

POLICY BRIEF:

**Empowering Futures:
Overcoming
Educational Barriers
for Adolescents in
Cox's Bazar**

The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Research Programme Consortium is a global research and learning partnership that strives to transform education policy and practice in conflict and protracted crisis around the world – ultimately to help improve holistic outcomes for children – through building a global hub for a rigorous, context-relevant and actionable evidence base.

ERICC seeks to identify the most effective approaches for improving access, quality, and continuity of education to support sustainable and coherent education systems and holistic learning and development of children in conflict and crisis. ERICC aims to bridge research, practice, and policy with accessible and actionable knowledge – at local, national, regional and global levels – through co-construction of research and collaborative partnerships.

ERICC is led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), with Academic Lead IOE, UCL’s Faculty of Education and Society, and expert partners include Centre for Lebanese Studies, Common Heritage Foundation, Forcier Consulting, ODI, Osman Consulting, Oxford Policy Management and Queen Rania Foundation. During ERICC’s inception period, NYU-TIES provided research leadership, developed the original ERICC Conceptual Framework and contributed to early research agenda development. ERICC is supported by UK Aid.

Countries in focus include Bangladesh (Cox’s Bazar), Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.

Disclaimer

This material has been funded by UK International Development from the UK government. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed here are entirely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the ERICC Programme, the authors’ respective organisations, or the UK government’s official policies. Copyright lies with the author of a paper; however, as per ERICC contracts, the authors have granted permission for the non-commercial use of the intellectual property to ERICC Research Programme Consortium, and by extension to the funder.

Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful for helpful comments and suggestions from Genevieve Kebe.

Suggested citation

Use and reproduction of material from ERICC publications are encouraged, as long as they are not for commercial purposes, and as long as there is due attribution. Suggested citation: Haque, A., Abedin, M., Hasan, G., Saha, P., Dow, J., Zaw, H, & Diazgranados, S (October 2024). Barriers of education for older adolescents, boys and girls in the refugee camp and host community of Cox’s Bazar. [URL](#)



A. Background

Education of adolescents in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, faces significant challenges, particularly for Rohingya refugees. Prior to fleeing Myanmar, nearly half of the Rohingya youth had not received any formal education¹. Since their arrival in Bangladesh, adolescents aged 15 to 19 years have been excluded from formal education in the all Rohingya refugee camps of Cox's Bazar districts, primarily because of to a lack of age-appropriate learning materials and the informal nature of available schooling².

In host communities such as Ukhiya and Teknaf, secondary school enrolment for adolescents aged 12 to 18 years is below the national average; and it continues to decline due to the refugee influx³. Key factors contributing to school dropout include child labour, early marriage, and financial constraints. Adolescent girls face additional protection concerns, such as trafficking and forced marriage⁴.

Before the introduction of the Myanmar Curriculum (MC) in Cox's Bazar, refugee adolescents were largely excluded from the education system. During the academic year 2023–2024, children of all ages have been integrated into the MC. However, significant gaps in evidence remain regarding system coherence, accountability, and constraints at both the policy and local system levels. These gaps contribute to the out-of-school (OOS) status of many children, and impact local educational activities.

B. Executive summary

This policy brief highlights findings from the ERICC formative research study titled 'Access and continuity of quality education for older adolescent boys and girls in the refugee camp and host community of Cox's Bazar'.

That study identifies: (1) the key stakeholders involved in creating education opportunities for older adolescents and girls in Cox's Bazar; (2) the technical and vocational opportunities that are available to older adolescents and girls in Cox's Bazar; (3) the determinants influencing school dropout rates among adolescents in both refugee and host communities in Cox's Bazar; (4) the expectations and life goals of adolescents and girls in Cox's Bazar.

The study emphasises the skills deemed valuable by the adolescents and their parents; the opportunities for and barriers to skills development, and the formal and non-formal educational pathways available for re-engagement in schooling for that group. A number of barriers have been identified as the main reasons for school dropout, especially for girls. These include early marriage, gender norms surrounding domestic responsibilities, safety issues, and financial constraints.

¹ Education Cannot Wait. (2018). Why Education Cannot Wait, Reliefweb.

² Guglielmi, S., Muz, J., Mitu, K., Uddin, M. A., Jones, N., Baird, S., & and Presler-Marshall, E. (2019). The lives they lead: Exploring the capabilities of Bangladeshi and Rohingya adolescents in Cox's Bazar. ResearchGate. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.15802.75206>.

³ ISCG. (2019). Joint Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (J-MSNA) - Rohingya: Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

⁴ CBPS. (2021). Cox's Bazar Panel Survey Briefs. worldbank.

www.worldbank.org/en/country/bangladesh/brief/cox-s-bazar-panel-survey-briefs.

The recommendations of the study point to the need to address such barriers, particularly among the Rohingya refugee community, focusing on five key areas that are:

- Expand technical and vocational education training (TVET) programmes
- Enhance access to formal secondary education
- Strengthen school capacity and aligning non-formal education
- Provide targeted financial support
- Introduce community-based income-generation programmes

C. Methodology

The aforementioned study was conducted in response to a comprehensive evidence review⁵, and a country scan process that involved extensive consultations with key education stakeholders in Cox's Bazar who identified this theme as a major gap⁶.

The study used a mixed-methods approach with primary and secondary data. Secondary data were sourced from vocational institutes and youth programmes within the host and Rohingya communities. They encompassed student demographics, vocational subjects, admission processes, and employment outcomes. The data were obtained from the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), the Bangladesh Technical Education Board, and the Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG).

Primary data collection involved semi-structured interviews and surveys with: 32 technical education teachers (13 from the Rohingya community and 19 from host communities); 155 current vocational students (84 male, 71 female) 318 out-of-school (OOS) adolescents (155 from host community, 163 from refugee community); 67 vocational programme graduates (41 male, 26 female); and 318 parents of OOS adolescents (155 from host community, 163 from refugee community). Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with OOS adolescents and their parents to explore educational barriers and skills preferences. Community insights on education and skills development were further enriched through interviews with 25 community leaders.

D. Findings

1. Policy systems level findings

Formal and non-formal education: In the host community, older adolescents have access to formal education, including secondary education provided by both private and public schools, leading to the Secondary School Certificate (SSC). Meanwhile, learning facilities funded by agencies such as UNICEF offer education to Rohingya teenagers based on the Myanmar Curriculum (MC).

⁵ Saha, P., Haque, A., Hasan, G., Abedin, M., Dow, J., Zaw, H.T. & Ferrans, S. (2023). Evidence to practice: The case of education in an emergency context – Cox's Bazar. EVIDENCE TO PRACTICE: THE CASE OF EDUCATION IN AN EMERGENCY CONTEXT – COX'S BAZAR. ERICC Working Paper. <https://inee.org/resources/evidence-practice-state-evidence-education-emergency-context-coxs-bazar>

⁶ Haque, A., Diazgranados, S., Saha, P., Abedin, M., & Hasan, G. (2023). ERICC Country Research Agenda. Cox's Bazar. ERICC.

This constitutes non-formal learning. Additionally, community-based programmes provide technical and skills training to teenagers who might not have access to formal schooling.

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET): TVET opportunities in Cox's Bazar include institutes that offer vocational training in various trades, crucial for skills development. Some NGOs also run specific TVET programmes aimed at equipping adolescents with practical skills for employment. These programmes are essential for providing adolescents with the skills needed to secure livelihoods.

Livelihood, protection, and skills development services: The 2024 Joint Response Plan (JRP)-Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis⁷ for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis has identified several areas that provide livelihood opportunities, food security and safety (FSS), protection, gender-based violence (GBV) prevention, and skills development services, to youth and adolescents aged 15 to 24 years. In addition to these programmes, there is a critical need for basic literacy, numeracy, and soft skills, especially for women and girls, who have not had prior learning opportunities⁸

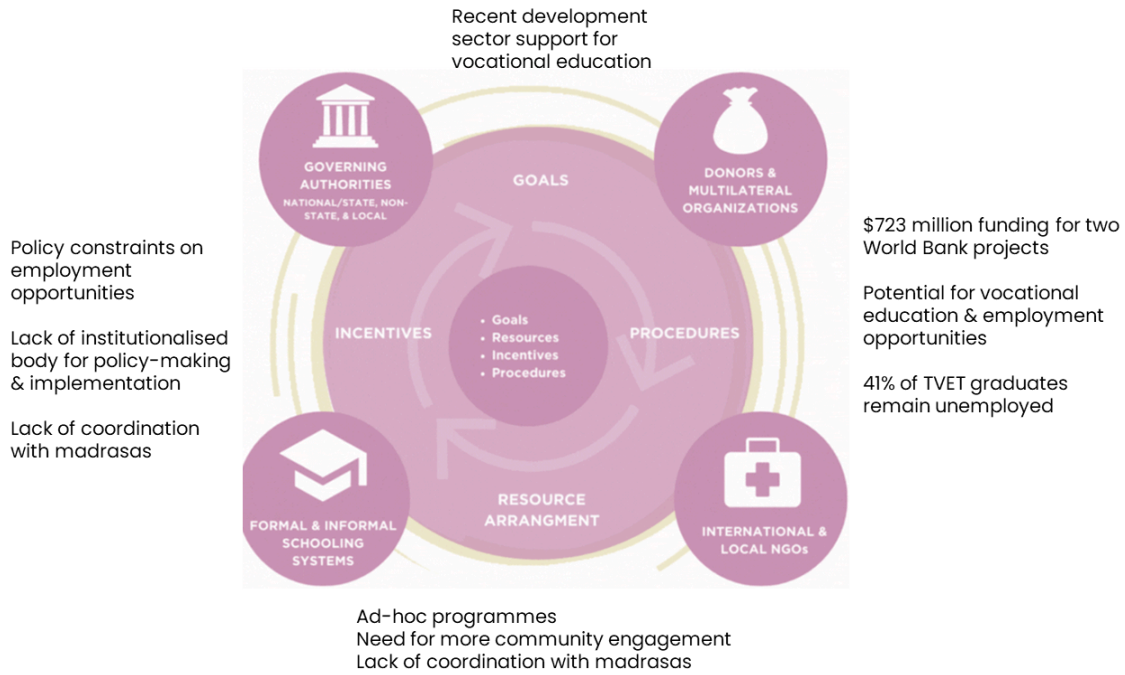
Challenges and resource limitations: Ensuring access to high-quality education and training for the adolescents from both host and refugee communities is challenging due to resource limitations and the large size of the refugee population. Social norms also typically limit access to schooling for this age group, and particularly for girls. Concerted efforts are required to guarantee inclusion and address these barriers.

Support initiatives and community engagement: Agencies like the World Bank have initiated support programmes to address such challenges. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has also launched the Cox's Bazar Education Support Programme, which focuses on community engagement and strengthening education systems. The sustained cooperation of international organisations, local government agencies, and the communities themselves, is essential to the success of these projects.

⁷ [2024 JRP | Rohingya Response](#)

⁸ Education Cannot Wait. (2018). Why Education Cannot Wait., Reliefweb.

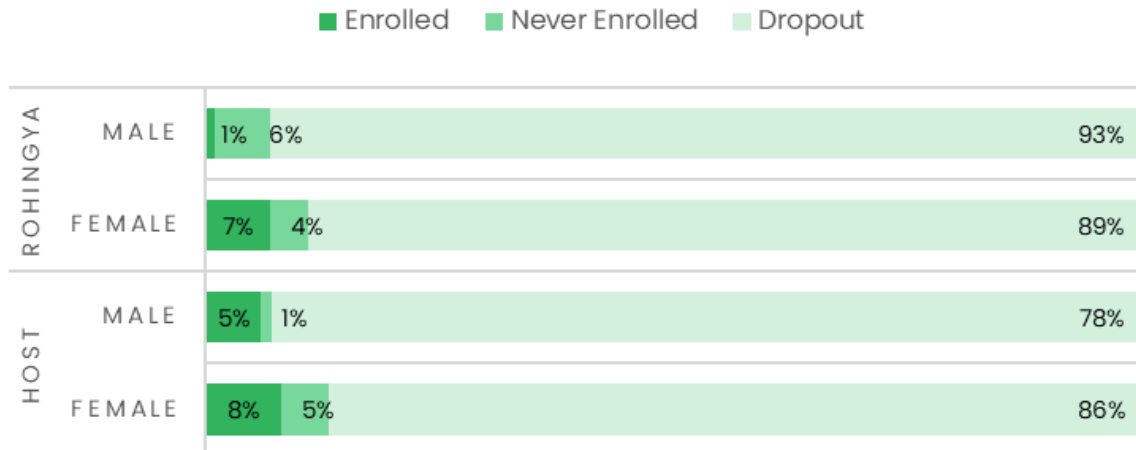
Figure 1: Key factors at the policy level for adolescents' education



2. Local systems level findings

Prevalence of out-of-school (OOS) adolescents: More than 90% of adolescents (15-19 years) are reported to be OOS, having never attended or having dropped out of school. This trend persists across gender and nationality, with OOS rates exceeding 90% in all sub-groups. Notably, there is a slight gender disparity, with girls more likely than boys to be OOS due to non-enrolment or dropout in both Rohingya communities (99%, 93%) and host communities (95%, 91%). The data indicate that the majority of adolescents had some level of education before dropping out; this was the case for both Rohingya and host community adolescents, and for both boys and girls.

Figure 2: School enrolment status by gender and nationality

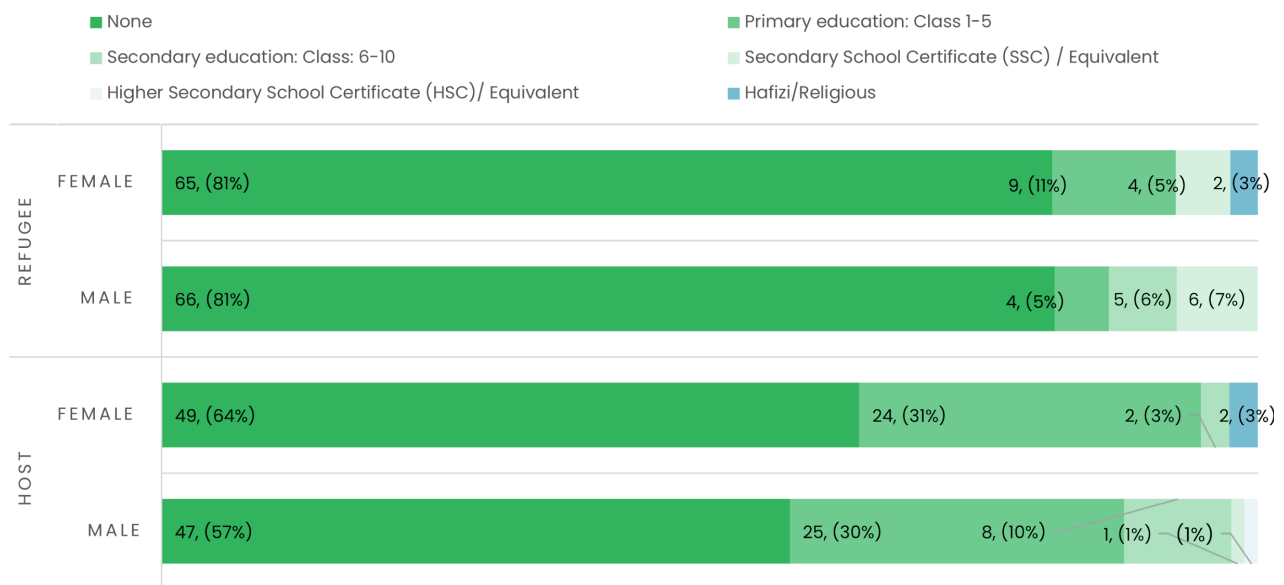


Educational attainment by gender and host/ refugee community: Despite restrictions on education of Rohingya communities, Rohingya adolescents exhibit higher levels of educational attainment compared with host adolescents. Gender differences in the completion of education vary by nationality: Bangladeshi boys are less likely than girls to complete secondary education, whereas Rohingya boys are more likely to do so than Rohingya girls.

Specifically, 56% of Rohingya girl adolescents have completed their education up to and including secondary level, nearly double the rate of Bangladeshi girl adolescents (29%). Among boys, 68% of Rohingya adolescents have completed their education up to secondary level, significantly higher than for their host counterparts (just 11%). This underscores the challenges in accessing and continuing secondary education for both Rohingya and host communities.

Educational attainment of parents: Over 80% of parents reached a level of education less than secondary level; low completion rates were observed in both Rohingya and Bangladeshi communities. Among Rohingya parents, 81% have no formal education, with only 5% of mothers and 6% of fathers having had some primary level schooling. Similarly, 64% of Bangladeshi mothers and 57% of fathers had no education, while 31% of mothers and 30% of fathers had some primary level schooling. These statistics highlight the issue of limited continuity of education persisting across generations, affecting both communities, irrespective of gender or whether or not they are refugees or host community members.

Figure 3: Highest educational attainment of parents



Impact of early marriage on continuity of education: Early marriage is a significant gender norm that disrupts the education of girl adolescents in both Bangladeshi and Rohingya communities.

Box 1: “When I was studying in class 7, suddenly my parents found a good person for me, and I was forced to marry him. After that, I could not continue my education.” (Girl from host community)

For girls in Bangladesh, early marriage significantly disrupts educational continuity for girls in Bangladesh. A year’s delay in marriage is associated with 0.22 additional years of schooling and a 5.6% increase in literacy⁹.

Despite financial incentives aimed at reducing underage marriage, gender norms still strongly favour early marriage, preventing significant reductions in adolescent marriage rates. Beyond marriage, gender norms related to domestic chores and security concerns around commuting to school also hinder girls’ education. Parents often refrain from sending adolescent girls to school due to safety concerns during travel, a common issue in both Rohingya and the host Bangladeshi communities.

Figure 4: Reasons for school dropout (host community)

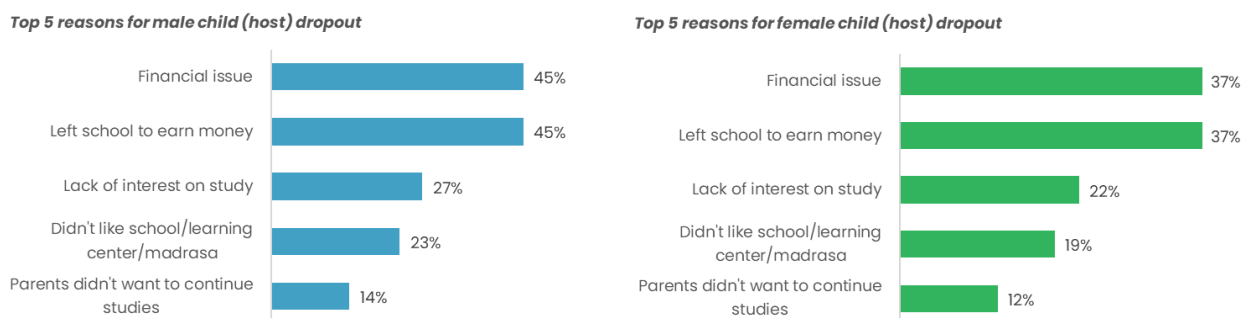
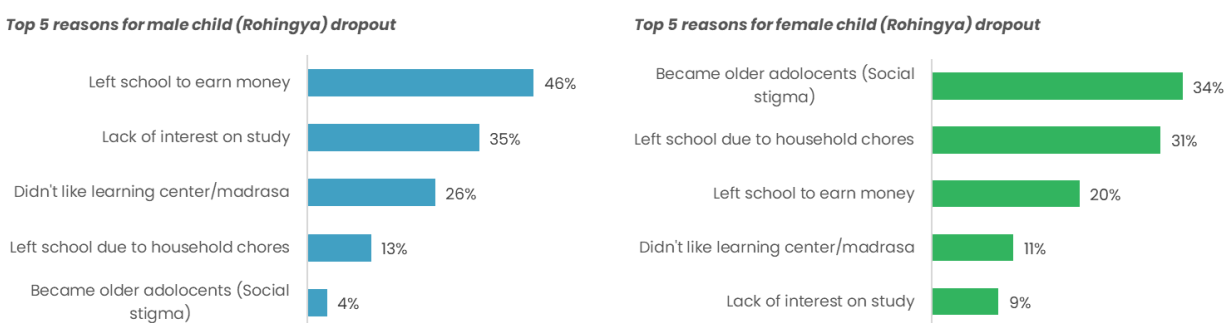


Figure 5: Reasons for school dropout (refugee)



Other gender norms and disruption to education: Other gender norms beyond marriage disrupt the education of adolescent girls. Expectations of girls’ contributions to domestic chores, as well as security concerns regarding commuting to schools, disincentivise parents from sending girl

⁹ Field, E., & Ambrus, A. (2008). Early marriage, age of menarche, and female schooling attainment in Bangladesh. *Journal of political Economy*, 116(5), 881–930.

adolescents to school. The most frequently cited reason to do with gender norms for girls being OOS is security concerns around travel to and from schools.

Box 2: *“School is far away from our community and there are fewer transportation opportunities here. Boys can walk to school, but we cannot allow our girls to walk to school.” (Parent from the host community)*

Although there were no major security incidents, fears of potential threats to girls, such as sexual harassment and human trafficking, persist.

Box 3: *“When a girl grows up and goes out to study, boys harass them on the way. That’s why we don’t let girls go to school when they grow up.” (Parent from the host community)*

“Child trafficking, especially for girls, is now rampant in our camps, due to which we do not feel safe to send them to school when they grow up.” (Parent from the Rohingya refugee camps)

Gender norms surrounding safety, and community perceptions of girls who defy these norms, shape decisions not to send daughters to school. So some expressed a belief that girls should rightfully stay at home.

Box 4: *“I have two daughters, one is grown up. So, I have stopped her from going to school, and she lives at home now. She has restrictions on going outside of the home. It was my hope that she only learns to read and write, not more than that.” (Parent from the Rohingya refugee camps)*

Madrasa education as an alternative pathway: Madrasa education provides an alternative educational pathway for adolescents, particularly within Rohingya communities. Parental preferences for madrasa education divert children from formal education programmes, such as the MC or host community schooling, to focus on religious studies. This parental preference limits access to broader academic and vocational skills for adolescents, creating a divide between religious and formal education.

Financial contributions and disruptions in education continuity: Gendered expectations for boys to financially contribute to households are a primary reason for school dropout among both Bangladeshi and Rohingya male adolescents. This expectation is prevalent among parents in both communities, often leading to the discontinuation of boys’ education.

Box 5: *“My father is sick. We are poor, we have a money crisis. So, my brother started working outside to support our family.” (Boy from the Rohingya refugee camps)*

Household financial constraints and education

Household financial constraints disrupt education for both boys and girls. Beyond the financial expectations for boys, the overall financial situation of both Bangladeshi and Rohingya families

influences the continuity of education for both boys and girls, since direct financial and opportunity costs increase at higher levels of education.

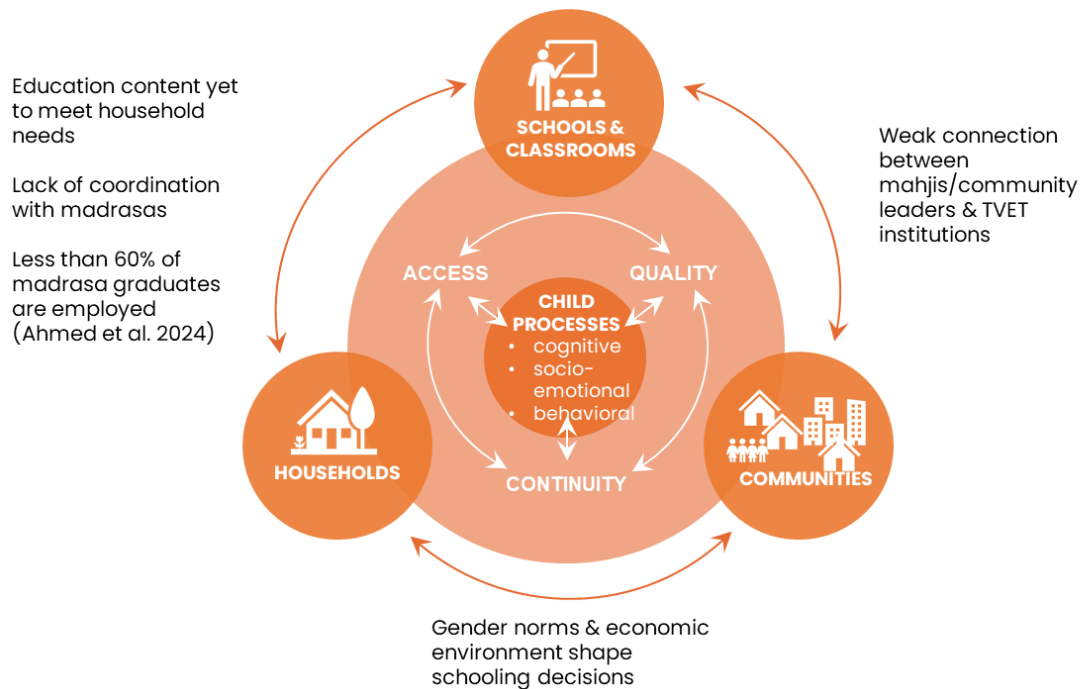
Box 6: “My son studied until class five because it required less money till class five but when he was promoted to upper classes and increased expenses for education, I was not able to contribute.” (Parent from the host community)

Career aspirations and skills development: Both adolescent boys and girls express career aspirations that involve skills development. Among girls, there is widespread interest in developing handicraft skills.

Box 7: “We girls who have left education do not have any professional goals like other highly educated girls. But I want to learn sewing for making beautiful designs in clothes, so I can sell these and earn money.” (Girl from the host community)

Similarly, there is interest among both Bangladeshi and Rohingya male adolescents in pursuing careers that require trade skills and business management skills.

Figure 6 : Key Factors at the local level for adolescents’ education



E. Conclusion and recommendations

Adolescents in Cox’s Bazar, particularly within the Rohingya refugee population and host communities, face significant barriers to education. Gender and socioeconomic factors critically influence access to and continuity of education.

Early marriage, gender norms related to domestic chores, safety concerns, and financial pressures, compel many adolescents, especially girls, to drop out of or never attend school. While *madrasa* education provides a viable alternative for some, particularly in Rohingya communities, it often diverts children from formal education pathways, limiting their opportunities for broader skills development.

Boys face pressures to financially support their families, resulting in high dropout rates. Despite these challenges, both boys and girls express strong aspirations for skills-based careers, indicating a desire for vocational training that could help them overcome the limitations of traditional schooling and offer opportunities for self-sufficiency.

Box 8: Recommendations

• Expand TVET programmes:

- Equip both boys and girls with marketable skills.

Actors: Host Community – TVET institutions; Rohingya Community – Livelihood and Skill Development Sector and its partners

- Ensure TVET programmes are accessible to adolescents from both Rohingya and host communities.

Actors: Host Community – TVET institutions, Upazila administration; Rohingya Community – Livelihood and Skill Development Sector and its partners, Camp administration

• Support access to formal secondary education:

- Implement programmes that facilitate access, including scholarships and financial incentives, to reduce dropout rates among girls and boys.

Actors: Host Community – Upazila administration, Educational institution administration; Rohingya Community – Cox’s Bazar Education Sector and its implementing partners

• Strengthen school capacity and align non-formal education:

- Enhance accelerated learning programs aimed at older adolescent school dropouts within both host and refugee communities to facilitate their reintegration into the formal education system.

Actors: Host Community – Department of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME), Bangladesh Open University; Rohingya Community – Cox’s Bazar Education Sector and ALP implementing partners

- Enhance the capacity of schools in host communities *Actors: Ministry of Education*
- Ensure non-formal education options in refugee camps align with formal education standards for better continuity.

Actors: Cox’s Bazar Education Sector and its appealing partners

• Provide targeted financial support:

- Offer targeted financial assistance to low-income families within host communities to cover educational expenses.

Actors: Upazila administration, Development partners, NGOs and INGOs, Charity Foundations

- Develop and promote entrepreneurship opportunities for adolescents, particularly males, to alleviate the financial pressures that compel them to drop out of school

and enter the workforce. Integrate these initiatives with the Economic Recovery Deployment (ERD) program.

Actors: Host Community - Upazila administration, Microfinance NGOs, Ministry of Labour and Employment; Rohingya Community - Camp administration, Livelihood and Skill Development Sector and its partners, Implementing partners of the Cash for Development program.

• **Introduce community-based income-generation programmes:**

- Develop programmes that allow families to generate income, enabling adolescents to continue their education without financial pressure.

Actors: Host Community - Upazila administration, Microfinance NGOs, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Community-based Organisations, Department of Cooperatives; Rohingya Community - Livelihood and Skill Development Sector and its partners, Cash for Development Sector, Community-based Organisations

Through these recommendations, this brief aims to address the critical educational needs of adolescents in Cox's Bazar, fostering greater access to quality education and skills development opportunities.

