



Socioeconomic And Cultural Determinants of Secondary Education in Haor, Bangladesh: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: Secondary education attainment in the ecologically vulnerable Haor regions of Bangladesh remains persistently low despite the vital role of secondary schooling in individual, social, and national development. This narrative review synthesises the existing literature on the socioeconomic and cultural factors that influence secondary education outcomes among adolescents in the Haor regions. **Methodology:** The study follows a narrative literature review approach, drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and regional literature published between 2015 and 2025. Sources were identified through Google Scholar, ERIC, and national and institutional repositories in Bangladesh, supplemented by reports from UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and relevant NGOs, and were synthesised thematically. **Main Findings:** Thematic analysis reveals that household poverty, the direct and indirect costs of education, seasonal unemployment, child labour, and low parental education are significant socioeconomic barriers, while entrenched gender norms and early marriage are dominant cultural barriers. Geographic isolation and seasonal flooding further contribute to absenteeism and dropout, and these factors interact to reinforce one another. **Applications of this study:** The findings are relevant to education policymakers, the Ministry of Education, regional development planners, and non-governmental organisations working on education access and gender equity in ecologically vulnerable and rural regions of Bangladesh and comparable South Asian contexts. **Novelty/Originality of this study:** Unlike prior studies that address educational access in rural or urban Bangladesh more generally, this review consolidates the socioeconomic and cultural determinants of secondary education in the ecologically vulnerable Haor region, providing an integrated basis for context-specific policy strategies.

Keywords: Haor region; secondary education attainment; socioeconomic barriers; cultural factors; gender norms; Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Secondary education is an important tool for personal development, social change, and a nation's sustainable development. Secondary school teachers foster students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, support their personal growth, and guide them on academic, personal, and career pathways (Singh, 2024; Boruah et al., 2024). Effective management of secondary education drives individual self-empowerment and contributes to sustainable national development (Walson & Ajekere, 2020). The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh is under a constitutional obligation to ensure education for all under Articles 15(a) and 17. In this regard, Bangladesh has taken many steps, including nationalising schools, implementing stipend schemes, and making targeted interventions to address the gender gap in secondary education. Consequently, the country has attained considerable gains in enrolment and gender parity (Banbeis, 2023). However, students in rural, remote, and ecologically vulnerable areas still lack equal access to education, resulting in low attendance, poor performance, and high dropout rates (World Bank, 2018). Consequently, many adolescents in these regions drop out of school, perform poorly and lack opportunities for upward social mobility.

Haor regions are low-lying wetland ecosystems mainly found in northeastern Bangladesh. These areas have distinct socioeconomic and environmental settings for continuing secondary education. Physical, financial, and infrastructural constraints make Haor areas more vulnerable to risks associated with geographic isolation, seasonal and flash floods, and dependence on natural resources (Shajahan & Bista, 2023). Haor dwellers live in organised poverty and marginalisation, facing extreme poverty with low per capita income and literacy rates (Liza, 2024; Hossain et al., 2023). Sarif et al. (2016) indicate that the socioeconomic status of people residing in the Haor, such as family size, income, and land ownership, makes them more vulnerable. The primary economic activities in these areas are agriculture and fisheries, which are highly seasonal (Bangladesh Haor and Wetland Development Directorate, 2016). Their limited cultivable land and seasonal unemployment worsen income and food insecurity (Liza, 2024; Sarif et al., 2016).

The literature shows that students from the Haor areas face various interrelated socioeconomic and cultural factors that hamper their educational development. Studies reveal that socioeconomically disadvantaged families often prioritise short-term earnings over long-term investment in education, withdrawing children from school to engage in income-generating work to secure household survival (Sarker et al., 2019). Murshed and Uddin (2019) found a strong relationship between parental education and children's educational achievement: higher parental education is associated with better school enrollment and children's performance. Likewise, Hassan et al. (2025) showed that children of more educated families are more resilient to disruptions when their parents provide guidance, learning support, and educational expectations. In addition, household poverty, seasonal unemployment, and geographic vulnerability force children to work to support family finances rather than attend school, as Farid et al. (2021) describe, creating a "never-ending vicious loop." Seasonal unemployment traps Haor dwellers in a cycle of economic

vulnerability, which affects their children's education by limiting household economic security and their ability to invest in schooling. Further, schooling is also costly for low-income families (Mooi-Reci & Bakker, 2015), and educational expenses remain a considerable burden for poor households.

Gender norms and cultural practices influencing schooling decisions are also deeply entrenched. In rural communities, parents' perceptions and cultural attitudes play an important role in decisions about girls' enrollment, attendance, and persistence in school. Furthermore, household financial precariousness can worsen negative perceptions of girls' schooling (Hossain, 2021). Alam and Hoque (2022) revealed that anxiety about harassment, familial expectations, and domestic responsibilities are also equally responsible for the dropout of girls from secondary school. In addition, child marriage also limits girls' access to education (Khan et al., 2024).

Despite the number of studies on educational access, dropout, and female education in Bangladesh, most have been conducted in urban or general rural contexts. Fewer have been conducted in ecologically vulnerable areas, such as the Haor areas. In this context, it is important to review the existing literature in detail to identify issues, summarise existing knowledge, and pinpoint gaps in research on secondary education in the Haor regions. To address this, this review critically examines the existing literature on the socioeconomic and cultural challenges to secondary education attainment in the Haor regions of Bangladesh.

METHODOLOGY

This review follows a narrative literature review method to synthesise the current literature on socioeconomic and cultural influences on secondary education in the Haor regions of Bangladesh. The review focused on studies about secondary school outcomes in Haor regions and other rural or ecologically vulnerable contexts. Secondary education attainment is defined broadly to include enrolment, continuity, completion, and efforts to prevent dropout. To cover both international and local research, we conducted a broad literature search using Google Scholar, ERIC, and Bangladeshi national and institutional repositories for publications from 2015 to 2025. The review also included reports from UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and relevant NGOs. The search used different combinations of terms like secondary education attainment, school dropout, socioeconomic factors, cultural norms, gender, early marriage, seasonal unemployment, migration, Haor regions, and Bangladesh.

After identifying studies using these search terms, the authors first checked titles and abstracts for relevance. We then reviewed the full texts of relevant studies to see how they addressed socioeconomic and cultural factors affecting secondary education attainment. We manually collected key details, including author and year, study location and context, research design and methods, the main socioeconomic and cultural factors studied, and findings on secondary education attainment. We then grouped and analysed the literature by theme.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Socioeconomic Factors

Household Poverty and Income Instability

Household poverty makes it hard for many students in Bangladesh to attend and succeed in secondary school. In the Haor areas, poverty is a major barrier to education, and studies show that the cost of schooling is a big challenge for poor families (Liza, 2024; Hossain et al., 2023). Many families struggle to pay for school fees, uniforms, books, and transportation (UNESCO, 2022). Rahman (2021) studied 790 former secondary students and found that financial problems are a leading cause of dropping out. Other important factors include family size, food insecurity, and distance to school. These findings show that poverty and other household issues often work together to affect students' education.

Research shows that people living in the Haor basin are at greater risk because of their difficult socioeconomic conditions. Sarif et al. (2016) found that poor living conditions, weak farming methods, limited healthcare, and poor roads make families more vulnerable. Household income also affects choices about children's schooling and work. Teenagers are often expected to support household income, and many families choose immediate earnings over investing in education for the future.

Parental Education and Occupation

Parental education and occupation are highly significant socioeconomic factors affecting secondary education attainment, influencing access to and quality of secondary education in rural Bangladesh. In addition to household income, parental education level influences attitudes toward schooling, which contributes to continued schooling and a higher likelihood of successful completion. A substantial body of research indicates a strong relationship between parental education and children's educational opportunities; limited literacy, financial constraints, and limited parental involvement in schooling are among the most common challenges rural parents face (Hasnat & Kabir, 2024). Murshed and Uddin (2019) show that parental education level directly affects children's school enrolment and academic performance, while Farah and Upadhyay (2017) also found that children from less educated families are at higher risk of dropping out.

Recent studies confirm that parental educational level and occupational status are closely associated with children's education. Hassan et al. (2025) demonstrate that children in better-educated families benefit more from parental guidance, educational support, and higher educational expectations. Seasonal livelihoods and economic instability in rural Bangladesh also increase educational vulnerability, further indicating that secondary education outcomes should be understood in relation to parents' educational background and occupational status.

Seasonal Unemployment

Seasonal unemployment is a defining feature of livelihoods in the Haor regions, particularly among farming families. The Haor economy operates on two seasons, the dry season (mid-October to mid-April) and the wet/monsoon season (mid-April to mid-October) (Chakraborty et al., 2020), and livelihoods shift cyclically with the changing of land cover over the course of a year. While households remain largely engaged in farming during the dry season, employment opportunities decline sharply during the monsoon. Nahar et al. (2018) report that 90% of Haor residents are engaged in agriculture and 7% in fishing during the dry season, but the picture shifts markedly with the change of season: nearly 80% of people change occupation, with 51% moving into fishing, 18% into day labour, and 10% into making fishing equipment, while 15% become jobless and migrate to neighbouring areas such as Dhaka, Sylhet, Mymensingh, and Chattogram in search of work.

Seasonal unemployment in Haor areas severely affects secondary education by creating a vicious circle of economic vulnerability and educational disruption. Rabby (2012) found that 73% of households in the Haor areas live in poverty because of low income, and 44% of people there live in extreme poverty. Because of this, families often have to focus on survival instead of education, which leads to children dropping out of school and getting involved in seasonal migration or child labour. Research also shows that parental unemployment hurts children's education by making family finances less stable (Mooi-Reci & Bakker, 2015). This instability affects how children take part in school and what they achieve.

Child Labour and Household Economic Contribution

Child labour is a serious problem in the Haor areas of Bangladesh. It keeps children in poverty and at risk, and stops them from going to secondary school. Although child labour is prohibited under the Child Labour Act 2006, it remains prevalent in Bangladesh, as in many other South Asian countries. Several studies show how seasonal unemployment and livelihood insecurity force households to rely on children's financial support, and how poverty, seasonal unemployment, and geographic vulnerability drive children into the labour market instead of school (Farid et al., 2021). According to Sarker, Wu, and Hossin (2019), poverty forces many parents to pull their children out of school to pursue work that supports the family's livelihood, and children from low-income families are more likely to drop out of school to find employment.

Child labour remains a significant factor denying many children access to schooling in Bangladesh (Karim et al., 2024). Hasan and Muneer (2019) found that a large proportion of dropout students are primarily engaged in wage-based work and are more likely to leave school. For instance, findings from rural Bangladesh showed that household poverty forces families to choose between education and work, removing school-aged children from classrooms to engage in activities that support family livelihoods (Islam & Hoque, 2022). When adolescents start working, child labour often leads them to leave school. This has long-term effects on their skills and productivity, which negatively affect national development.

Access to Educational Resources and Schooling Costs

Poverty, environmental challenges, and poor infrastructure make it hard for people in the Haor regions of Bangladesh to access education. Compared to other parts of the country, these areas have a severe shortage of schools, so secondary education is much less available. The District Education Office (DEO) of Kishoreganj reports 262 public and private (MPO-affiliated) secondary schools across the district's 13 upazilas, but they are not evenly distributed. For example, Austagram and Nikli, two Haor upazilas, each have only ten secondary schools, which is the lowest in the district. This shows large regional differences in secondary school enrolment and that schools are both few in number and unevenly distributed in the Haor areas (Nahar et al., 2018).

Primary education is free in Bangladesh, but secondary education costs money in both direct and hidden ways. These costs are especially hard for low-income families, who often cannot afford secondary education unless they also pay for private tutoring (Mahmud, 2021). Shahidul and Karim (2015) found that rural families with low incomes often spend less on their daughters' education, which leads to more irregular attendance and early dropout. Not being able to pay for private tuition is also a big reason for dropping out. Sheikh et al. (2022) found that most students who left school said their parents could not afford the costs, and more than one in ten dropped out because they could not get private tuition.

Cultural Factors

Attitudes toward Education

Attitudes toward education play a crucial role in shaping children's educational attainment, especially in areas facing economic and geographic challenges. For girls, whether they enroll in, attend, or continue school often depends on how society and parents value secondary education. In places like the Haor and other ecologically sensitive regions, education is often seen mainly as a way to help families survive financially, rather than as something that offers long-term benefits.

Research shows that a family's economic situation is closely linked to how children progress in school. Poor families often consider secondary education as a cost instead of an investment, especially when the benefits are unpredictable (Shahidul & Karim, 2015). In rural areas, economic uncertainty makes families even less likely to support girls' secondary education (Hossain, 2021). Parvez et al. (2022) found that 62% of Haor families are at risk of food insecurity because of flash floods. The poorest families feel this insecurity the most, which directly affects whether children can go to school. When families struggle to meet basic needs, they often see formal education as a luxury.

Many families facing economic hardship still hold negative attitudes about girls' education. Strong gender norms and poverty limit girls' chances to go to school, which lowers their chances for educational success and upward social mobility. Some parents choose child marriage over continued schooling to secure their daughter's future (Arafat et al., 2021). Discriminatory attitudes, conservative beliefs, social norms, and religious values often make it harder for girls to access education.

Gender Norms and Socio-cultural Constraints

In rural Bangladesh, gender norms and cultural expectations make it difficult for girls to access education. Several studies have shown that patriarchal systems, economic challenges, and cultural beliefs put girls at a disadvantage in school (Arafat et al., 2021). These issues often show up in everyday family decisions. Alam and Hoque (2022) found that factors like fear of harassment, family expectations, and domestic responsibilities all contribute to girls leaving secondary school, even though more girls are enrolling nationally. Mahbub (2022) also found that traditional roles, such as doing housework and marrying early, are major reasons limiting girls' education.

Parents often put more importance on early marriage and household chores for their daughters than on their education. Many girls also face sexual harassment, which seriously affects their schooling. Jahan et al. (2021) studied 2,300 people and found that girls who experience harassment often deal with anxiety, depression, poor grades, and sleep disturbance, especially those under 18. Roy et al. (2023) found that these experiences can harm girls both physically and mentally, sometimes leading them to leave school or change their career plans. Tabassum and Tamanna (2025) point out that most victims do not report these incidents or seek legal action because of institutional barriers and inconsistent responses from institutions. All these social and cultural challenges work together to limit girls' chances for education.

There is evidence that attitudes about gender and education are slowly improving. Younger generations are more supportive of gender equality in education than older generations, which suggests that norms are changing and could help better educational attainment for girls over time (Blunch & Das, 2015).

Early Marriage and Social Expectations

Early marriage is still a major reason why girls leave school in Bangladesh, and it is deeply rooted in long-standing social norms (Streatfield et al., 2015). While early marriage rates have decreased slightly, they are still very high. According to the UNICEF Bangladesh Child Marriage Report (2020), Bangladesh has the highest rate of child marriage in South Asia and is ranked eighth in the world. The report says 51% of women marry before age 18, and 31% marry before age 15. Also the rates are different depending on where people live: 44% in urban areas and 54% in rural areas.

Studies in Bangladesh show that several connected factors lead to early marriage among girls. These include parents' financial problems, the dowry system, fear of sexual harassment, lack of awareness, and strong social values. Many poor families see daughters as a financial burden and believe marrying them off will help ease that burden (Ahmed et al., 2019). The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (2018) also points to poverty and economic hardship as main reasons for child marriage, especially among poor families. Child marriage is closely linked to girls dropping out of secondary school. For example, Rani and Akman (2022) found in Naogaon district that many adolescent girls who married early were less

likely to continue or regularly attend school. Child marriage frequently terminates girls' education completely and narrows their future prospects in the long term (Khan et al., 2024).

Synthesis and Discussion

This review brings together the literature on socioeconomic and cultural factors affecting secondary school education in the Haor region of Bangladesh. It demonstrates that household poverty, parental education and occupational level, seasonal unemployment, child labour, and educational expenses are the key socioeconomic factors shaping secondary education outcomes, while attitudes toward education, deep-rooted gender norms, and early marriage are the dominant cultural factors. Taken together, these factors pose a significant challenge for students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds seeking to access and complete secondary education.

Socioeconomic conditions among Haor households play a persistent role in shaping secondary education attainment. Household poverty restricts a family's capacity to pay for direct costs such as school fees, uniforms, private tuition, and learning materials, as well as indirect costs such as transportation and the opportunity cost of schooling, among low-income families. Financial insecurity is an additional risk for dropout among Haor households, whose livelihoods are mostly seasonal and unpredictable, and several studies have found that low family income is strongly correlated with increased dropout rates. These socioeconomic vulnerabilities remain key contributors to educational inequality in the region.

Parental education and occupation also appear to be significant factors. The literature suggests that parental education level is directly associated with household income and livelihood, and is a significant determinant of students' educational continuation. Parents with limited education are more likely to have their children drop out, underscoring the importance of both parental education and occupational involvement in shaping parents' ability to support their children's academic and financial well-being.

Seasonal unemployment and child labour are common in the Haor region, especially among farming families. During the monsoon, many people lose work and often have to move elsewhere to find jobs. Because of this economic hardship, families sometimes take their children out of school so they can work. Studies show that many students leave school to financially support their families, and over time, this can lead to them leaving formal schooling. This has long-term effects on human capital, productivity, and the country's development.

Research shows that poor families often consider formal education as a luxury they cannot afford. In many rural households, negative views about girls' education and strong gender norms still influence educational choices. Factors like early marriage, safety issues, limited parental awareness, expectations for girls at home, and low spending on girls' education all help create a cycle that restricts girls from attending secondary school. This review finds that these social and cultural barriers, along with poverty and geographic location, keep reinforcing the same obstacles to girls' education.

In sum, this review shows that secondary education in the ecologically vulnerable Haor region is shaped by factors such as socioeconomic disadvantage, gendered cultural norms, and environmental challenges. Future research should use mixed methods and spatial analysis and examine how climate and education are connected to better understand the links between environment, livelihood, and schooling.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This review has limitations that should be acknowledged. As this is a narrative review, not a systematic one, the study selection did not follow a set protocol, which could introduce selection bias in the included literature. The available evidence is also limited. There are not enough empirical studies, especially longitudinal ones, focused on Haor environments. As a result, some conclusions are based on research from wider rural areas in Bangladesh, which may not fully reflect the unique ecological and socioeconomic conditions of the Haor region. To address these gaps, future research should use systematic review methods, track studies over time, combine different research approaches, and include spatial analysis. This would provide stronger evidence to guide policy decisions.

CONCLUSION

This literature review has focused on the socioeconomic and cultural factors that shape secondary education achievement in the Haor regions of Bangladesh, which are geographically isolated and highly marginalised. The studies show that educational attainment here does not depend on just one factor. Instead, it emerges from a complex interplay of factors such as household poverty, parental education and occupation, livelihood insecurity, gender roles, and internal cultural traditions.

Chronic poverty, seasonal unemployment, and mono-crop economies are the main barriers to secondary education. These challenges make it hard for families to afford both the direct and indirect costs of schooling, and often lead children to work instead. Cultural issues like early marriage, traditional views on gender, and parental belief about the limited returns to investing in girls' education. Geographic isolation and environmental vulnerability also contribute to socioeconomic disruptions that exacerbate low educational attainment.

To improve secondary education in the Haor areas, requires a contextual and integrated policy response that addresses socioeconomic disadvantage, challenges conservative cultural practices, and accounts for ecological realities. Key steps include providing targeted financial aid, running gender-focused community programs, adjusting school calendars to match seasonal changes, and building flood-resilient infrastructure. The study suggests that future research should use both qualitative and quantitative methods from different fields to better understand how social, cultural, and environmental factors shape secondary education in the Haor regions.

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