

Improving the quality of girls' education in madrasas in Bangladesh

Discussion guide and
program plan, 2015-2020

Musammat Badrunnesha
Co-authored with Christina Kwauk

DECEMBER 2015



THE ECHIDNA GLOBAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM

The Echidna Global Scholars Program is a visiting fellowship hosted by the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings that works to catalyze and amplify the work of leaders in girls' education from developing countries. The Echidna Global Scholars are selected through a rigorous, competitive selection process and spend nearly five months in-residence at Brookings on research-based projects and collaborating with colleagues on issues related to global education policy, with a particular focus on girls' education. Upon return, Echidna Scholars may implement projects with their home institutions based on their research findings and join the Echidna Alumni network. For more information on the Echidna Global Scholars Program, please visit: www.brookings.edu/globalscholars.

Support for this research and the Echidna Global Scholars Program is generously provided by Echidna Giving. Brookings recognizes that the value it provides is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment and the analysis and recommendations are solely determined by the scholar.

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hope is a renewable energy source to me. I meet many deprived women and girls. Yet, I continue to dream with passion, desire, and a demand for a better society. With hope I joined the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution as an Echidna Global Scholar. At this time, I would like to thank the following people, as well as the numerous others whom I am unable to recognize individually, who have come with me on my journey to regenerate hope for those without it.

I am grateful to Echidna Giving for this princely fellowship and for giving me the support to undertake a very important issue at CUE. Girls' education in madrasas in Bangladesh has not been a well-attended or urgent topic for the national or global communities. However, this opportunity at the Brookings Institution has provided a space to begin this important discussion.

I must acknowledge the restless support, insights, invaluable advice, and technical support from Christina Kwauk, Rebecca Winthrop, Jenifer Gamble, Bridget McElroy, and all of the CUE team at Brookings who have directly and indirectly inspired me to work on this paper.

I am thankful to the Bangladesh government, Madrasa Education Board Dhaka, the U.S. Department

of State, the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka, the International Research and Exchange Board (IREX), BRAC International, the British Council, and the Asia Foundation for providing me with the necessary support to implement educational projects in the madrasas over the last few years. The experiences I have gained through my involvement serve as the source of inspiration for this discussion guide and program plan.

I would like to thank the EHDS team, the madrasa community in Sylhet, the U.S. State Alumni Community, and the community leaders of Sylhet who were and are always next to me in every step of my thoughts and writing.

I would also like to acknowledge the support from Mr. Ryan Bradeen, Nmzeaul Alam, Md. Mofizul Islam, Alkama Siddiqui, Professor Dr. Abdul Awal Biswas, Professor Dr. Del Harnisch, Md. Shariful Islam, and Natalie Lau-Chien.

Finally, I would like to give thanks to my family and friends for allowing me to be away from home and for making my stay in D.C. both enjoyable and productive, enabling me to finish this study, and develop a program plan for girls' education in madrasas.

Improving the quality of girls' education in madrasas in Bangladesh

Discussion guide and program plan, 2015-2020

Musammat Badrunnesha

Co-authored with Christina Kwauk



OVERVIEW

One major but unrecognized force behind Bangladesh's progress enrolling approximately 3 million more girls in secondary school between 1991 and 2005 is the rise of madrasa education. For many religiously minded Muslim parents in the country, madrasas offer a comforting response to a rapidly globalizing world with an education that will help preserve the social values of society while ensuring that the honor of their daughters is protected. But even though madrasas provide

over 1.5 million girls with the important opportunity to attend school, the majority does not receive a quality, relevant education and will not complete secondary school. Drawing from limited madrasa education data in the Sylhet region and the principal author's 15 years of experience working in education and madrasas there, this discussion guide and program plan first spells out what the problems and challenges are for girls' education in madrasas, and, second, outlines two strategies for improving the quality of girls' education in madrasas for the next five years.

Musammat Badrunnesha | Bangladesh

Founder and Chairperson, Empowerment and Human Development Society

Ms. Musammat Badrunnesha has over 15 years of experience on girls' empowerment efforts as a career-oriented administrator, social scientist, and entrepreneur. She is the CEO, founder, and chairperson of Empowerment and Human Development Society and the founding principal of Captain Academy, based in Sylhet, Bangladesh. In the last three years, Ms. Badrunnesha has worked with 300 madrasas providing workshops and trainings for teachers, administrators, youth, and women. She is an alumna of the Community Solutions Program (CSP)—a program of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State for community leaders implemented by IREX. During her CSP fellowship, Ms. Badrunnesha worked at the Girls Inc. YWCA in West Central Michigan where she was involved in girls' education programming. She holds a M.Ed. in education from Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology and a M.A. in history from Bangladesh National University as well as a B.Ed. in education and a B.A. in social science from Bangladesh National University.

*“Quality education is not just about numbers and letters,
but also about empowerment.”¹*

INTRODUCTION

Research around the world has demonstrated the important role that education plays in the empowerment of girls and women.² Providing girls with a quality education can help prevent early marriage, prevent drop out from school, facilitate successful transitions to adulthood, increase wages, and launch them into more active roles leading their communities.³ In short, a quality education can “kick-start a virtuous cycle of development.”⁴ But in Bangladesh, despite tremendous progress enrolling 3.9 million girls in secondary school in 2005—up from 1.1 million

in 1991—the majority of girls are not receiving a quality, relevant education in a safe, supportive, and empowering environment.⁵

One major but unrecognized force behind the enrollment success in Bangladesh is the rise and recent reform of madrasa education.⁶ With over 1.5 million girls⁷ in the country attending school in Aliya (reformed) madrasas (see text box), madrasa education has become the preferred form of schooling for the more religiously minded communities in the country. Observing Islamic religious teachings—for example, about girls and boys occupying separate

Types of madrasas

With global terrorism a serious concern for the global community, madrasas have often been characterized by the media as socially backwards and complicit in training terrorists across the regions of South Asia and the Middle East. Painted as a responsible counterpart in spreading extremist ideology, these images have led many madrasas to reform and modernize their curriculum. Today, madrasas in Bangladesh are structured in one of two ways: Aliya and Qaumi.

This paper focuses on **Aliya (state-reformed) madrasas**. Aliya madrasas are supported by the state with a modified Dars-e-Nizami curriculum that combines general secular education with religious education. Aliya madrasas are also known as mainstream madrasas, providing graduates with a secular education from primary to tertiary levels that prepares them to compete for university admission and enter the workforce.

Within the Aliya stream, **Cadet madrasas** are an emergent category. These private, English-medium madrasas are styled after kindergarten schools in Bangladesh, and offer residential education and a somewhat regimented life, including offering physical activities and other co-curricular activities.

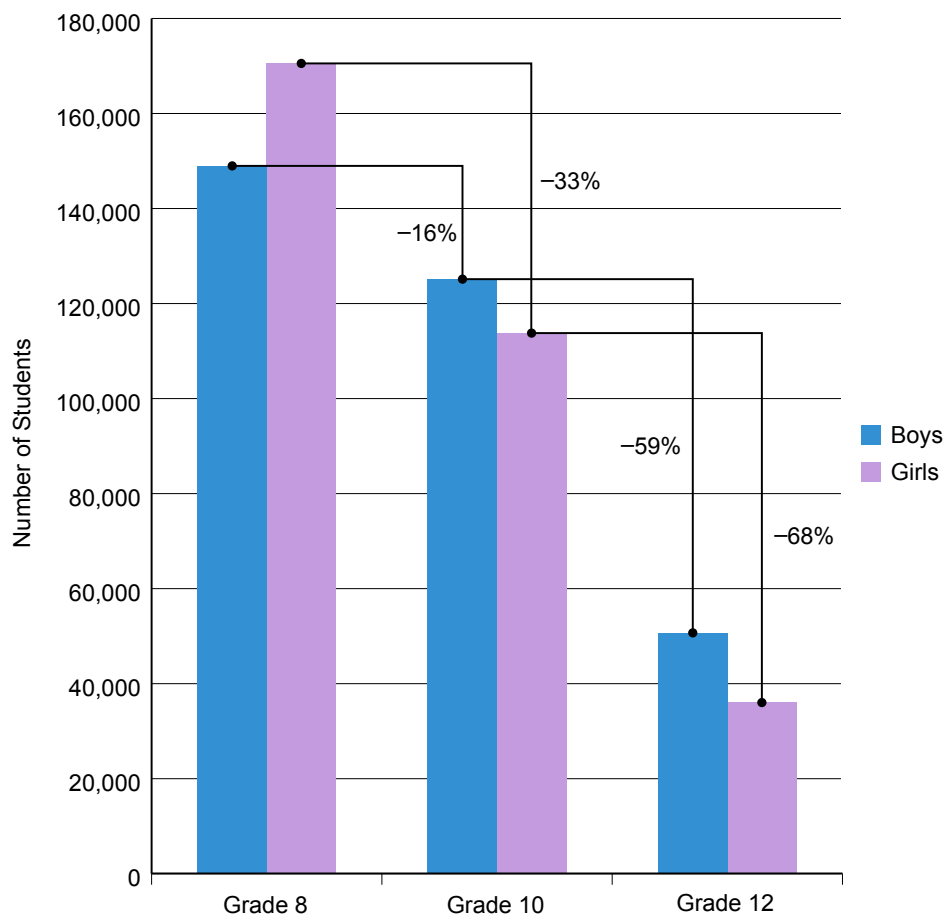
The **Qaumi (unreformed, traditional) madrasas**, which are not recognized or supported by the state, are often considered to be extremist and operate on donations and charity outside the state from sources unknown. Because Qaumi madrasas are organized informally, our knowledge of school enrollment numbers, gender composition, curriculum offered, and the scope of student transitions to higher education and the job market is very limited.

In Sylhet, a region in northeastern Bangladesh, where, like the national average, 88 percent of the population is Muslim, madrasas offer an important source of education for both girls and boys. There are 228 government-registered madrasas offering up to grade 10 in Sylhet, compared to 691 non-madrasa state schools. In addition to the Aliya madrasas, Qaumi madrasas are also popular in Sylhet.

spaces—madrasas give parents a peace of mind when it comes to concerns about protecting the honor of their daughters while in school.⁸ For these religiously minded parents, madrasas—which offer both secular and religious education—offer a comforting response to the social influence of a rapidly globalizing world. Poor and rich parents alike are turning away from “regular” state schools to madrasas to help preserve the social values of society, and they are choosing to send their daughters to madrasas on the belief that madrasas are safer for girls. Unfortunately, few studies have been conducted on madrasas and reliable gender-disaggregated educational statistics for madrasas are not collected by the state. Therefore, little is known about the particular challenges girls face when being educated at a madrasas.

Even though madrasas provide over 1.5 million girls in Bangladesh the opportunity to be educated, the data that do exist indicate that the majority will not complete secondary school or transition to university. According to madrasa principals in Sylhet interviewed by the principal author, only 3-4 percent of girls matriculating from Aliya madrasas will go on to complete a tertiary education. Data from the Madrasa Education Board of Bangladesh on the number of girls and boys who sit for their grade 8 (Junior Dakhil Certificate, JDC), grade 10 (Dakhil), and grade 12 (Alim) exams give an approximation of the female dropout rate from madrasas in the Sylhet region: On average, 33 percent fewer girls sit for their grade 10 exams than on the grade 8 exam. By the time they sit for their grade 12 exam, 79 percent of girls from

FIGURE 1. CHANGE IN THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS WHO SAT FOR THEIR EXAMS, GRADES 8-12



the original cohort have disappeared from school. This is compared to 16 percent and 66 percent fewer boys not appearing for their grade 10 and 12 exams, respectively (see Figure 1). Furthermore, only a small percentage of girls attending madrasas will enter the labor market.

Although the lack of data severely constrains what we know about girls' education in madrasas, observations in and experience with co-educational madrasas in the Sylhet region, where the principal author's nongovernmental organization (NGO) Empowerment and Human Development Society (EHDS) has worked, indicate that girls face multiple challenges stemming from poor quality education and an unwelcoming classroom environment for girls. For example, most madrasas are run by male principals and classes are taught by male teachers. In some rural madrasas that observe Islamic religious teachings about gender segregation, a cloth divider is used to separate girls from boys and male teachers in the classroom, affecting girls' ability to see the blackboard and sometimes even their teachers.

Understanding issues like how cloth dividers, a lack of female teachers, an irrelevant curriculum,

or poor educational quality affect girls' ability to learn in madrasas are largely unknown and left unaddressed, first, because little research is conducted on girls' education issues in madrasas; second, because madrasas receive less attention from the national and local governments; and, third, madrasas are often not engaged by NGOs working on improving gender equality in schools. If left to the status quo, over 1.5 million girls in Bangladesh's madrasas will be unable to receive a quality education, will continue to drop out of madrasas in large numbers, and will not experience the empowering benefits of education.

This discussion guide and program plan attempts to fill the gap in knowledge and call on the government of Bangladesh, NGOs, and local community leaders to take serious action to improve the quality of girls' education in madrasas. Drawing on existing literature, interviews conducted with madrasa principals in the Sylhet region, and the principal author's 15 years of experience in education in Sylhet, including working with 300 madrasas in the region, the recommendations put forward outline a plan of action for the next five years.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM? A DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MADRASA STAKEHOLDERS

The following summary of discussion points highlights what data and observations have indicated are underlying problems for girls' education in madrasas at the level of the school and the community. The final cluster of problems pertains to the lack of data and research, which further extenuates the lack of concrete knowledge about the challenges facing girls in madrasas.

School-level problems

- *Teacher training:* A major impediment to improving the quality of education in madrasas is that teachers are not trained to teach the curriculum efficiently. Ministry of Education data indicate that only 8.5 percent of Aliya madrasa teachers in Sylhet are trained, compared to 49.6 percent of state secondary school teachers.¹³ Currently, teacher training is not prioritized, especially in English and social science, with which the principal author is most familiar. There is only one teacher-training institute for all madrasa teachers in the entire country. This is insufficient for providing training and continuing support across the country. In fact, only 10-14 percent of madrasa teachers attend training workshops offered by the institute.¹⁴
- *Too few female teachers:* Although the number of female teachers in madrasas has almost *septupled* since madrasa reforms were initiated by the state in the 1980s,¹⁵ 6.9 percent female teachers is too low for an education system where almost half of the students are girls. In Sylhet region, there are even fewer female teachers—some schools have none, others may have two or three—and there are no female principals or school administrators across the 300 madrasas familiar to the principal author. Research from other countries shows that hiring female teachers is important for improving girls' educational outcomes in socially conservative communities where girls cannot go to the school unless there are female teachers.¹⁶ And since madrasas are traditionally male dominated, the presence of a female teacher is even more important for girls.
- *Curriculum:* Although the curriculum in Aliya madrasas has been modified and textbooks have been revised, there is serious concern about the quality of learning in madrasas.¹⁷ Currently, there is a heavy emphasis on reading and memorizing textbooks and little to no attention to the development of soft skills like leadership. Co-curricular activities and life skills training (including mentoring and girls' guides, human rights education, leadership development, and global citizenship education) are not included in daily activities or integrated into the curriculum. Unlike state schools, where government and NGOs are more likely to collaborate and implement such innovative life skills programming, madrasas are less likely to receive the kind of external attention or support that would lead to partnerships and initiatives targeting the social and cultural obstacles impeding girls' educational outcomes.
- *Lack of and distance to higher-level madrasas:* After completing Alim class (grade 12), many girls drop out from school due partly to the unavailability of madrasas

offering higher class levels in their community. For example, in Sylhet region, there are 228 madrasas offering up to grade 10 and only 62 madrasas offering up to grade 12, leaving many girls without a school to attend beyond grade 10. Furthermore, the availability of only 11 Kamil (masters) madrasas across the region is not enough to enable all students in madrasas to continue their education through higher levels of schooling that could improve their employment outcomes. While boys can continue their madrasa education in cities traveling via bicycle, bus, or train, girls have fewer options since social norms prohibit girls from using public transportation unaccompanied, and they will often discontinue their schooling as a result. Research shows that in contexts where adolescent girls' mobility is restricted, longer distances to school means greater opportunity costs in investing in girls' education. Families have to make extra arrangements and bear additional costs to transport their daughters to and from school.¹⁸

Community-level problems

- *Early marriage:* Barriers outside the classroom add another layer of challenges for girls attending madrasas. Factors like early marriage contribute to girls dropping out of madrasas before completing the secondary level. UNICEF reports that 66 percent of girls in Bangladesh are married before the age of 18, and over one-third of girls are married before the age of 15.¹⁹ In many cases, due to parents' low levels of education and strong religious ideology, teachers and principals of madrasas have reported that once girls complete grade 9 their

parents arrange for them to be married to men living overseas, particularly in the Middle East and the U.K., and sometimes to men who are much older. Due to the high rate of emigration and the rise of remittances from abroad, new inequalities have been introduced in Sylhet affecting young women the most.²⁰

- *Low parent and community motivation and engagement:* Evidence illustrates that madrasas are more likely to be located in poor rural areas, where parents are illiterate and, as a result, have limited understanding about the benefits of educating their daughters. This means that as girls mature, families and communities experience decreasing support for and engagement in girls' education.
- *Lack of involvement by local government, NGOs, and donors:* A repeated concern by principals of madrasa and officials from the Madrasa Education Board is that the Bangladeshi government, national and international NGOs (including influential organizations such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, or BRAC), and international agencies (including the World Bank, UNICEF, and UNDP), provide educational assistance and supplemental programming for girls in state schools, but very few provide such extensive or consistent support for girls in the madrasa community. Some assistance occurred in the 1990s when the Bangladesh government introduced a number of substantial policy incentives for the Aliya madrasas as part of its policy to develop primary, secondary, and higher secondary education across the country. But in order to receive such support from the government, madrasas in the private sector, like other categories of

educational institutions, have to be registered with the government. Many madrasas around the country are unregistered, and in order to become registered and receive a license from the state, the madrasas must fulfill specific standards and requirements of the government. This structural problem continues to hold back progress.

Research/data problems

- *Lack of reliable data to inform knowledge of the problems and solutions:* Policies and programs targeting quality improvement in madrasas in Bangladesh must be based on a sound empirical foundation.²¹ Unfortunately, a sound empirical base is not available: Support of educational research on girls' education in madrasas and the collection of educational statistics in madrasas are urgently

needed. Currently, the number of studies investigating madrasa education in Bangladesh, as well as around the world, is very low. None of the available national data sets provide reliable information on enrollment in madrasas or a comprehensive account of gender differences in attendance or academic performance in madrasas. Numbers cited in this paper are the best approximations based on available data sources provided by the Madrasa Education Board and UNICEF, as well as information from the few research studies on madrasas. The lack of gender-disaggregated data and educational statistics in madrasas affects our knowledge about the problems, challenges, and scope of issues facing girls' quality education in madrasas, as well as overall quality issues for both girls and boys.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION? A PROGRAM PLAN FOR 2015-2020

Addressing the above problems and ensuring a quality education for girls in madrasas can be achieved by taking strategic steps. Considering the availability of resources, funding, data, and the capacity of local organizations, the following two goals should be prioritized over the next five years. New data from monitoring and evaluating these efforts and from future research can inform action steps post-2020, allowing for a more gradual approach to improving girls' education in madrasas as our understanding of the issues, challenges, obstacles, and opportunities becomes more concrete.

Goal 1: All teachers in secondary Aliya madrasas in Bangladesh should be trained in English and social science teaching methodologies.

Teachers are an important key to improving the quality of education in madrasas and learning outcomes for both girls and boys. Teachers interact directly with students and are responsible for implementing the curriculum in the classrooms. More trained English and social science teachers at the secondary level—and eventually also mathematics and science teachers—will ensure textbooks are taught properly—not simply memorized to pass tests—and that interactive and participatory activities like project-based and hands-on learning are incorporated in the classroom in ways that observe religious requirements with respect to gender segregation. Trained teachers, especially trained female teachers, will also help ensure girls acquire the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English; introduce girls to topics in the social sciences like

human rights, good governance, and citizenship; and help them gain the confidence and skills to continue to higher studies and employment. Teacher training in English and social science is the first step to improving the level of educational quality for girls and boys in madrasas in the short-term, and to improving girls' educational and life outcomes in the long-term, including reducing drop out and delaying the age of marriage. However, the effects of teacher training on the quality of madrasas needs to be monitored and sustained through accountability to community leaders and local government and continued professional support from teacher trainers and teacher-training program providers.

Goal 2: Establish a functioning girls' club in every Aliya madrasa to build the capacity of girls.

“Learning by doing” is a powerful and effective way to extend learning beyond the classroom. Girls' clubs in madrasas can provide girls a safe environment to engage in important capacity-building training and to acquire relevant life skills, like leadership, communication, and negotiation. Gaining skills means gaining confidence in themselves, and that confidence will help them to stay in school longer and to speak out about the importance of their education. As demonstrated by girls' clubs and girls' capacity-building programs implemented previously by EHDS and BRAC in Sylhet, ensuring madrasas have a functioning girls' club where girls can participate in year-long projects will enable them to have the opportunity to take on leadership roles in school, work with mentor-teachers, practice communication and public speaking, and acquire new experiences and exposure to new environments. Involving parents and local leaders in girls' clubs activities is also important for demonstrating to parents and the community the

value of investing in girls' education. Together, with the observable gains in skills and confidence by girls—skills that will serve them throughout their lives and livelihoods within their future families, careers, and communities—parents will be more likely to consent to allow their daughters to travel further distances for higher studies when higher-level madrasas are not available in the nearby community. Additionally, a functioning girls' club will also provide local leaders and government a space to be involved in improving the quality of educational experiences in madrasas.

The following theory of change (see Figure 2), based on evidence from previous teacher-training and girls' capacity-building programs implemented by organizations like BRAC and EHDS, illustrates how the prioritization of teacher training and girls' clubs over the next five years serves as an important first step to improving the quality of education for girls in madrasas. Addressing other underlying problems mentioned earlier, including school-level problems like the low number of female teachers or the availability of higher-level madrasas, should be considered as more data becomes available from this initiative.

To accomplish these goals, the following activities and steps should all be taken.

Plan 1: Provide one week of extensive training to the English and social science teachers of all secondary Aliya madrasas in Bangladesh (all seven divisions) through collaboration between NGOs and local governments.

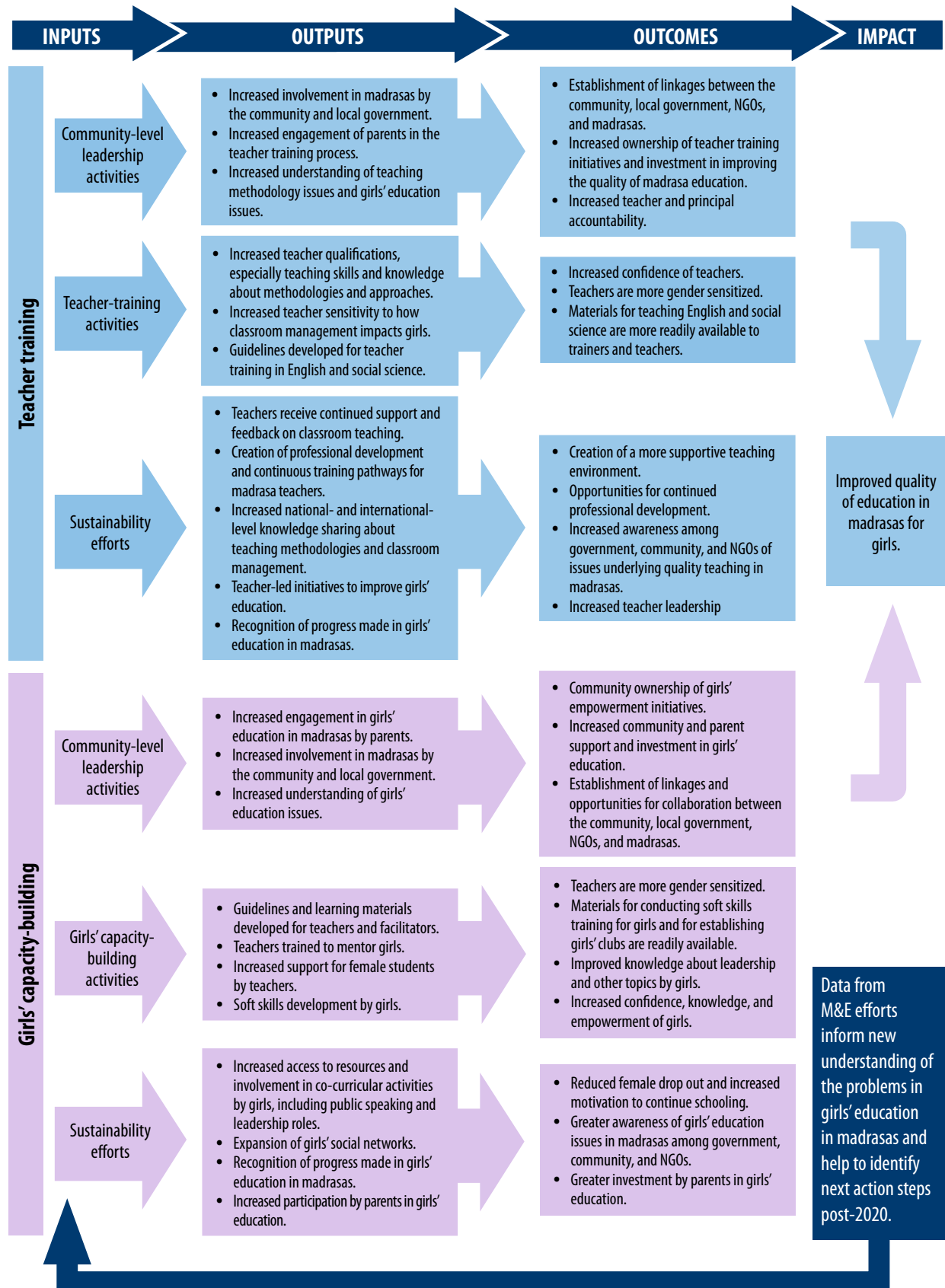
Community-level leadership activities:

- **Form local councils on quality teacher training in madrasas:** This advisory board should be composed of volunteer members

from the local government, local community leadership, principals from participating madrasas, and teacher-training program providers (ideally two from each entity). The board, of which at least half should be women, should oversee activities targeted at improving the quality of teacher training and provide necessary feedback to ensure girls' education issues are understood and addressed in teacher-training programs.

- **Provided the relevant authorities an acknowledgment letter by teacher-training program providers:** An acknowledgment letter will inform relevant governing authorities about teacher-training activities, aims, objectives, and expected outcomes. The letter must be brokered with the district administration office, Madrasa Education Board, and the district and sub-district education offices before engaging with madrasas. Gaining permission from these bodies is critical for gaining the support necessary to implement teacher-training activities in the madrasas.
- **Sign agreements between teacher-training program providers and participating madrasas:** An agreement letter will help establish mutual understanding and consent about program conditions, outcomes, and expectations between program providers and selected madrasas. In addition, signing an agreement letter will serve to express a madrasa's interest in improving the quality of education, especially for girls.
- **Establish a connection between madrasas, the community, and local governments:** Prior to teacher-training activities, a one-day workshop for madrasa principals and administrators, local government

FIGURE 2. THEORY OF CHANGE FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION FOR GIRLS IN MADRASAS



officials, and community leaders should be conducted. This workshop will help introduce key stakeholders to each other, establish grounds for collaboration and involvement in madrasa education, as well as inform all parties about program activities and expected outcomes and impact. The aim is to break down barriers between the madrasa and the larger community and local government, and to overcome limited opportunities for interaction.

Teacher-training activities:

- **Develop teacher-training materials:** Two separate training manuals for English and social science teachers should be developed to enhance teaching methodologies, teachers' capacity to effectively incorporate textbooks into their teaching techniques, and their ability to recognize how their classroom setup and management practices affect girls. Teacher-training materials not only serve as guidelines for the trainers, but also an important reference throughout the school year for trainees.
- **Train facilitators:** In order to implement a quality teacher-training program, facilitators must also be trained and familiar with techniques and materials. Where possible, training female facilitators should be prioritized. Teacher-training facilitators should be selected to participate, ideally for three days, in a training of trainers based on their interest, experience, and commitment to improving the quality of education for both girls and boys in madrasas.
- **Provide one week of extensive field-level training for English and social science teachers:** A group of teachers, ideally

between 20 and 25 teachers giving preference to female teachers, should be invited from 20 madrasas for each teacher-training session. The training should be arranged in a central madrasa so that all teachers can commute easily. During the week-long training, teachers will learn to use new teaching methodologies that focus on the effective use of textbooks in the classroom and on gender-sensitive classroom management practices. Demonstration classes should be a core component of the training.

Activities to sustain and improve teacher-training efforts:

- **Monitor and support:** When trained teachers begin to implement their new skills in the classrooms, efforts should be made to continue to provide teachers with support and feedback. Teacher-training facilitators should be involved in monitoring the teachers' classroom teaching and provide ongoing performance feedback and professional development support. This will also allow program providers to collect meaningful data on the intervention in order to improve it over time, and to identify issues, challenges, and opportunities in the quality of teaching in madrasas for girls. This continued relationship between madrasa teachers and teacher-training providers also means teachers can be informed of professional development opportunities arranged by NGOs, international NGOs, and other international agencies.
- **Connect teachers with national and international (U.S. and U.K.) schools:** Teachers can benefit from national and international exchanges, like the International Research

and Exchange Board's Teachers for Global Classrooms or the British Council's Connecting Classrooms initiatives, through the expanded opportunity to learn from and share ideas with a larger professional network about quality teaching methodologies. Not only does facilitating connections contribute to ongoing teacher professional development, but it also helps lay the groundwork for partnerships, collaborations, and friendships with teachers from other schools, including non-madrasa, state schools in Bangladesh.

- **Share lessons learned with the larger community:** Following a year of implementation, an end-of-year knowledge-sharing workshop should be held where members of the Council on Quality Teacher Training in Madrasas, NGOs, local media, local government, community leadership, and parents gather to learn from teachers about how they implemented their new teaching methodologies. This workshop will allow teachers to share success stories and lessons learned to the larger community, while also further engaging madrasa stakeholders in the process of improving the quality of education. Activities such as demonstration classes will help hold all stakeholders and participating teachers accountable to the vision of quality madrasa education.
- **Award mini-grants to qualified teachers:** Trained teachers should be provided the opportunity to continue the momentum gained around teacher training and professional development efforts. Teachers should be invited to submit proposals to teacher-training providers for a follow-up mini-grant, funded by the NGO partner, to implement a

six-month project of their own choosing that uses their experience as a trained teacher to make a difference in their community.

Plan 2: Provide a four-day capacity-building training for girls and establish girls' clubs in the madrasas through collaboration between NGOs and local governments.

Community-level leadership activities:

- **Formation of a Girls' Club Advisory Board:** This advisory board should be composed of volunteer members from the local government, local community leadership, principals from participating madrasas, and teacher-training providers (ideally two members from each entity). This board, of which at least half should be women, will oversee activities targeted at girls' capacity building, the formation and operation of girls' clubs in each madrasa, and provide necessary feedback to ensure that girls' educational needs are understood and addressed.
- **Girls' capacity-building program providers supply an acknowledgement letter to the relevant authorities:** An acknowledgment letter will inform relevant governing authorities about girls' capacity-building training activities, aims and objectives, as well as expected outcomes, especially with the establishment of girls' clubs in madrasas. The acknowledgment letter must be brokered with the district administration office, Madrasa Education Board, and the district and sub-district education offices before engaging with madrasas. Gaining permission from these bodies is critical for gaining the support necessary to

implement girls' capacity-building activities in the madrasas.

- **Signed agreements between girls' capacity-building training providers and participating madrasas on the selection of girls for training and the establishment of girls' clubs:** Selected madrasas must be prepared to participate for one year, including the four-day capacity-building training and the operation of a year-long girls' club. A formal agreement with madrasa principals will help to ensure co-curricular activities associated with girls' clubs receive support and assistance over the course of the year. The agreement will also establish a participant selection process for a group of girls, ideally around 20 to 25, from grades 7, 8, and 9 on the basis of their leadership skills, interests, and commitment to participate in the training and the girls' club and to share their lessons learned with other girls and the larger community.
- **Establish a connection between madrasas, the community, and local governments:** Prior to girls' capacity-building training, conduct a one-day workshop with principals and vice principals of madrasas, local leadership, and local government officials. This workshop will help introduce key stakeholders to each other, establish grounds for further collaboration and involvement in co-curricular offerings in madrasas, and inform all parties about the girls' capacity-building training activities and expected outcomes and impact. The workshop will also serve to introduce stakeholders to challenges and issues around girls' education in madrasas. The aim is to break down barriers between the

madrasa and the larger community and local government, while raising awareness about the quality of education in madrasas for girls.

Girls' capacity-building activities:

- **Develop girls' capacity-building training materials:** Materials for the girls' capacity-building workshop should be developed by trainers and facilitators in collaboration with national consultants and curriculum experts from other organizations who have done similar work, like BRAC, CARE, and the British Council. The training materials should be focused on leadership, sisterhood, and good governance. These materials can also serve as guidelines for the girls' club in addition to the development of materials and information on how to form and sustain a club.
- **Train facilitators and mentors:** Girls' capacity-building workshop facilitators should be trained on how to conduct a girls' capacity-building workshop and to promote girls' leadership development. Facilitator/mentors should be selected on the basis of their experience and education, level of interest, and their commitment to empowering girls. The performance of these facilitators should be reviewed by the Girls' Club Advisory Board.
- **Provide a four-day capacity-building training for girls:** A group of girls, ideally around 20 to 25, and two teachers (English and social science, with preference given to female teachers) should be selected from participating madrasas to attend a capacity-building training hosted in their home institution. Along with the main topic

of introducing girls to topics in leadership, sisterhood, and good governance, girls will also learn valuable soft skills like working in teams, problem solving, presentation skills, negotiation skills, and public speaking, as well as self-confidence. Participating girls should be given a pre- and post-test assessment on their familiarity with and development of soft skills.

Activities to sustain and improve girls' capacity-building efforts:

- **Form girls' clubs:** After completing the capacity-building training, girls, with the support of their teachers, should establish a girls' club in their madrasa. Each club would form an executive committee of student members who are responsible for running the club, initiating projects, and coordinating with the training provider and madrasa. Materials developed earlier on how to run a club could be provided as guidelines, in addition to materials like a white board, markers, pens, and colored paper. Girls who received training will meet weekly to arrange open seminars for other students of the madrasa, to organize mini-projects aimed at bettering their community and practicing the skills acquired in their training. These projects could include learning a handicraft for income-generation; practicing their English skills; sharing their skills with other students; educating the elder generation about leadership, good governance, and the benefits of staying in school; and engaging in community outreach about early marriage.
- **Monitor and support:** Girls' clubs should be monitored by the two teachers who

attended the capacity-building training, as well as by members of the workshop providers, each providing feedback and support on a weekly basis on how to practice and develop the soft skills acquired during the capacity-building workshop. Teachers and training providers should also identify ways to encourage girls' club executive committee members to increase participation by other girls.

- **Provide certificates and share lessons learned:** Following a year of implementation, an awards ceremony and end-of-year knowledge sharing workshop should be conducted in the district center. Girls should be given the opportunity to present the end products of their mini-projects. The local media, NGOs, local government officials, local leadership, and advisory board members should be invited to attend and to engage the girls in dialogue and discussion. The girls and their schools should be awarded with a certificate that recognizes them for their contributions; and clubs should be especially recognized for their outstanding contribution to girls' empowerment and their commitment to bettering their community.
- **Handover to the committee:** To ensure local ownership, at the end of the first year of operation, girls' clubs should be officially handed over from the oversight of the training provider to the madrasa's running committee—a governing body comprised of people from the community, madrasa teachers, and the local government, similar to a school management committee. Efforts at monitoring, evaluating, and providing feedback should be continued under the oversight of the madrasa running committee.

CONCLUSION

The strategies outlined above are directed at two specific first-step strategies necessary to catalyze a larger movement to improve the quality of girls' education in madrasas in Bangladesh. In order to measure progress, baseline and end-line measurements should be collected through a survey among targeted madrasas. This survey should identify:

- the number of students enrolled (disaggregated by gender),
- the number of teachers (disaggregated by gender),
- student attendance and absentee rates,
- student drop out from grades 6-10 or 12,
- student test results on internal and external tests,
- co-curricular offerings (type and frequency),
- student participation in curricular and co-curricular activities (disaggregated by gender), and
- the quality of the relationship with local community leadership and local government.

In addition, pre- and post-test assessments should be developed and administered for the teachers

and girls participating in the teacher-training and capacity-building workshops. Relevant indicators for measurement for teachers include: knowledge about teaching methodologies, awareness about the impact of classroom practices on girls, attitudes about the value of girls' education, and familiarity with girls' educational needs. For girls, relevant indicators should be developed to measure growth in soft skills like leadership, self-confidence, and negotiation. Community initiatives and mini-projects developed by teachers and girls' club members can also be used as qualitative indicators of the effectiveness of training and program activities on improving the quality of girls' educational experiences in madrasas.

These strategies, although the first of many steps needed to be taken, will directly help improve girls' outcomes both inside and outside of the madrasa, including improving girls' learning outcomes, decreasing girls' early drop out from school, decreasing early marriage rates, and improving the prospects of her parents agreeing to allow her to continue her education beyond her immediate community. However, more research is needed to understand the challenges and barriers to girls' education in madrasas, and more monitoring and evaluation is needed to better understand the impact of efforts to improve girls' education on girls' life outcomes.

ENDNOTES

1. Kuppens, Line. (2014, July 10). "Quality education means empowerment." Global Partnership for Education. Available at <http://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/quality-education-means-empowerment>.
2. Klugman, Jeni, et al. (2014). *Voice and agency: Empowering women and girls for shared prosperity*. Washington, DC: World Bank; Lopez-Claros, Augusto and Saadia Zahidi. (2005). *Women's empowerment: Measuring the global gender gap*. Geneva: World Economic Forum; Mocan, Naci H., and Colin Cannonier. (2012). "Empowering women through education: Evidence from Sierra Leone." NBER Working Paper w18016. Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research.
3. Aslam, Monazza. (2013). "Empowering women: Education and the pathways of change." Background paper for *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2013/4*. Paris: UNESCO; O'Neil, T., G. Plank, and P. Domingo. (2015). *Support to women and girls' leadership: A rapid review of the evidence*. London: Overseas Development Institute; Sperling, Gene, Rebecca Winthrop, and Christina Kwauk. (2016). *What works in girls' education: Evidence for the world's best investment*. Washington, DC: Brookings; UNICEF. (2014). *State of the world's children 2015: Reimagine the future—Innovation for every child*. New York: UNICEF.
4. King, Beth M. and Rebecca Winthrop. (2015). "Today's challenges in girls' education." Global Economy and Development Working Paper 90. Washington, DC: Brookings.
5. World Bank. (No date). Stipends Triple Girls Access to School. Available at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/IDA/0,-contentMDK:21227882~menuPK:3266877~pagePK:51236175~piPK:437394~theSitePK:73154,00.html>.
6. Asadullah, Mohammad Niaz and Nazmul Chaudhury. (2006). "Religious schools, social values and economic attitudes: Evidence from Bangladesh." QEH Working Paper Series 139. Available at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTINDIA/4371432-1194542415868/21542111/ReligiousSchoolsinBangladesh.pdf>; Asadullah, Mohammad Niaz, Nazmul Chaudhury, and Syed Rashed Al-Zayed Josh. (2009). "Secondary school madrasas in Bangladesh: Incidence, quality, and implications for reform." World Bank. Available at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTDEVDIALOGUE/Resources/Bangladesh-MadrasaReportFinal.pdf>; Bano, Masooda. (2008). "Allowing for diversity: State-madrasa relations in Bangladesh." Religions and Development Research Programme Working Paper 13. Available at http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/1548/1/Bano_StateMadrasaBangladesh.pdf.
7. Estimates based on a BEI (2011) study stating 3.5 million students were enrolled in Aliya madrasas in 2004, with a 44.4% enrollment rate by females. This is a conservative estimate as it only includes state-registered madrasas. Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI). (2011). "Modernization of madrasa education in Bangladesh: A strategy paper." Dhaka, Bangladesh: BEI. Available at http://ndc.gov.bd/lib_mgmt/webroot/earticle/2379/modernization_of_madrasa_education_in_Bangladesh.pdf.
8. Asadullah, Chaudhury, and Josh 2009.
9. Winthrop, Rebecca and Corinne Graff. (2010). "Beyond madrasas: Assessing the links between education and militancy in Pakistan." Center for Universal Education Working Paper 2. Washington, DC: Brookings.
10. BEI 2011.
11. Bano 2008.
12. Asadullah, Chaudhury, and Josh 2009; BEI 2011.
13. Bano 2008.
14. BEI 2011; Yusuf, Nusaybah. (2014). "The impact of Islamic schools in Bangladeshi society: The case of madrasa." Alochonaa. Available at <http://alochonaa.com/2014/03/27/the-impact-of-islamic-schools-in-bangladeshi-society-the-case-of-madrasa/>.
15. Asadullah and Chaudhury 2006.
16. Sperling, Winthrop, and Kwauk 2016; Kirk, Jackie. (2006). *The impact of women teachers on girls' education—Advocacy brief*. Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok. Available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001459/145990e.pdf>; Muralidharan, Karthik, and Ketki Sheth. (2014). "Bridging education gender gaps in developing countries: The role of female teachers." NBER Working Paper 19341. Cambridge, Mass: National Bureau of Economic Research. Available at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w19341>.
17. Asadullah, Chaudhury, and Josh 2009.
18. Asadullah, Mohammad Niaz and Zaki Wahhaj. (2012). "Going to school in *purdah*: Female schooling, mobility norms and madrasas in Bangladesh." IZA Discussion Paper 7059. Bonn, Germany: Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at <http://ftp.iza.org/dp7059.pdf>; Sperling, Winthrop, and Kwauk 2016.
19. UNICEF. (No date). Early marriage. Accessed on October 28, 2015 from http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/children_4866.htm.
20. Callan, Alison. (2012). *Patients and agents: Mental illness, modernity and Islam in Sylhet, Bangladesh*. Oxford: Berghahn.
21. Asadullah, Chaudhury, and Josh 2009.

The Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution

The Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings is one of the leading policy centers focused on universal quality education in the developing world. CUE develops and disseminates effective solutions to achieve equitable learning, and plays a critical role in influencing the development of new global education policies and in transforming them into actionable strategies for governments, civil society and private enterprise.

For more about the Center for Universal Education at Brookings, please visit: [**www.brookings.edu/universal-education**](http://www.brookings.edu/universal-education)

Cover photos courtesy of the Empowerment and Human Development Society

BROOKINGS

1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20036

202-797-6000

www.brookings.edu/universal-education