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Challenges for Coastal Children: Investigating the Causes of School Dropout in the Southern Coastal Area of Bangladesh

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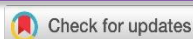
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Challenges for Coastal Children: Investigating the Causes of School Dropout in the Southern Coastal Area of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Coastal areas in Bangladesh are highly vulnerable to environmental and socioeconomic issues, leading to significant setbacks in children's education. In a disaster-prone area like Satkhira, Shyamnagar Upazila, the root causes for high rates of student dropouts in schools are interlinked with the natural calamities of the land. This study aims at identifying the multifaceted challenges tending to school dropouts in the disaster-prone coastal area of Shyamnagar Upazila, Bangladesh. To achieve the aim, this study employs an exploratory qualitative design and purposive sampling, including structured interviews for 34 participants: 10 dropout children (aged between 10–16), 12 parents of dropout children, and 12 teachers from primary and secondary schools. Findings highlight that there are factors, such as natural calamities and scarcity of water, that directly hinder the education process and increase dropout rates. Economic constraints force children to leave schools so that they can work and earn money, alongside sociocultural factors such as child marriage and other gender norms. The study found that people who dropped out of school feel remorse and want to go back to school but get little or no assistance from the stakeholders. Inadequate infrastructure, sociocultural barriers, and psycho-social issues are also contributors to school dropouts.

Keywords: Bangladesh; Coastal Children; Education; Factors; School Dropout.

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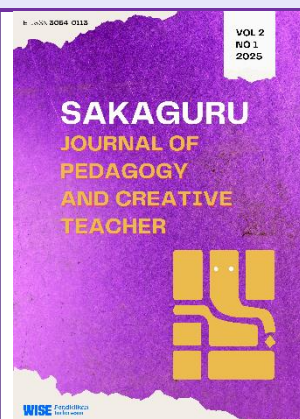
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INTRODUCTION

The socioeconomic and environmental challenges in coastal areas in Bangladesh, especially Shyamnagar Upazila in Satkhira, directly affect children's education. While national literacy rates have improved considerably, school dropout remains one of this region's most critical challenges. Rahman (2021) claimed that it is both an educational hurdle and a symptom of more considerable hardships among coastal communities [1]. This study tried to address the fundamental causes of children's school dropouts and investigate the challenges that coastal children face, aiming at filling the research gap in comprehending how these challenges hinder educational advancements. Shyamnagar, in southwest Bangladesh, is highly vulnerable to squeeze, salinity intrusion, and tidal surges, all of which are driven by climate change. These combined challenges upend livelihoods and put children in vulnerable positions, prompting many to drop out of school to help their families. Poverty, limited access to quality schools, child marriage, and gender inequalities, among other obstacles, make the challenges much harder [2].

According to Shyamnagar Upazila education office information in 2020, 5657 students studied in the eighth grade at 46 schools, 36 madrasas, and three technical (vocational) schools. That year's candidates sat for Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and equivalent examinations in 2023. However, according to the statistics, only 3293 students took part in SSC and equivalent exams, and 2364 students dropped out. By the end of this year, this problem was expected to grow [3]. According to a Save the Children article [3], climate change is causing people to suffer from diarrhea, malnutrition, and malaria at a higher rate. Infants are helpless when adapting to socioeconomic conditions and problems. The lives and futures of some 19 million children in the country are under threat from floods, cyclones, and other environmental devastation linked to climate change. About 4.5 million coastal children's lives are most at risk [3].

At the same time, the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B), and UNICEF have found hazardous levels of lead in the blood of over three and a half million children across the country, including coastal areas [4]. Professor Anu Muhammad, a climate expert at Jahangirnagar University, told Samakal that Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries to the climate crisis in the world. Salinization is depleting biodiversity in coastal areas. Public life, too, is taking a heavy toll. Children are not exempt from this loss. The developed world is primarily to blame for this. However, our government has a responsibility, too. Different industries, including power plants, have been constructed at various times in coastal zones, which have started to destroy the pace of environment. He also stated that the government has been unable to ensure appropriate medical care for the affected population, which may include children. Medicare is exclusively expensive, and health care, in general, is insufficient. For this, the government has to launch development projects and prepare a long-term strategy to cope with the losses arising out of climate change [3].

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, Adviser on Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, said that climate change constantly threatens the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable people, including children [3]. According to a United Nations Children's Organization (UNICEF) report, Bangladesh ranks 15 out of 163 in the Children's Climate Risk Index. Climate change impacts children directly and indirectly [4].

Although various studies have shown the challenges that coastal children face, no study has significantly addressed the causes of children's school dropouts in the southern coastal area of Bangladesh. Therefore, it is crucial to address the knowledge gap about the educational challenges faced by the children of Shyamnagar, who reside on one of the world's most vulnerable coasts, to ensure their access to education [5] and provide recommendations for the stakeholders to make informed decisions about suitable social actions. Therefore, we designed this study to investigate the socioeconomic factors that contribute to school dropouts among the coastal children of Shyamnagar. It seeks to understand how environmental, economic, and social forces interact to drive this troubling trend.

Education is a fundamental human right and is the foundation for societies to move towards economic growth. However, in coastal regions of Bangladesh, such as Shyamnagar Upazila in Satkhira, a range of socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental factors continue to contribute to the alarmingly high dropout rates among children in education. Climate change, such as frequent cyclones, floods, and salinity intrusion, adversely affects livelihood and infrastructure [6]. These aspects exacerbate poverty, leading families to choose between survival and schooling [7,8]

Economic conditions are one of the primary causes of dropping out of school at Shyamnagar. Many families in the region live below the poverty line and depend on child labour to support their families [9]. Increasing prices of basic needs such as educational tools, travel, and toiletries also prompt parents to refrain from sending their children to school [10].

Cultural and social norms are also responsible for school dropouts, especially for girls. This scenario is vivid in rural coastal regions, where early marriage and gender disparities are widespread since families consider that girls do not need to be educated [11]. As a result, the gap between male and female students in school attendance and completion is huge [2].

Poor school infrastructure, with non-climate-resilient buildings, unclean drinking water, and the absence of a basic level of sanitation, also results in dropouts [12]. Moreover, transportation systems are only available in some rural areas, creating barriers to children's education [13]. Children who have experienced environmental disasters or displacement may also experience persistent mental health issues relating to the trauma, which inhibits their ability to pursue education [14]. On the contrary, there is virtually no school-based psychosocial support in the region.

The general objective of this study is to identify the factors contributing to school dropouts in Shyamnagar Upazila. This research not only analyzes how environmental, economic, and sociocultural factors intersect to influence dropout rates but also proposes a way to recap this crisis.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design to understand the complex and contextual factors behind school dropouts. Qualitative methods were chosen to capture in-depth insights from stakeholders, emphasizing their personal experiences and narratives [15]. The data were collected from thirty-four respondents.

Population and Sample

We chose participants for this study using purposive sampling. Participants included:

1. Ten dropouts (aged between 10–16);
2. Twelve parents of dropout children;
3. Twelve teachers from primary and secondary schools.

Location

Shyamnagar Upazila is located in Satkhira district, a coastal area frequently affected by cyclones, tidal surges, and salinity intrusion. Its economy relies on aquaculture, farming, and small-scale fishing and is vulnerable to climate change [16].

Research Procedure and Instruments

The researcher interviewed the students, parents, and teachers of Shamnagar Upazila to analyze their experiences regarding the causes of school dropouts with structured questionnaires. We translated the questions into Bangla to ensure participants understood them clearly and provided authentic information. The questionnaires are attached in Appendixes.

Data Analysis Techniques

The researcher used NVivo analysis to identify patterns and themes from the collected data. Transcriptions were coded and categorized manually focusing on accuracy and consistency.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Find Findings of School Dropouts' Interview (Aged 10-16)

Ten school dropout kids were asked to share their opinions and experiences with education, reasons for school dropouts, environmental impact on their educational experience, support system, and their future activities if they are given opportunities. The results are shown below:

Educational Experience

Regarding their educational experiences and the challenges they encountered, the majority of dropout kids shared a diverse range of experiences, both positive and negative. Some kids reported (4) that the school environment was good and they learned many things. However, six other students expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of their education. All the kids acknowledged that the daily reality was much tougher for them because of being a low-income family and lack of resources (books/uniforms etc.).

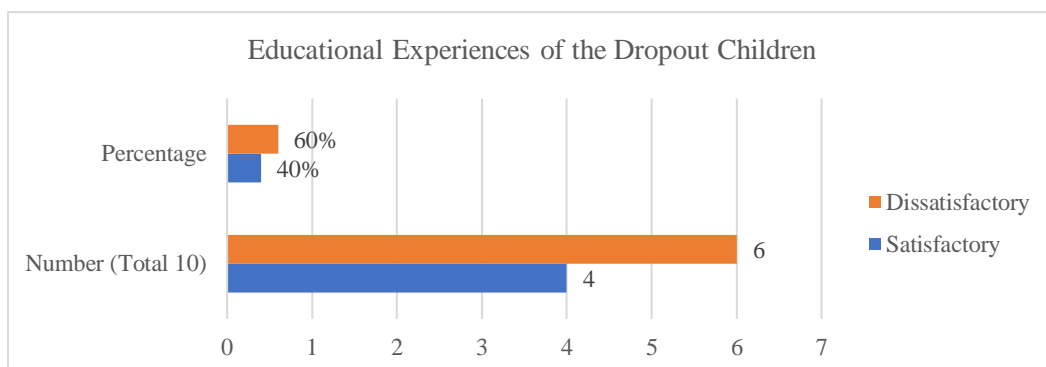


Figure 1. Educational Experiences of the Dropout Children

Reasons for School Dropouts

All the interviewees claimed that economic hardship forces many students to drop out, as they must earn money to help their families. Eight kids spoke about environmental disasters, such as cyclones that swept away their houses and learning equipment. Some other kids (6) pointed to early marriage or domestic work.

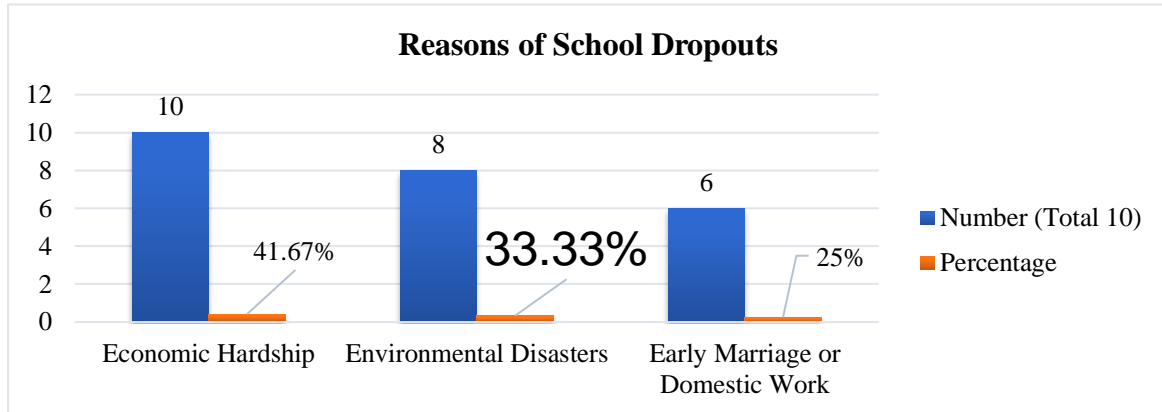


Figure 2. Reasons for School Dropouts

Environmental Impact

All the interviewees reported that natural calamities have a huge impact on school dropouts. Eight kids claimed that cyclones and floods affected their education by inundating school property or requiring their families to move. Two interviewees said that high salinity and waterlogging in the ground made them prioritize living rather than attending school.

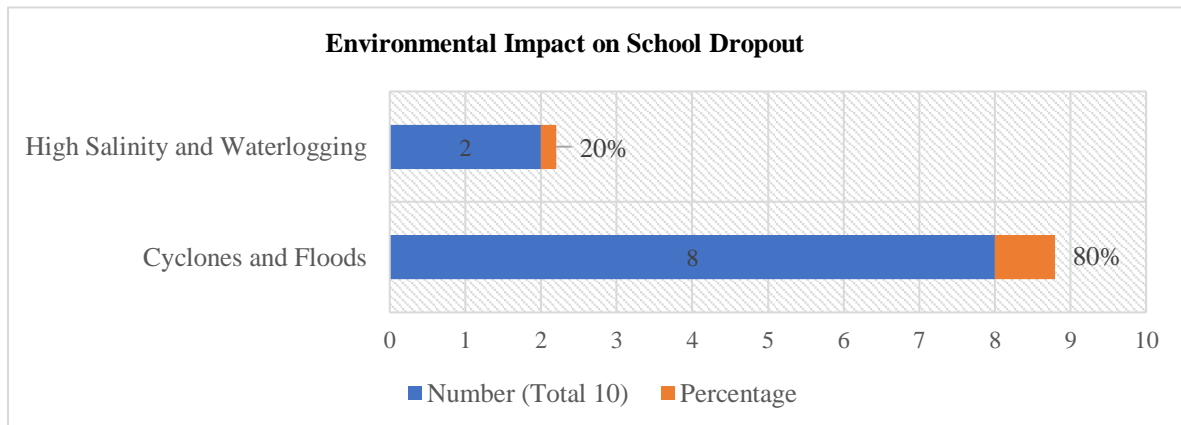


Figure 3. Environmental Impact

Support System

Only five kids said that their teachers tried to assist them to send them back to school, but that assistance was not enough. These students could have stayed in school if they received scholarships, free supplies, affordable housing, or mental health support.

Future Aspirations

All the kids want to return to school if financial and logistical barriers can be overcome. Their ethos was that education was key to changing their future. However, they expressed uncertainty about their ability to return to school.

Findings of Teachers' Interview

Teachers were asked to provide their opinions on the hurdles in offering quality education, the obstacles hindering students' development, available resources, and strategies to address students' psychological needs. The findings of the teachers' interview are given below:

Teacher Retention Problems

Teachers reported many problems. Ten teachers claimed that inadequate salaries, housing, and professional development opportunities created the problems. Four teachers addressed inadequate infrastructure, and six teachers pointed to poor economic status.

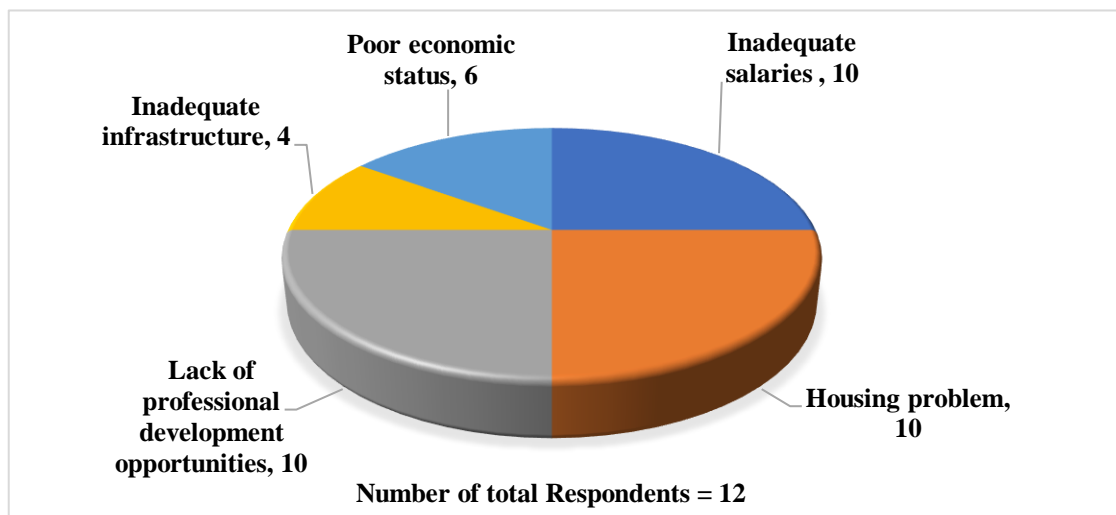


Figure 4. Teacher Retention Problems

Community Trust in Local Teachers

As educational institutions do not have adequate teachers, they can hire part-time teachers to conduct the classes. The findings show that hiring local teachers might be a significant factor in establishing trust and engaging parents, as eight teachers reported. However, four teachers said that it might be difficult for the educational institutes to find locally qualified teachers.

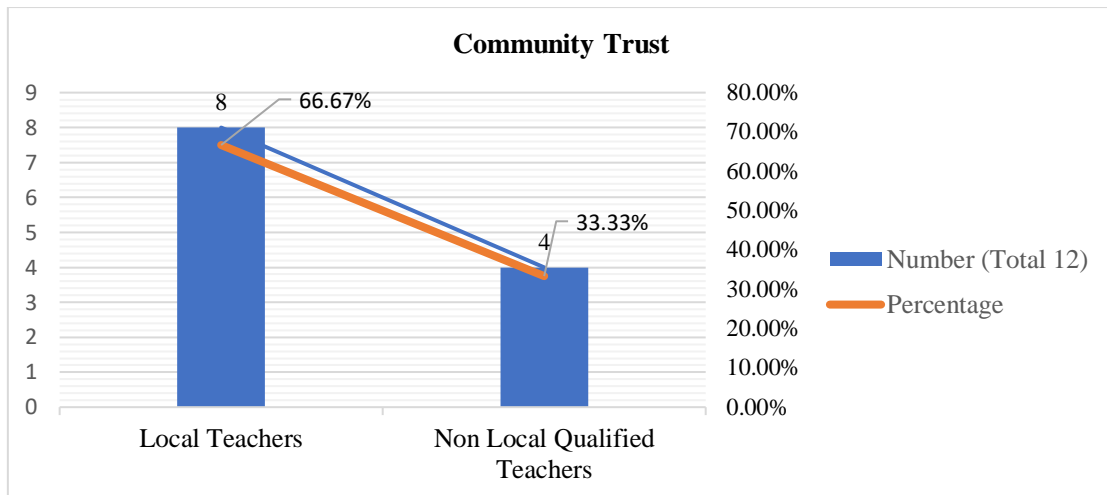


Figure 5. Community Trust

Unmet Psychosocial Needs

The lack of school-based mental health services left children with unaddressed trauma and stress. All the teachers mentioned that there are no school-based mental health services.

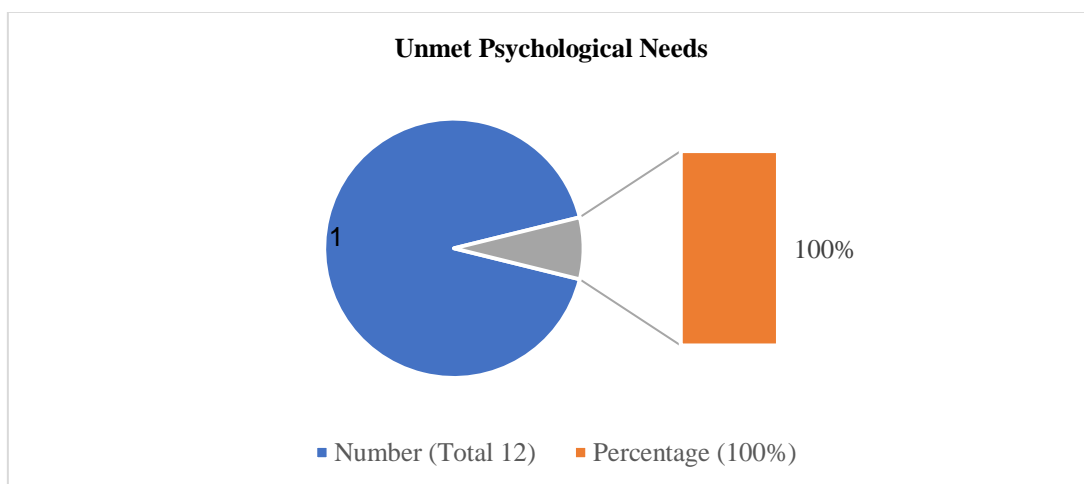


Figure 6. Unmet Psychosocial Needs

Teachers' Preparedness

Most of the teachers (10) do not have training in mental health support. Teachers must be trained to address students' emotional and psychological needs.

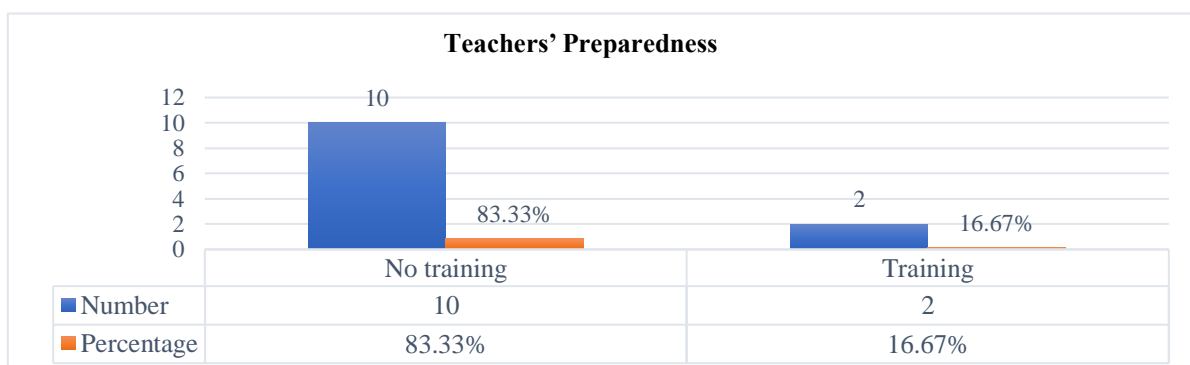


Figure 7: Teachers' Preparedness

Finding from Parents' Interview

The researchers interviewed twelve parents to hear their perspectives on the value of education, the reasons behind school dropouts, economic pressures, environmental issues, etc. The results are as follows:

Perception of Education

Parents are not much concerned about education; they are, however, busy meeting their urgent survival needs. They acknowledged that education is important, as it could bring a better future for their children, but they need something more to concrete right now.

Economic Pressures

All the parents said that they are supposed to send their children to work so that they can earn money. For lots of people, this suggests that education is an expense rather than an investment.

Environmental Challenges

Families have lost homes and livelihoods due to cyclones and salinity, and education is not a priority in these circumstances.

Discussions

According to the study, the majority of families in Shyamnagar live under acute poverty, which forces kids to support the family. Many kids have to do household work or work in aquaculture, which makes it challenging for them to finish school. Families feel pressure to provide funds because they think that education is a long-term investment with unknown returns. Children inevitably drop out of school to work in order to support themselves. In Bangladesh, over 22.9% of child labourers engage in dangerous activities to support their families [2].

The study found that people of this region have to deal with environmental issues like displacement brought on by climate change. Frequent cyclones and tidal surges uproot families, disrupting children's schooling. Since school buildings frequently turn into shelters during emergencies, the requirement for refuge hinders academic progress [16]. However, there are also problems with waterlogging and salinity intrusion. Large tracts of agriculture have been unusable due to environmental changes, which have increased poverty and impacted school attendance [17].

The results of the study also support the idea that many girls drop out due to marriage or cultural norms that prioritize household duties over schooling. Families think that girls should stay at home and do not need education. Early marriage is one of the main causes of school dropouts among girls in rural communities. In Bangladesh's rural communities, early marriage is not uncommon. Many rural girls drop out of school during pregnancy. Pregnancy-related school dropout rates can be decreased with appropriate counselling and quality improvement initiatives.

The children of low-income families encounter prejudice and bullying in the classroom, which creates a sense of exclusion among them. They used to feel embarrassed when others teased them for not dressing appropriately. Parental education significantly impacts a child's school enrolment. Compared to illiterate parents, educated parents are more concerned about their children's education. The literacy of the mother has a significant impact on the education

of the children. Children of illiterate parents are more likely to drop out than children of literate parents because they are less engaged and interested in activities linked to education.

Recommendations

The government should implement incentives for families to keep children in schools. To ease the financial strain on families, the government should offer free meals and school-related supplies in the schools of coastal areas. These can motivate attendance and prevent dropouts. The government and non-government organizations should build climate-proof schools with basic facilities to withstand cyclone and flood impacts. The government and the authorities of the schools should facilitate transportation for students from distant places, such as school buses or subsidized travel for low-income families. The government, non-government organizations, and the schools' authorities should create awareness campaigns to raise the importance of education, especially among girls, who will be an asset to the family and the nation. The government and the schools should train local leaders to advocate for and uphold children's rights. This will bring the local leaders to the table during conversations about possible educational crises and other crises surrounding learning. Strict punishments should be enacted for child labour and early marriage, two of the main impediments to education in the area. Nationally and internationally funded programs can be developed to support the recruitment, training, and retention of rural teachers. The government should provide natives with affordable housing or higher wages. There should be mental health programs introduced in the schools focusing on trauma, stress, or other psycho-social issues among students.

CONCLUSION

Identifying the multifarious challenges of school dropouts in the disaster-prone coastal area of Shyamnagar Upazila, Bangladesh, is the core focus of this study. Together, economic limitations, environmental vulnerabilities, sociocultural factors, lack of adequate educational infrastructure, and psycho-social deficiencies prevent children from getting an education. For many families, the requirement to choose survival over schooling is rendered unavoidable by poverty, while frequent natural disasters serve to continuously displace children and disrupt education. Girls face structural and institutional barriers, compounded by cultural norms that tend to prioritize marriage and domesticity over education. Schools are not climate-resilient and furnished with proper facilities. The findings suggest that policies should aim at recruiting and retaining qualified rural teachers, implementing mental health programs in schools, and engaging local communities for inclusive and sustainable educational systems. The recommendations include financial investment, free school meals, and better infrastructure, as well as enforcing laws against child labour and child marriage. Teachers should be given professional growth opportunities, and they should be trained to address students' emotional needs

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

"The authors declare no conflict of interest."

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