

Policy Brief

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CAMPE is the secretariat of the Education Watch Group - a civil society platform for researchers, practitioners, and activists in Bangladesh's education sector. On behalf of the Education Watch Group, CAMPE coordinates the annual research-based Education Watch report, presenting the civil society perspective on the progress and challenges in line with national and international goals and targets.



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Unequal Paths to Learning

*Educational Barriers Facing Indigenous Girls
in the Plainlands of Bangladesh*

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KEY FINDINGS

- Plainland Indigenous girls face persistently high dropout and low transition to secondary education, reflecting deep geographic and equity gaps.
- Language barriers and culturally insensitive teaching practices contribute to learning poverty and silent dropout among Indigenous girls.
- Poverty, unsafe travel, inadequate sanitation and menstrual hygiene facilities, and early marriage jointly drive adolescent girls out of school.
- Discrimination and weak school environments undermine participation, confidence, and learning outcomes.
- Stipends boost enrolment, but weak governance, poor implementation, and lack of disaggregated data and targeted financing limit retention, completion, and inclusion of Indigenous girls.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand mother-tongue-based and culturally relevant education beyond early grades and train teachers in Indigenous languages and inclusive pedagogy.
- Increase recruitment and retention of female and Indigenous teachers in plainland Indigenous areas through scholarships, incentives, and priority deployment.
- Ensure safe, nearby, and girl-friendly secondary schools with sanitation, menstrual hygiene facilities, safe transport, hostels, and anti-harassment measures.
- Redesign stipends to prioritise retention and completion while aligning financing with needs-based local planning using ethnicity- and gender-disaggregated data.

Bangladesh is home to more than 54 Indigenous communities, collectively speaking at least 35 distinct languages. The Population and Housing Census 2022 identified approximately 1.65 million people, or around one percent of the national population, as Indigenous. Indigenous organisations, however, suggest that the actual number is higher, pointing to long-standing challenges related to undercounting and misclassification.

Indigenous people in Bangladesh are broadly categorised into two groups: those living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and those who live in the plains, commonly referred to as plainland Indigenous or Adivasi communities. Plainland Indigenous populations are dispersed across the north-western, north-central, north-eastern, and southern regions, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Naogaon, Rangpur, Gaibandha, Mymensingh, Tangail, Sylhet, and parts of Chattogram and Barishal districts. Historically, these communities have faced sustained social, political, and economic marginalisation, including land dispossession, forced evictions, and displacement linked to development initiatives such as social forestry and eco-park projects. These structural disadvantages have resulted in widespread poverty, limited access to basic services, and weak participation in decision-making, collectively constraining educational access and outcomes, particularly for Indigenous girls.

Education Scenario of Plainland Indigenous Girls

Over the past two decades, Bangladesh has made significant progress in expanding access to education, as reflected in increased enrolment rates, near gender parity at the primary level, and the expansion of stipend and social safety net programs. Indigenous children, including those from plainland communities, have also benefited from these access-oriented initiatives. However, beneath these aggregate achievements lies a persistent and deeply unequal reality: plainland Indigenous girls continue to experience systemic exclusion from quality, continuous education, particularly at the secondary level, where dropout rates remain high, and learning opportunities are limited.

A Strong Legal Promise, a Weak Reality

Bangladesh's education system is grounded in a strong constitutional and policy commitment to equity and inclusion. Article 17(a) of the Constitution mandates the State to establish a universal education system and ensure free and compulsory education for all children. This commitment is reinforced by the Compulsory Primary Education Act 1990, which guarantees non-discriminatory access to primary education regardless of gender, income, ethnicity, culture, or geographic location. National Education Policy (NEP) 2010 further strengthens this framework by explicitly recognising Indigenous and small ethnic groups and calling for mother-tongue-based learning, Indigenous teachers and learning materials, targeted support, and inclusive teacher training. The Eighth Five-Year Plan similarly identifies language barriers, remoteness, and deprivation as key challenges facing ethnic minority learners and emphasises targeted responses.

Despite these legal and policy provisions, plainland Indigenous girls, particularly at the secondary level, remain among the most excluded learners. This gap reflects not a lack of policy commitments, but persistent weaknesses in implementation and accountability that fail to address Indigenous realities and the specific risks faced by girls.

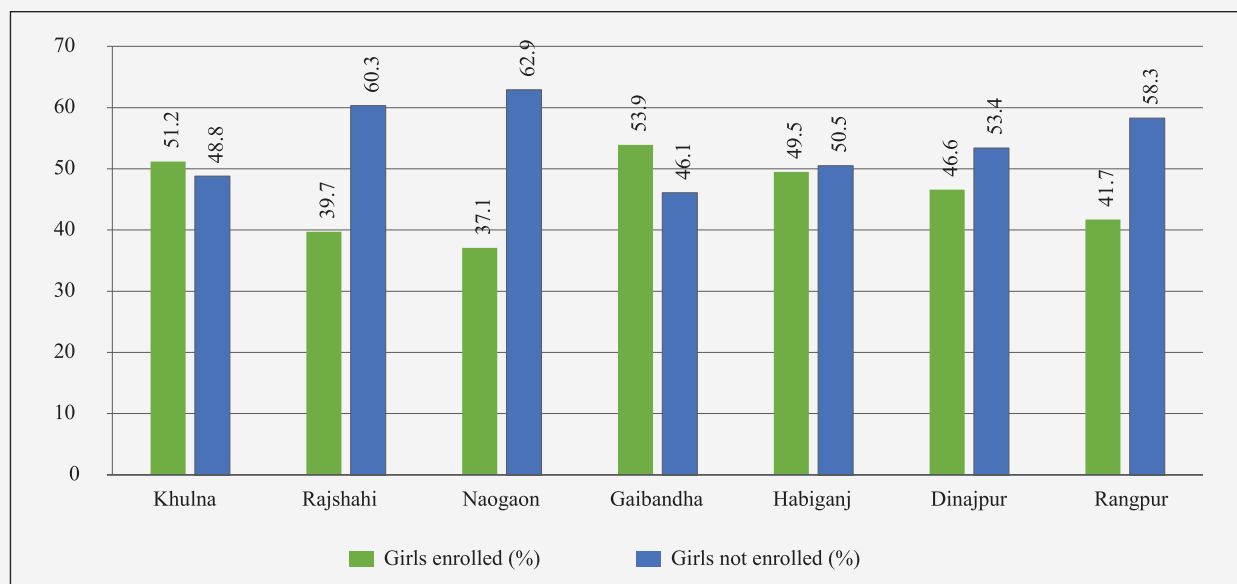
Learning and Retention: The Unequal Path

Educational outcomes among Indigenous communities continue to lag behind national averages, with lower literacy rates, higher dropout rates, and sharp declines in completion beyond the primary level. Language mismatch is a critical factor: most Indigenous children enter school without proficiency in Bangla, while classroom

“She enrolled with the stipend, but after class six, the distance and fear became too much. If the school felt safe and she could follow the lessons—we would never stop her.

— Parent of an Indigenous girl

Enrolment Snapshot



Source: CAMPE Study, Insights on the Barriers - Facing Girls' Education in Plainland Indigenous Communities of Bangladesh

instruction remains predominantly Bangla-based. Although pre-primary to early grade of primary education learning materials have been developed in five Indigenous languages-Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo, and Sadri, their coverage is limited, and many plainland languages, particularly those spoken by Santal and Oraon communities, remain inadequately supported. This results in “silent dropout,” whereby girls remain enrolled but fail to comprehend lessons, gradually disengage, and ultimately leave school.

These challenges are compounded by limited teacher capacity. Teachers posted in Indigenous areas often lack skills in Indigenous languages and culturally responsive pedagogy. Indigenous learners also experience discrimination, stereotyping, and bullying in school environments, which undermine their sense of belonging and motivation. For adolescent girls, these barriers intersect with puberty-related needs and social constraints, including inadequate sanitation facilities, lack of menstrual hygiene knowledge and support, and safety/security risks associated with long travels to school, all of which significantly increase the likelihood of dropout.

Progress, but Deep Geographic Inequality

Although enrolment among Indigenous girls has improved in certain districts where girls' participation

is broadly comparable to that of boys in areas such as Khulna and Gaibandha, exclusion remains widespread and uneven. In contrast, districts including Rajshahi, Rangpur, Dinajpur, and Naogaon continue to record alarmingly high rates of non-enrolment and dropout among Indigenous girls, often exceeding 50 percent, underscoring pronounced geographic disparities in educational participation.

Peer effects also reinforce dropout: more than half (51.6%) of girls reported that many of their friends do not attend school, suggesting that exclusion has become socially normalized in some communities.

Why Indigenous Girls are Still Being Left Behind

Plainland Indigenous girls experience intersecting disadvantages as being Indigenous, as girls, socio-economically backward and often as residents of remote or marginalised areas. While stipend programs have helped boost initial enrolment, they have not been sufficient to ensure sustained participation or learning. The Key structural barriers include:

- **Language Exclusion:** Most Indigenous children enter school without proficiency in Bangla.

Although pre-primary textbooks exist in five Indigenous languages, coverage is limited, and many plainland languages-especially Sadri-based and Oraon dialects remain unsupported beyond early grades.

- **Teacher Preparedness Gaps:** Teachers posted in Indigenous areas rarely receive training in Indigenous languages or culturally responsive pedagogy. As a result, classrooms often become spaces of alienation rather than inclusion.

“My daughter enrolled, but after class six, she stopped attending. The school was far, there was no toilet, and she could not understand the lessons

- An Indigenous parent

- **Gender-specific Constraints:** For girls, inadequate sanitation facilities, lack of menstrual hygiene support, long and unsafe travel distances, and early marriage sharply increase dropout risks at the secondary level.
- **Discrimination and Invisibility:** Indigenous students frequently report stereotyping, bullying, and low expectations from peers and

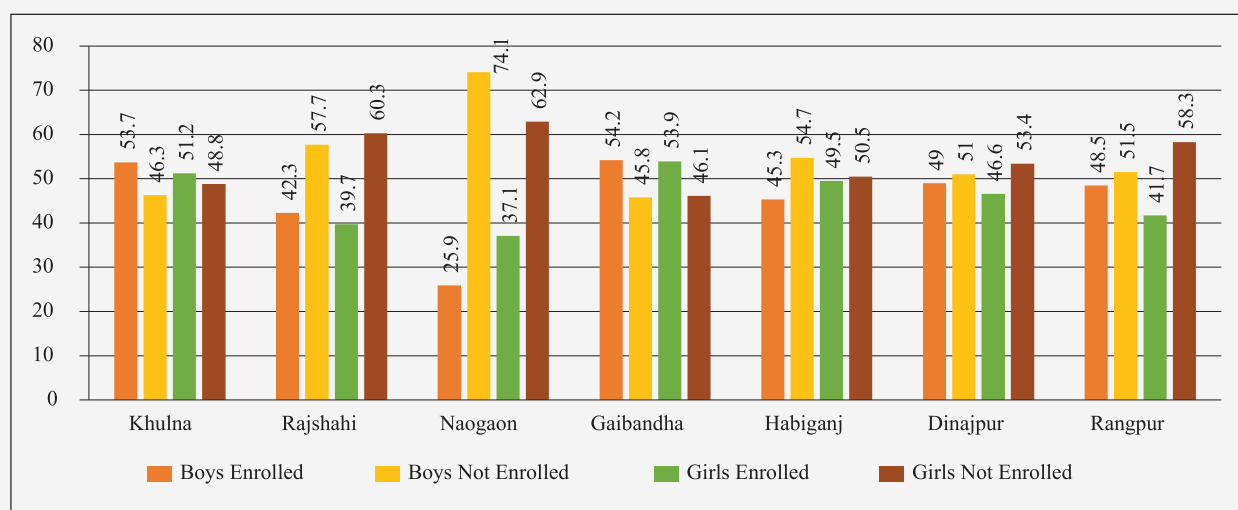
teachers, undermining confidence and school attachment.

The Gap Facing Plainland Indigenous Girls

Despite clear constitutional and policy commitments to inclusive education, field-level implementation failures continue to exclude plainland Indigenous girls from secondary schooling. Local education planning is often driven by expressed community demand for schools and teachers, an approach that disadvantages Indigenous communities who face language barriers, political marginalisation, and limited engagement with formal institutions. As one local official noted, “We establish schools where communities demand. We have not received any request from the Indigenous villages.” This demand-driven logic obscures real need and results in chronic under-provision of schools, trained teachers, and basic facilities in Indigenous areas.

Dropout among Indigenous girls is frequently explained away as poverty or “parental ignorance,” ignoring structural causes such as unsafe school environments, language exclusion, discriminatory attitudes, and restrictive gender norms. The absence of ethnicity- and gender-disaggregated data further renders Indigenous girls invisible in planning and budgeting processes. Addressing these gaps requires a shift from access-focused policies to equity-driven implementation-one that proactively identifies underserved Indigenous settlements,

Enrolment Status of Indigenous Children by Sex and District (%)



Source: CAMPE Study, Insights on the Barriers - Facing Girls' Education in Plainland Indigenous Communities of Bangladesh

ensures safe and girl-friendly secondary schools, extends language and learning support beyond early grades, and enforces accountability at school, Upazila, and district levels. The continued exclusion of plainland Indigenous girls reflects not a policy vacuum, but a critical failure of implementation and governance.

Enrolment has Improved, but Exclusion Persists

Enrolment among Indigenous girls has improved in several plainland districts, reflecting the positive effects of stipend programs and gender-focused education initiatives. In the districts such as Khulna and Gaibandha, girls' enrolment rates are broadly comparable to those of boys, indicating that access-oriented interventions have achieved measurable gains.

However, this progress is uneven. In a number of districts, a majority of Indigenous girls remain either out of school or have dropped out. In Naogaon, Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Dinajpur, rates of non-enrolment and dropout among Indigenous girls exceed 50 percent, highlighting pronounced geographic disparities in educational participation.

Beyond household-level data, peer influence reinforces exclusion. More than half (51.6%) of

girls reported that many of their friends do not attend school, indicating that dropout has become socially normalised in some communities.

Enrolment-focused strategies alone are insufficient. Without retention-oriented interventions, Indigenous girls remain structurally excluded despite formal access.

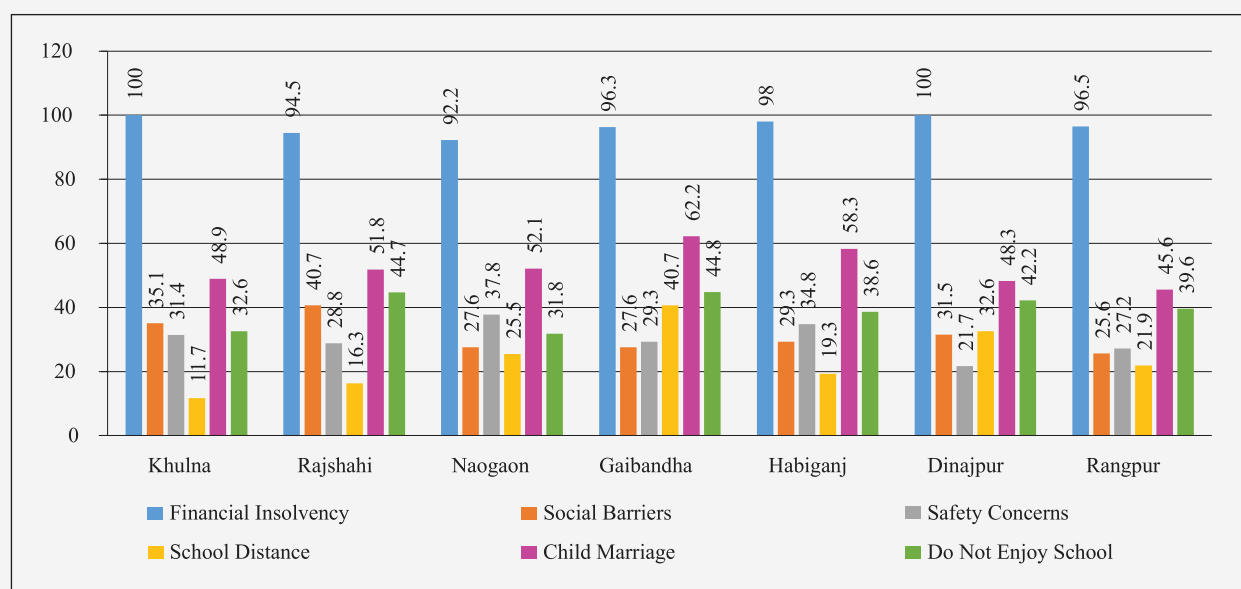
Poverty is Universal but Interacts with Multiple Structural Barriers

Economic insolvency emerged as the most consistently reported barrier across all districts. Over 90 percent of guardians cited poverty as a reason for girls' non-enrolment or dropout, reaching 100 percent in districts such as Khulna and Dinajpur. Education-related expenses, i.e., uniforms, learning materials, transport, examination fees, and private tutoring, remain unaffordable for many Indigenous households.

Financial support must be combined with safety, proximity, and quality improvements to prevent dropout.

However, the data demonstrate that poverty alone does not explain exclusion. High dropout persists

Socio-economic Barriers to Indigenous Girls' Education (% of Guardians)



Source: : CAMPE Study, Insights on the Barriers - Facing Girls' Education in Plainland Indigenous Communities of Bangladesh and UNICEF

even where stipends are available, indicating that economic constraints intersect with other barriers such as safety, distance, language, and school environment.

Distance, Safety, and Infrastructure Drive Adolescent Dropout

Distance to schools and safety during travel are decisive factors in girls' discontinuation of education. In districts such as Gaibandha and Dinajpur, over 30-40 percent of guardians identified school distance as a major barrier. Safety concerns including fear of harassment and social stigma were raised by nearly one-third of sample respondents overall.

Adolescent girls are particularly affected in this regard. As they grow older, parental concern over safety intensifies, often leading to withdrawal from school even when girls are academically capable and motivated.

Distance to secondary schools and safe transport options disproportionately excludes Indigenous girls during adolescence.

Language Barriers and Weak Teacher Preparedness Undermine Learning

Language appears as a critical institutional barrier. Indigenous girls often enter school without Bangla proficiency, while classroom instruction remains overwhelmingly Bangla-based. Although pre-primary textbooks exist in five Indigenous languages, coverage is limited and teacher capacity to deliver mother-tongue instruction remains weak or absent. This contributes directly to disengagement. A significant proportion of students (39%) do not enjoy school as they reported, reflecting difficulties in comprehension, lack of cultural relevance, and limited teacher support.

Language exclusion results in “silent dropout”, where girls remain enrolled but disengaged.

School Environment, Discrimination, and Social Exclusion

Evidence from CAMPE field consultations shows that subtle but persistent discrimination within schools, such as language-based teasing, social isolation, and low teacher expectations, creates an unwelcoming environment for plainland Indigenous girls. Many students avoid participating in class discussions, hesitate to speak Bangla, and feel culturally invisible in classrooms. This weak sense of belonging discourages regular attendance and contributes to early withdrawal from school, particularly during adolescence, when confidence and safety concerns are most critical.

International evidence reinforces this concern. UNICEF and UNESCO studies on marginalised learners in South Asia show that students who experience school-level discrimination are significantly more likely to miss classes or drop out, while those who feel respected by teachers are twice as likely to meet minimum learning standards. This highlights a clear priority: improving school climate through culturally responsive teacher training, recruitment of Indigenous and female teachers, anti-bullying enforcement, and safe grievance mechanisms. Without addressing discrimination inside schools, investments in stipends or infrastructure alone will not ensure equitable education for plainland Indigenous girls.

Gender Norms, Early Marriage, and Domestic Responsibilities

Gender norms remain a major driver of dropout. Data show that child marriage is a significant risk across districts, affecting between 45-62 percent of girls according to guardian responses. Domestic work and caregiving responsibilities further reduce girls' study time and attendance.

The girls perceive that financial constraints alone may not necessarily force them to discontinue their education, as the government provides stipends, free textbooks, and other support. They believe they can also contribute to their education costs through private tutoring or other income-generating activities. However, they express serious concern that safety/security issues may compel their parents to arrange early marriage before completion of Secondary School Certificate (SSC).

Student-Reported Risks to Continuing Education (%)

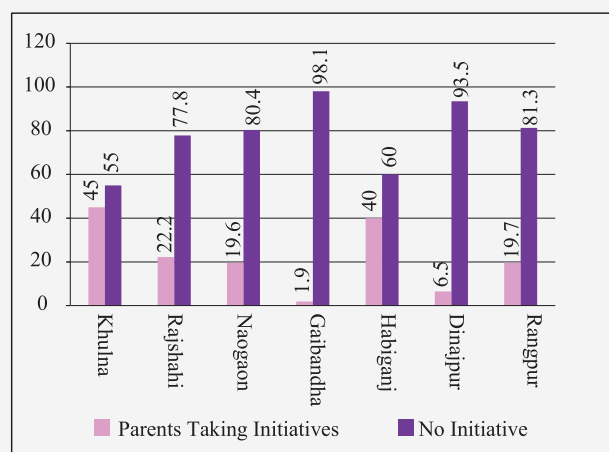
Risk Factor	Percentage
Financial constraints	45.3
Household work	4.5
Safety concerns	13.3
Child marriage	36.9

Source: Source: CAMPE Study, Insights on the Barriers - Facing Girls' Education in Plainland Indigenous Communities of Bangladesh and UNICEF 2025

Parental Aspirations are Strong, but Institutional Support is Weak

Contrary to prevailing assumptions, most parents express strong aspirations for their daughters' education. Many wish their daughters to “study as much as possible” and pursue professional careers. Girls themselves report ambitions to become teachers, doctors, nurses, or professionals. However, parental engagement remains uneven due to poverty, limited awareness, and weak school–community linkages.

Parental Initiatives to Support Children's Education (%)



Source: : CAMPE Study, Insights on the Barriers - Facing Girls' Education in Plainland Indigenous Communities of Bangladesh

Lower Learning Outcomes and Learning Poverty among Indigenous Girls

Access to schooling does not guarantee learning. National and global evidence consistently show that children from marginalised communities, particularly Indigenous and ethnic minority girls, experience significantly lower learning outcomes than national averages. This phenomenon,

commonly referred to as learning poverty, describes the inability of children to read and understand a simple text by the end of primary education.

National Learning Poverty Context

According to national and international assessments, Bangladesh faces a severe learning crisis:

- More than 50% of children at the end of Grade 5 fail to achieve minimum proficiency in Bangla and mathematics.
- Learning poverty is significantly higher among rural, poor, and linguistically marginalised children, including Indigenous learners.
- Girls from marginalised households face double disadvantage—limited instructional quality and reduced learning time due to domestic responsibilities.

Although this study did not directly assess learning achievement, several indicators strongly suggest high learning poverty among Plainland Indigenous girls:

- High proportions of students report that they “do not enjoy school”, often due to language barriers and weak teacher support.
- Early disengagement from classrooms, followed by dropout.
- Limited exposure to remedial support, tutoring, or learning materials at home.

For Indigenous girls, learning poverty is both a cause and a consequence of dropout. Language mismatch between home and school, lack of culturally responsive pedagogy, and weak teacher preparedness result in poor comprehension during early grades. As learning gaps accumulate, girls lose confidence, disengage emotionally, and are eventually withdrawn from school—often before completing secondary education.

Learning Poverty and Foundational Skill Gaps – National and Marginalised Context

Indicator (Primary Level)	National Average	Marginalised / Indigenous Context
Children unable to read grade-level text	50–55%	Significantly higher (est. 65–75%)
Children lacking basic numeracy skills	55%	Higher than national average
Rural–urban learning gap	High	Concentrated in Indigenous areas
Language-related learning difficulty	Moderate	Very high

Source: Estimated based on BANBEIS, UNICEF, UNESCO, and CPD analyses of marginalised learners.

Education Financing and Equity: Who is Left Behind

Education financing in Bangladesh remains structurally inequitable, with limited targeting of hard-to-reach and Indigenous populations. While overall public investment in education has increased in nominal terms, allocations remain insufficient and poorly aligned with equity goals.

Education Financing Snapshot – Bangladesh

Indicator	Status
Education spending (% of GDP)	Moving below 1.8% of last few years (1.53% in FY 2025-2026),
Recommended level (global benchmark)	4–6%
Share of budget for marginalised groups	Limited / non-earmarked
Dedicated Indigenous education budget line	Absent
Hostel, transport, or language program funding	Very limited

National Education Financing Landscape

- Public education expenditure remains below GDP 1.53% in FY 2025-2026, significantly lower than regional and global benchmarks.

- The Eighth Five-Year Plan acknowledges inequity but lacks dedicated budget lines for Indigenous or plainland ethnic communities.
- Most education budgets are absorbed by salaries and routine expenditures, leaving limited fiscal space for targeted interventions.

Plainland Indigenous girls face significantly higher per-student education private costs compared to the national average. These additional costs arise from travelling long distances to schools, the need for mother-tongue and language support, and the requirement for hostels, and safe transportation to ensure regular attendance—particularly at the secondary level. Moreover, the shortage of female and Indigenous teachers in remote and marginalised areas further increases the resources required to create a safe and culturally responsive learning environment. Despite these realities, existing education financing frameworks continue to treat Indigenous learners as part of a broad “disadvantaged” category, failing to recognise and respond to the distinct structural barriers and cost implications faced by Indigenous girls.

Data Gaps and Governance Failures: The Invisibility Problem

One of the most critical barriers to addressing Indigenous girls’ education is data invisibility. Findings from the CAMPE Education Watch study in selected plainland districts show persistent exclusion, yet national monitoring systems rarely disaggregate data by ethnicity. As a result, dropout, learning poverty, and safety risks remain hidden within national averages, leading to weak planning, inadequate budget allocation, and limited accountability at Upazila and district levels. Local education planning often depends on expressed community demand instead of proactive mapping of underserved Indigenous settlements, reinforcing historical marginalisation. Without ethnicity- and gender-disaggregated data, commitments under NEP-2010 and PEDP-4 cannot translate into targeted action.

Data Availability Gaps in Education Monitoring

Indicator	Available	Disaggregated by Ethnicity
Enrolment	Yes	No
Dropout	Yes	No
Learning outcomes	Limited	No
Teacher deployment	Yes	No
School infrastructure in Indigenous areas	Partial	No

Source: Source: CAMPE Study, Insights on the Barriers - Facing Girls' Education in Plainland Indigenous Communities of Bangladesh

Current Data Limitations

- BANBEIS and EMIS datasets rarely record Indigenous identity.
- Dropout, repetition, and learning outcomes are reported by gender/location—but not ethnicity.
- Indigenous girls' exclusion, therefore remains statistically invisible in national reporting.

Significant governance and implementation failures continue to undermine Indigenous girls' access to education. At the local level, education officials frequently rely on expressed community demand when planning school establishment, overlooking the reality that many Indigenous communities are less vocal due to historical marginalisation and limited engagement with formal institutions. Moreover, many officials lack adequate orientation on Indigenous-specific policy provisions, resulting in weak implementation of existing commitments. Dropout among Indigenous girls is often simplistically attributed to poverty or perceived “parental ignorance,” while deeper systemic factors—such as language barriers, safety concerns, distance to schools, and discriminatory school environments—remain largely unaddressed. This governance approach disproportionately disadvantages Indigenous communities, reinforcing exclusion rather than mitigating it. As policy experience consistently shows, what is not counted is not prioritised, and what is not prioritised is not funded.

The exclusion of plainland Indigenous girls from education cannot be explained solely by issues of access or household poverty. Instead, it is sustained



by interlinked systemic failures, including learning poverty that begins in the early grades, education financing models that fail to incorporate equity considerations, and data and governance systems that render Indigenous girls statistically and institutionally invisible. Without confronting these structural constraints, even well-designed enrolment initiatives or stipend programs are unlikely to produce durable and equitable educational outcomes.

Conclusion

Plainland Indigenous girls in Bangladesh continue to face disproportionately high exclusion from quality and continuous education due to a convergence of poverty, language barriers, gender-based discrimination, unsafe and distant schooling environments, inadequate sanitation, and weak implementation of existing educational policies. Despite constitutional guarantees and policy commitments, these structural constraints result in high dropout rates, low learning outcomes, and limited progression to secondary education, particularly during adolescence when risks of early marriage and mobility restrictions intensify. While initiatives such as stipends and Indigenous-language textbooks have improved initial enrolment, they have not ensured retention or learning, largely due to shortages of trained female and Indigenous teachers, limited culturally relevant curricula, and persistent data and governance gaps. Unless education planning and financing explicitly prioritise plainland Indigenous girls through equity-focused implementation, accountable delivery at local levels, and systematic monitoring, Bangladesh will continue to fall short of its national commitments and global obligations under SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

Policy Recommendations

- 1. Institutionalise Mother-Tongue and Culturally Relevant Education:** Extend mother-tongue-based instruction beyond pre-primary into early primary grades in plainland Indigenous areas, prioritising languages spoken by Santal, Oraon, and Mahali communities. Curricula and teacher training should systematically incorporate Indigenous histories, cultures, and culturally responsive pedagogy to strengthen learning outcomes.
- 2. Increase Female and Indigenous Teacher Representation:** Introduce targeted scholarships, fast-track recruitment, and incentive packages to expand the number of female and Indigenous teachers in plainland Indigenous areas. Teacher posting and transfer policies should prioritise continuity, particularly at the secondary level, to address safety concerns and reduce adolescent dropout.
- 3. Ensure Safe and Girl-Friendly Secondary Schools:** All secondary schools serving Indigenous communities should provide gender-responsive infrastructure, including separate toilets, water supply, and menstrual hygiene management facilities. Institutionalised school safety plans must address harassment, bullying, and other risks that disproportionately affect adolescent girls.
- 4. Reduce Distance and Safety Barriers to Secondary Education:** Expand secondary education access in Indigenous-populated areas through new schools, hostels, or community-based learning centres where distance is a major constraint. Safe and affordable transport options should be introduced, and planning should be guided by need rather than expressed community demand.
- 5. Strengthen Retention-Focused Financial Support:** Redesign stipend and scholarship programs to prioritise retention and completion of secondary education for plainland Indigenous girls. Financial support should cover indirect education costs such as transport, uniforms, examination fees, and learning materials, with incentives linked to attendance and progression.
- 6. Integrate Child Marriage Prevention with Education Interventions:** Link education programs with child marriage prevention mechanisms at community and local government levels. Schools,

SMCs, and local administrations should coordinate to identify girls at risk and provide timely educational and protective support.

7. **Enforce Zero Tolerance for Discrimination and Bullying:** Implement and enforce anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies in all schools serving Indigenous learners, with specific attention to ethnic stereotyping and gender-based harassment. Accessible grievance redress mechanisms should be in place for students and parents.
8. **Institutionalise Ethnicity- and Gender-Disaggregated Education Data:** Mandate the collection and reporting of education data disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, and location across all education management systems. Such data are essential for identifying exclusion, tracking dropout, and guiding targeted policy and budget decisions.
9. **Adopt Needs-Based Local Education Planning:** Shift local education planning from demand-driven approaches to proactive, needs-based assessments in Indigenous areas. Upazila and district education offices should be required to map underserved Indigenous settlements and plan services accordingly.
10. **Earmark Dedicated Budgets for Indigenous Girls' Education:** Introduce dedicated budget lines within national and sectoral education budgets for plainland Indigenous girls, reflecting higher per-student costs and structural disadvantages. Earmarked funding should support language programs, teacher deployment, hostels, transport, and school safety measures.

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