind in the education process.
- 39.** Abolish child marriage and child labour by implementing national laws and legislations, closely monitoring the phenomena and punishing perpetrators.
- 40.** Accelerate issuing birth registration to all unregistered children to ensure they have access to public services and that all newborns are immediately registered.
- 41.** Eliminate sexual abuse to prevent physical and psychological traumas and help children focus on their education. Develop a national strategy to monitor and punish perpetrators for increasing control over the phenomenon.
- 42.** Ensure academic freedom and freedom of expression by ceasing unlawful and arbitrary arrest and detention of teachers.
- 43.** Conduct a general national study on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on education, identify the main areas where students fell behind and design national plans for reparation.

VII. References

Is submitted seperatly.