
SAFEGUARDING THE RIGHT TO SECONDARY EDUCATION IN TIMES OF NATURAL & POLITICAL CRISIS: THE BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The right to secondary education constitutes a fundamental human right and a critical driver of socio-economic development, social mobility, and national progress. In Bangladesh, this right is constitutionally enshrined, reflecting the state's commitment to ensuring equitable access to quality education for all citizens. The paper critically examines the structural, political and administrative factors that threaten the safeguarding of secondary education in Bangladesh, with particular attention to the vulnerabilities exposed during crisis.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative research design, drawing on extensive documentary analysis of scholarly articles, government reports, statistical data, and policy documents situated within the frameworks of education rights and human development. Thematic analysis is employed to interrogate the data, highlighting how inadequate infrastructure, insufficient budgetary allocations, weak crisis management mechanisms, and political interference, collectively impede the protection of secondary education during emergencies. The research situates these findings within a broader discourse of educational equity and human rights, emphasizing the disproportionate impact of crisis on marginalization populations and the widening urban-rural education divide.

The findings reveal that while Bangladesh has made progress in access and enrollment, the fragility of institutional structures and the absence of a crisis-contingency education policy severely limit resilience. These insights underscore the gap between constitutional ideals and policy realities—where systemic politicization and uneven resource distribution exacerbate educational inequality.

The finding indicates that natural disaster, such as floods and cyclones, combined with entrenched political instability and institutional politicization, constitute the primary obstacles to the continuity and quality of secondary education in Bangladesh. In essence, the research demonstrates that crises magnify pre-existing educational disparities, revealing deep-rooted structural weaknesses that hinder policy enforcement. The paper

concludes that ensuring the resilience and protection of secondary education requires a comprehensive, crisis-responsive policy framework underpinned by increased government funding, robust institutional accountability, and the depoliticization of education spaces. By implementing such measures, Bangladesh can uphold its constitutional commitment to education and safeguard the transformative potential of secondary schooling as a vehicle for social and national development.

Keywords: Right to education, Secondary education, Human Rights, Education equity, political economy of education.

1. Introduction

Education is key to human development and societal progress, is recognized as a Human right in Bangladesh's constitution and international agreements, and is being legally prioritized to keep pace with the competitive world. Part II-Article 15(a) and 17 of the constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh strongly affirm the commitment to guaranteeing education for every citizen.¹ Secondary education plays a crucial role in equipping young people for advance studies, skill development, and future career opportunities. In Bangladesh, secondary education is divided into three stages: junior secondary (grade VI-VIII), secondary (grade IX-X), and higher secondary (grade XI-XII).² One area where natural calamities have an impact is education. Teachers, students, and educational facilities are the three groups into which the effects of disasters on education can be separated. Teachers and students may experience physical, psychological, and social effects from disasters.³ And new impact in recent time political instability in Bangladesh marked by strikes blockaders, has severely disrupted students, academic life, forcing school closures, online classes, and creating psychological stress for both students and parents.⁴

¹ Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (adopted 4 November 1972, amended) <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-367.html> accessed 5 October 2025

² Md Ashfikur Rahman, Bayezid Khan and Md Hasan Howlader, 'Secondary Education in Bangladesh: Issues and Challenges' (2018) 6(2) *International Journal of Business, Social and Scientific Research* 19–25 <http://www.ijbssr.com/currentissueview/14013251> accessed 4 October 2025

³ Mustafa Tevfik Hebecci, 'The Impact of Natural Disasters on Education' (International Conference on Social Science Studies (IconSoS), Marmaris, Turkey, 27–30 April 2023) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375238926_The_Impact_of_Natural_Disasters_on_Education accessed 5 October 2025

⁴ Hasan Al Manzur, 'Political Instability Takes Toll on Students' Academic Life' (Bangladesh Post, 6 December 2023) <https://bangladeshpost.net/posts/political-instability-takes-toll-on-students-academic-life-126707> accessed 5 October 2025.

Our National Education Policy (NEP) 2010⁵, the first to be enacted by the Parliament since Bangladesh's independence, has offered practical direction and suggestions for the future. This gap between policy and execution has amplified crisis vulnerability, leaving the secondary sector ill-prepared to handle systemic shocks. Unfortunately, we have not yet developed a plan for putting this policy into effect.⁶ The purposes of this studies to examine how vulnerable Bangladeshi secondary education is to, political and natural disasters, evaluate how well the current institutional and legal protections work, and look into interventions that help the education sector become more resilient, like digital learning, alternative curricula, and NGO projects.

Literature Review

Many writings discuss about student dropouts across various educational level, but why preventing dropout during the secondary education stage is particularly crucial remains open. However, few studies have deeply explored the intersection between political disruption and educational continuity during crises in Bangladesh.

M Veermans discuss about major role of secondary education⁷. Professor Sandra Fredman analysis the right to education in covid-19.⁸ The dropout rate for secondary school girls was 32.85 percent in 2023, down 3.13 percentage points from the previous year. The dropout rate for girls was 34.87 percent, down from 40.78 percent in 2022. The total dropout rate for higher secondary school was 21.51 percent, of which girls were 22.45 percent. The COVID-19 pandemic played a significant role in the decline in student enrollment; many parents married off their daughters during this time and some students had to enter the world of work. Educational institutions were closed since 17 March 2020, but partially reopened on 12 September 2021. Bangladesh had one of the longest school closures in the world, with schools

⁵National Education POLICY, 2010 <https://moedu.portal.gov.bd/site/page/318a22d2-b400-48a7-8222-303ab11cc205/->

⁶ Rasheda K Choudhury, 'Where Our Education System Has Failed' (interviewed by Eresh Omar Jamal, The Daily Star, 28 January 2018) <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/where-our-education-system-has-failed-1525951> accessed 5 October 2025.

⁷ M Veermans, 'Major Role of Primary and Secondary Education' (2022) Department of the Education, University of Turku, Finland, GRJE-22-74140 <https://doi.org/10.15651/2408-6894.22.10.136> accessed 5 October 2025.

⁸ Sandra Fredman, 'A Human Rights Approach: The Right to Education in the Time of COVID-19' (Commentary, October 2021) https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/Fredman%2C%20S_the%20right%20to%20education%20in%20the%20time%20of%20Covid19_Oct2021_EN.pdf accessed 5 October 2025.

closed for 543 days.⁹

Chhetri and Pokhrel (2021) stated that the Covid-19 pandemic caused the largest disruption in human history to education system, affecting nearly 1.6 billion students in more than 200 countries. They further noted that over 94% of the world's student population was affected due to the closure of schools, institutions, and other pause of learning.¹⁰ The UNICEF & UNESCO's 2021 research found that the economic shocks stemming from the covid-19 pandemic harmed the physical and mental health of households.¹¹ Alam and Forhad (2020) suggest that ensuring access to technology for individuals from poorer SES backgrounds should be prioritized to address education inequality-related challenges.¹²

The above literature review shows that the past studies had focused basically on understanding the limitations and dropout of secondary level and pandemic period. The aim of this research is to present a strategic framework for protecting the right to education for secondary students, this is relevant during any natural or political crisis.

Overall Objectives

The overall objective of this study was to assess the changes and adaptation approach in education policy in Bangladesh.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To **examine** the impact of natural and political crises on access to and quality of secondary education in Bangladesh.

⁹ Staff Correspondent, 'Secondary Schools: Number of Students Drops for Third Year in a Row' (The Daily Star, 29 March 2024) <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/education/news/secondary-schools-number-students-drops-third-year-row-3577171> accessed 5 October 2025.

¹⁰ Picciano, A. G. (2017). Theories and frameworks for online education: Seeking an integrated model. *Online Learning*, 21(3), 166-190. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v21i3.1>

¹¹ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) & United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2021). Bangladesh case study: Situation analysis on the effects of and responses to Covid-19 on the education sector in Asia.

<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/16481/file/Bangladesh%20Case%20Study.pdf>

¹² Gazi Mahabubul Alam and Md Abdur Rahman Forhad, 'The Impact of Accessing Education via Smartphone Technology on Education Disparity—A Sustainable Education Perspective' (2023) 15 *Sustainability* 10979 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390975559_The_Impact_of_Accessing_Education_via_Smartphone_Technology_on_Education_Disparity-A_Sustainable_Education_Perspective accessed 5 October 2025.

2. **To analyze** existing national and international legal frameworks — including constitutional provisions, education policies, and human rights treaties — that safeguard the right to education in Bangladesh.
3. **To evaluate** the effectiveness of government and non-government responses in maintaining educational continuity during crises (such as COVID-19, floods, or political unrest).
4. **To propose** policy recommendations and practical strategies for strengthening the resilience of the secondary education system to ensure equitable access in times of crisis.

Research Question Aligned with the stated problem, the study seeks to address the following research question:

- 1) How are student rights to secondary education affected during disasters, political unrest, and public health emergencies?
- 2) What legal, institutional, and policy mechanisms exist to safeguard secondary education during crisis?
- 3) How effective are current measure (digital education, alternative learning, NGO programs) in ensuring resilient and inclusive secondary education?

Methodology

The study is qualitative doctrinal in nature. Analyzing constitutional article, national education policy, different magazine and journal articles, newspaper columns, books and reports are also supported the study as the sources. This methodological approach allows the study to derive normative insights from legal texts while contextualizing them through contemporary data, offering both analytical depth and empirical relevance.

Findings and Discussions

Disruptions to secondary education not only infringe upon the right to education but also increases the tendency for juvenile delinquency (or youth crime). Among the causes of these disruption are political instability, social decay (or social degradation), and natural crisis.

Juvenile Delinquency is unacceptable and antisocial behaviour which is against the law and committed by a child whose age is less than 18 years.¹³

Lack of education limits a girl's opportunities, potential earnings, and ability to take control of her life, making her more susceptible to child marriage. Research shows that every additional year a girl stays in secondary school reduces her risk of child marriage. When girls marry young and drop out, it limits their chances for decent work and increases the likelihood that their children will also have limited education, thus perpetuating cycle of poverty.

Disruptions caused by conflicts, disasters, and emergencies increase child marriage by collapsing legal and educational protection systems, forcing vulnerable families to marry off girls as a perceived means of protection or resource management, which simultaneously removes the protective benefit of school and limits girls future opportunities.¹⁴ The vulnerable children face significant obstacles in their education. These challenges originate from various sources, including socio-economic disadvantages, psychological trauma, and systemic inefficiencies within educational institutions.¹⁵

In July, Bangladeshi students launched the students Against Discrimination movement against a policy reserving 30% of civil service jobs for veterans' descendants. Over 600 people died in the ensuing clashes in July and August, fueled by the security forces excessive use of force and violence after the government's collapse on August 5th. The conflict forced schools to close for a month, creating an added educational hurdle, especially for girls, who already represent a disproportionate 55% of post-pandemic school dropouts.¹⁶

The right to education is a fundamental principle supported by a variety of international agreements, including both legally binding treaties and non-binding soft law instruments. Once a country ratifies a treaty, it takes on legal obligations, whereas soft law creates moral duties. This right was first recognized as universal human rights in The Universal Declaration of

¹³ Brig Gen S M Anwar Hossain, 'Juvenile Delinquency: A Study on Young Gang Culture in Dhaka City' (2025) *NDC E-Journal* Vol 05 No 1 <https://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/ndcj/index.php/ndcj/article/view/403/323>

¹⁴ Plan International, 'What is Child Marriage and Why Does It Happen?' <https://plan-international.org/learn/what-child-marriage-why-does-it-happen/>

¹⁵ Dr Jadab Dutta and Dr Suresh Rajkonwar, 'Educational Problems of Children in Vulnerable Situations' (June 2024) *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* ISSN 0378-1143 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382000986_EDUCATIONAL_PROBLEMS_OF_CHILDREN_IN_VULNERABLE_SITUATIONS

¹⁶ Chisom Onyekwere, 'The Impact of Bangladesh's Student Protests on Girls' Education' (27 November 2024) *Malala Fund – News and Voices* <https://malala.org/news-and-voices/the-impact-of-bangladeshs-student-protests-on-girls-education>

Human Rights (1948) and has been reaffirmed many times since in subsequent treaties. Key examples: The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Educational (1960), The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Right (1966), The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), The International Convention on the Protection of the Right of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990), The Convention on the Right of the Child (1989), The Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Furthermore, the right to education is also present in ILO conventions and international humanitarian law. Human rights bodies oversee these commitments through reporting and complaint systems and provide official guidance via General Comments and Recommendations.¹⁷

However, the study finds a major gap between ratified commitments and domestic enforcement. The absence of crisis-specific education legislation leaves constitutional guarantees largely declaratory rather than enforceable.

The findings indicate that crises not only interrupt formal learning but also dismantle protective social institutions—schools serve as a stabilizing space preventing early marriage, exploitation, and child labor. Thus, educational disruption multiplies social vulnerabilities.

Recommendations

The government to ensure the continuity of the education system during natural and political crisis, along with suggestions for reforms.

Policy and planning

- **Integrate Crisis Management in National Education Policy:** A separate chapter must be included in the National Education Policy dedicated to managing the education system during natural and political crisis to ensure effective policy implementation.
- **Establish a Year-Round Expert Team:** Form an Expert Team to work throughout the year, focusing on proactive measure and planning to effectively tackle crises.
- **Define Crisis Separately:** Clearly define and distinguish between the parameters and

¹⁷ <https://www.right-to-education.org/page/international-law>

implication of Natural and Political Crisis within the policy framework.

- **Identify Vulnerable Areas:** Prioritize the early identification and mapping of areas prone to natural crises.
- **Predetermine Crisis-Specific Protocols:** Establish a set of pre-determined policies detailing which protocol will be implemented for each specific type of natural disaster.
- **Form Emergency Protection Teams:** Create Emergency Protection Teams in every division and district city. These teams will be responsible for identifying local issues and collaborating with the central expert team.
- **Educational Rights Act:** Enact an Educational Rights Act to properly establish and safeguard the constitutional right to education.

Operations and Training

- **Mandatory Teacher Training:** Institute annual training programs for teachers on their roles and responsibilities during times of crisis.
- **Online Education Awareness:** Educate students about online class options and conduct awareness sessions to familiarize them with the platforms and procedures.
- **Support for the Unconnected:** Organize upazila-based (sub-district based) awareness and assurance campaigns for students without online access to prevent them from dropping out of their studies.
- **Local Monitoring Committees:** Form supervision committees involving local administration and public representatives to keep track of students, ensuring they do not become involved in criminal activities.
- **Student Counseling:** Ensure the provision of counseling services for students in every school.

Political Engagement and Financial Allocation

- **Non-Obstruction Policy for Political Crises:** Formulate specific policies to ensure that political crises do not disrupt the education system.

- **Political Consensus on Education:** Inform all political parties that no action should be taken that would paralyze the education system.
- **Increase Education Budget:** Increase the education budget to ensure that disadvantaged students can benefit fully from educational initiatives and support programs.
- **Quality and International Collaboration**
- **Alternative Assessment Methods:** Maintain the quality of education by establishing alternative evaluation systems for assessments during crisis periods.
- **International Partnerships:** Forge long-term agreements with countries having advanced education systems for the application of improved policies and the integration of new technologies.

Conclusion

Students enrolled in the secondary phase of education are the most crucial stage of their academic lives. During this time, a conducive and supportive environment fosters sound mental development, while a crisis-ridden setting can pose a major impediment to their fundamental growth trajectory. This particular adolescent stage is characterized by vulnerability: students often lack the maturity to correctly distinguish between right and wrong, and they are not yet fully equipped or eligible for workplace participation. Consequently, securing their fundamental right to education at this pivotal stage is exceptionally urgent and necessary. The government must exercise more deliberate and conscious oversight concerning this matter. Given the high stakes involved, it is extremely urgent that codified regulations are established to ensure the education system is not disrupted or damaged, especially during periods of political crises. This study concludes that the fragility of secondary education in Bangladesh during crises reveals not merely logistical failure but a structural gap in governance, where constitutional rights lack crisis-time operational frameworks.

Furthermore, the strength of the education system is directly tied to a nation's economic solvency. Therefore, the right to education must be guaranteed as quickly as possible during all natural and political crises, prioritizing continuity and stability for this essential segment of the

student population. Education is not merely a service; it is a stabilizing force in crisis governance, peace-building, and economic recovery.