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## What Matters for Marginalized Girls and Boys in Bangladesh: a capabilities approach for understanding educational well-being and empowerment

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**ABSTRACT** Ensuring the education of marginalized children has become an important agenda in order to reach the goals of universal primary education and gender equality. Education policies and projects aiming to target marginalized children often do so on the basis of demographic variables, such as sex, ethnicity, poverty and geography. We argue that this approach to defining marginality does not sufficiently address underlying discriminatory conditions and norms that perpetuate inequalities. In this article, we employed a capabilities approach as an analytical frame to understand what girls and boys in a rural district in Bangladesh reason affects their educational well-being and empowerment. We draw on critical feminist perspectives of empowerment to illustrate how gendered inequalities are perpetuated in the structures and norms in communities and schools. We argue that specific conditions can differentially marginalize or empower, and these conditions have persistent gendered patterns. Conditions of a safe, supportive, and quality educational environment foster possibilities for empowerment and well-being, and conversely, a lack of these conditions can marginalize children from achieving well-being through education.

### Introduction

Reaching marginalized girls and boys has become a central agenda for international organizations and governments as they strive to achieve the goals of Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The 2010 EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR), *Reaching the Marginalized* (UNESCO, 2010), highlights this agenda through analyses that identify who is marginalized in education and how those who are marginalized can be better served through policies and strategies. A number of recent studies have aimed to identify and determine the causes of marginalization (see World Bank, 2001; Chant, 2007; Lewis & Lockheed, 2007; Tembon & Fort, 2008). These studies aim to identify economic, socio-cultural, and geographic determinants of marginalization, often analyzing whether a group, such as the poorest quintile or non-majority ethnicity, is marginalized in its access to education. Girls, particularly those from the lowest-income quintile, are often identified as marginalized. Some analyses in the GMR provide an example of using the extent of schooling to define who is marginalized and then determining how group demographic variables correlate to this outcome.

In this article, we offer an alternative approach to conceptualizing and understanding marginalization and empowerment. We aim to understand causes of marginalization in education through the use of a capabilities approach. We examine how girls and boys in rural communities in

Bangladesh perceive their own marginalization, or, alternatively, their empowerment in relation to education. Bangladesh is an interesting case in which to examine marginalization and gender inequalities in education, as the latest national enrollment data from Bangladesh (Al-Samarrai, 2009) show that gender parity has been achieved, an important accomplishment for a country that had low enrollment ratios two decades ago. This achievement of gender parity in enrollment obscures the inequalities and marginalization that persist beyond access to education. Further, it does not address how inequalities are gendered rather than understood as sex-disaggregated differences.

In 1990, the Government of Bangladesh established a policy of free and compulsory primary education, and since then it has significantly increased the number of children in school. Between 1985 and 2001, enrollment doubled, as did the number of primary schools (Wils et al, 2005). Recent data and reports show that a gender gap now slightly favors girls. From 2005 to 2007, UNICEF (2009) reports average primary net enrollment rates of 87% for boys and 91% for girls. Analyses conducted for the World Bank on education and poverty reduction also found that girls in primary classes 1-5 tend to have equivalent or higher enrollment than boys (Al Sammarai, 2009). Despite these significant increases in enrollment rates, 3 million school-aged children (19% of the population) were still out of school in 2004. Furthermore, drop-out is an increasing problem. The drop-out rate for primary grades was 33% in 2002, and it had increased to 52% in 2006 (DEP, Bangladesh, 2009).

Even with programs that provide provisions and incentives, gender equality and empowerment through education is not as positive as recent reports suggest. Out of 14 developing countries from the Asia Pacific, Bangladesh ranks 10th in respect of gender equity and overall equity (Asian South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education and Global Campaign for Education Report 2005). We suggest that gender discrimination remains deeply entrenched in families and in society, preventing many girls from fulfilling their academic potential and achieving well-being through education. Schuler (2007) argues in her work on Bangladesh that gender norms about education for girls and women are changing, yet these changes are precarious and have increased physical and psychological costs for female students, raise concerns by parents and girls that they may not get married, and conflict with the lack of economic and employment opportunities for educated women. This article explores local community and national policy conditions that continue to perpetuate marginalization related to educational well-being, particularly conditions that perpetuate gender inequalities, despite statistics that indicate gender parity. Additionally, we propose educational conditions that foster empowerment of girls and boys in these communities.

#### *Marginalization, Empowerment and Education*

Marginalization is more than a category that identifies groups, as it is often used. It is 'a multidimensional process which weakens the links between individuals and the rest of society' (ILO, 1996, cited in World Bank, 2001, p. 32), and as the GMR states, it is an 'acute and persistent disadvantage rooted in underlying social inequalities' (UNESCO, 2010, p. 135). These social inequalities are often rooted in gender and other forms of discrimination that do not allow girls and boys, men and women to live quality lives. Despite the recognition that marginalization is a process that results in persistent social inequalities, many international organizations utilize the level of education achieved as a proxy for marginalization. For example, the GMR, using this approach, defines marginalization as those who attend less than a threshold of four years of schooling, or what UNESCO (2010) refers to as education poverty, and two years of education denotes extreme education poverty. While categories such as gender, ethnicity, language or geographic location are analyzed to understand the underlying causes of education poverty, these analyses fall short in explaining the social policies and practices that perpetuate these inequalities.

Defining marginalization in terms of the extent of schooling assumes that education, and a particular level of education, is inherently a capability for well-being, or essential for improving disadvantage and societal inequalities overall (Unterhalter, 2003, 2007). To understand how education may or may not address social inequalities and enhance individuals' well-being, Walker & Unterhalter (2007) assert that researchers and educators need to explore the capabilities within and through education that foster well-being for different individuals. From a capabilities approach,

marginalization is not only related to whether one receives an education; rather, a capabilities approach allows us to examine how the process and practices of being educated can foster well-being. Therefore, educational well-being and empowerment depend on the social and educational conditions, such as quality and relevancy of education, and equity in social norms related to schooling (Unterhalter, 2005; Walker, 2007; Tikly & Barrett, 2010).

We utilize a capabilities approach to understand marginalization, or the lack of capabilities and freedoms, with a critical feminist perspective to examine gendered patterns of educational marginalization or well-being. Sen's (1995, 1999) capabilities approach, as a process of evaluating injustices or inequalities, offers an alternative framework to explore what matters in boys' and girls' lives to overcome gender and other social inequalities. We examine how social and material factors perpetuate inequalities related to education, and how these inequalities are gendered. We utilize data collected from a long-term project aimed at empowering girls and boys in rural villages in Sunamganj district in Bangladesh. Girls, boys, parents and community members all provided perspectives on social practices and conditions - what Unterhalter refers to as educational conditions - affecting educational well-being. Even though girls are participating in schooling at higher rates than boys in Bangladesh, a lack of human security, including abuse and violence, a lack of support to study from family, community members and teachers, and the irrelevancy of education to their lives cannot be ignored in terms of whether education will contribute to their well-being and empowerment. We argue that examining these issues is important in overcoming marginalization, as development organizations often target girls or other specific groups, rather than assessing how social practices are discriminatory in the lives of boys and girls.

### **A Capabilities Framework for Assessing Marginalization and Empowerment**

A capabilities approach emphasizes a person's capability to lead the kind of life she values not only by the culmination of alternatives that she ends up with, but by the processes involved in making choices, or her agency freedom to choose alternatives within her ability and context (Sen, 2009). We draw on and extend three analytic concepts from a capabilities approach as proposed by Amartya Sen (1999, 2009) to examine social inequalities. These concepts are: capabilities and their conversion into actual functionings, or achievements; the heterogeneity of social conditions that affect how individuals experience well-being; and the value that individuals, with others, place on the means for achieving well-being. Robeyns (2005) suggests that other frameworks should be used with the capabilities approach to analyze specific social conditions that affect individuals differently, and to determine what is valued in relation to specific capabilities and functionings. For this study, critical feminist perspectives regarding gender equity and empowerment provide a specific framework through which we can understand capabilities. Naila Kabeer's (1999, 2001) work is particularly relevant in extending a capabilities approach to gendered inequalities through examining social and material conditions that affect girls and women differentially. We also agree with Sharma's (2008) argument that girls' and women's subjectivities and agency cannot be assumed as a singular and shared identity; rather, there are various assemblages of empowerment revealing multiple tensions in its local manifestations.

A capabilities approach is distinct from other analyses that focus on the achievement of basic goods as an end goal (e.g. extent of education). Capabilities are the opportunities or choices that one values, while functionings are what one is able to do with the opportunities or choices. Sen (1999) points out that capabilities are not ends in themselves; capabilities and related freedoms are how opportunities are used to develop actual well-being, as opportunities can be materialized differently for different individuals. Thus, we do not presume that obtaining a threshold level of education results in empowerment; rather, we examine social conditions, including material and social structures, norms, and agency that girls and boys recognize as affecting their educational well-being.

Considerable attention in the scholarship on capabilities has been paid to the distinction between capabilities and functionings (e.g. Robeyns, 2005); that is, capabilities may include literacy and numeracy, but they are not reducible to these outcomes of education, as they also include safety, voice and other valued opportunities for one's well-being. Functionings are the beings and doings that result from combining and transforming capabilities into well-being. Less attention has

been given to examining the conditions and processes, or the well-being, freedoms and agency freedoms, that allow a person to combine their capabilities (e.g. access to education, learning in school, work) into well-being that they value (Unterhalter, 2003). From this approach, as Sen (1999) argues, development should address the social conditions in society that create inequalities, what we are referring to as marginalization, and those that create opportunities for a person to choose what he or she values for well-being or empowerment.

A capabilities approach assumes heterogeneous social conditions and individual experiences that affect well-being. Sen (1999, 2009) suggests four categories of personal and social conditions that affect one's choices and ability to achieve well-being. These are: personal attributes; physical environment; social climate; and relational perspectives (Sen, 2009). Analyzing these conditions through a critical feminist perspective on equity and empowerment, as Kabeer (1999) does in expanding Sen's work, the physical, social and relational environments include not only material goods or resources and institutional arrangements, but also discourses and norms that perpetuate inequalities. Kabeer (1999) also asserts that critical to any discussion of empowerment and gender equity is the concept of power, and therefore, within these different physical, social and relational conditions, power is exercised and 'serve[s] to demarcate the boundaries of choice for different categories of individuals' (p. 3).

Personal characteristics refer to age, gender, and disability as socially constructed phenomena that affect how others in society regard opportunities based on these characteristics. Sen (1999, 2009) suggests that personal characteristics are affected by the physical and social environment in which one operates. For example, a girl's opportunities and freedoms to choose well-being versus a boy's are not only affected by their biological sex - they are also affected by the social and relational environment in which they live. Critical feminist scholars argue that one's agency, or the ability to analyze, decide and act on decisions as a girl or woman (Maslak, 2008), is enacted in relation to structures, the norms and ideologies about gender relations.

In this study, girls' and boys' agency is reflected in their aspirations for education, their awareness and knowledge of rights and constructions of gender, and how they act on their rights individually and collectively (Murphy-Graham, 2008). While individual agency of women and girls is often the most visibly addressed issue in international organizations' agenda on equality, agency is affected by and affects the structures and relations that shape choices (Maslak, 2008).

The physical environment includes conditions that affect opportunities and choices for achieving well-being. While Sen (1999, 2009) refers to climate and geography as affecting overall well-being of a population, Kabeer (1999) suggests that resources or material goods in the environment affect capabilities; 'resources in this broader sense are acquired through a variety of social relationships conducted in the various institutional domains that make up a society, including the domains of family, market, state and community' (p. 3). While resources are usually considered as positively contributing to well-being and empowerment, some resource demands by the community, the family or the market may negatively affect well-being, such as demands for work.

For this study, we examined material resources that the literature on gender and girls' education has shown to be critical to fostering gender equity in schooling: transportation and access to schools; the infrastructure of schools, including toilets and sanitation; health care and nutrition, particularly meals for children before or during school; the kind and extent of workload; and paid labor opportunities for adult women (Lewis & Lockheed, 2007; Smith & Barrett, 2010).

In addition to physical and material resources, Sen (1999, 2009) suggests that the social climate and relational perspectives are critical to realizing capabilities. Conceptually, social climate is linked to material conditions and the physical environment. The social climate is affected by state and community resources, policies and practices, and includes access to public healthcare, education, and markets. Examining the social climate along with relations is critical for understanding gender inequalities, as Kabeer (1999) and other feminist scholars have argued; the social conditions that perpetuate gender inequalities include norms and social practices in communities. The social conditions also include support and collective efforts to expand capabilities and claim rights. Sen (1999, 2009) has a narrower understanding of relational perspectives as patterns of behavior in a community that can positively or negatively affect how one can choose and utilize one's capabilities for well-being, including taking part in the life of the community.

In this study, we draw on the research on gender relations that have been shown to affect young girls' and boys' participation and achievement in school, including the support of their parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and the broader community. For example, Martinez-Bordon (2003), in her study on empowerment, found that parents play a critical role in modeling and supporting the agency of girls through their own engagement with issues in the school. Kirk & Winthrop (2008) found that teachers and teaching assistants play a relational role through their gendered beliefs and behaviors that can positively and negatively affect girls' and boys' educational learning and opportunities. Parpart et al (2002) assert that power and how it is viewed and used is a critical component to empowering relations, and an assessment of attitudes about and uses of power, including gendered attitudes and beliefs about equality between girls and boys, women and men, was included in this study.

Finally, critical to a capabilities approach is how different members of society value different opportunities for well-being. Sen (2009) argues that what individuals value for their well-being matters for achieving equity in a community and society. The value a girl holds for her well-being is contingent on the knowledge she has about opportunities at a given point in time. Furthermore, Sen (2009) regards dialogue and debate within communities as critical to determining what is valued, by whom and for what kind of well-being. Unterhalter (2009), drawing on a capabilities approach to examine what matters for equity in education, suggests we need to give more emphasis to what people value in the everyday interactions in schooling, such as the curriculum, teacher relations and processes within education, rather than concentrating efforts primarily on access to education or the achievement of a certain level of education. Our aim in this research was to understand what girls and boys valued about their education, and what they reasoned to negatively affect their well-being in and through their education.

### **The Study**

This analysis of marginalization and empowerment is drawn from a longitudinal study as part of an eight-country initiative undertaken by CARE, an international non-governmental organization (NGO). The data presented are from a situation analysis of 'marginalized' communities in Bangladesh. Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from mothers, fathers, girls, boys, community members, classroom teachers, and school administrators. This analysis foregrounds data from the girls and boys to understand their perceptions of the social conditions that affect capabilities, as well as data from other community members to understand the specific local conditions that marginalize, and capabilities that are valued for educational well-being.

With the goal of addressing inequalities for girls and women, CARE initiated a global program, the Patsy Collins Trust Fund Initiative (PCTFI), focusing on education for the most marginalized girls. As an NGO, its vision is to improve the lives of girls and women through empowerment. Much of the work done by development organizations has been critiqued for focusing on a neo-liberal, self-actualization form of empowerment that aims to promote the goals of the market and governance (Sharma, 2008). Sharma (2008) also notes that the empowerment discourse is a complex articulation of various notions of gender, development and empowerment. Acting within the tensions among these empowerment discourses, CARE has attempted to utilize a model of empowerment, drawing on Kabeer's (1999) work, that includes three interactive dimensions—agency, structures, and strategic relations. They recognize and assert that to address underlying causes of poverty and marginalization, a focus on individual agency is misleading and even potentially harmful. Social programs and policies, such as education, must include all three empowerment components in order to sustain transformative outcomes for the well-being of girls, boys, and women (CARE USA, 2006). In their programs and impact measurement, they attempt to address not only girls' and women's agency, but, very importantly, the structures that inhibit capabilities, and the relations that foster collective support and struggle for equality. For example, the CARE educational program in these communities in Bangladesh particularly targets community members and teachers as critical actors who either foster or prevent the empowerment of girls through education. They do not assume that girls can learn about their rights and act on them alone to make changes in their lives. They recognize that collective actions of women and men are critical to the well-being of children. In addition, they aim to address specific social

conditions of violence and discrimination that affect girls and women in these communities through discussions and actions of key community members; and they address gendered norms and attitudes of teachers through ongoing professional development about the conditions that affect girls and boys differently.

*The Communities*

This study was conducted in seven villages in Sunamganj District in Sylhet, on the northern border with India. Sylhet is the region with the highest percentage of 15-to-19-year-olds with no education (Schuler, 2007, p. 182). The environmental conditions and social structures vary considerably in these villages, given the topography, social background of families, and resources available. The district is a flood plain and most villages are flooded for several months each year, making boat the primary means of transportation. Each of the villages has a government and/or NGO primary school, and a secondary school is located in the sub-district center. Most of the villages in this study are inhabited by Muslim Bengalis, and the literacy rate ranges from 20 to 40%. Two villages are distinct; in one the villagers are primarily of Garo ethnicity, and the other is Hindu. In the Garo community, the literacy rate is about 20%; in the Hindu community, the literacy rate is nearly 80%. The primary occupations in the villages are agriculture, fishing, and casual wage labor. The villages are a considerable distance from the central town, ranging from 3 to 10 hours away by boat, and many of the villages are severely affected by flooding each year, causing considerable out-migration of families (Barkat et al, 2009).

*Participants*

This analysis includes data from 78 school-age children who were chosen to participate in this study based on the following criteria: (1) they were girls and boys in grades 3-5; and 2) they were girls and boys who had dropped out from these grades in the past year. Among the 78 participants, there were 40 male and 38 female students (Table I).

Demographics		No.	%
Gender	Female	40	51
	Male	38	49
School-going	School-going	50	64
	Drop-out	28	36
Class	3	4	5
	4	21	27
	5	25	32
	Not in school	28	36
Ethnicity	Bangla	64	82
	Garo	11	14
	Barman	3	4
Religion	Muslim	49	63
	Hindu	18	23
	Christian	11	14

Table I. Demographics of school-age girls and boys in this study.

Fifty children (65%) were attending school in grades 3-5, and 28 children (35%) had dropped out of school. In this region of Bangladesh, there are two groups that are often considered ‘marginalized’: the ethnic tribes, including the Garo and Barman, and Hindus. Eighteen percent of the children (14 children) in this study were Garo or Barman. Sixty-three percent of the children identified as Muslim, while 23% identified as Hindu and 13% as Christians. Forty-four mothers and fathers were also interviewed for this study, as well as nine teachers from schools in each of these communities.

In addition, 11 community groups comprised of community elders, and members of the school management and other village committees were also interviewed.

### *Methods*

The methods and analysis used in this study were informed by a feminist perspective. Beetham & Demetriades (2007) suggest considering power relations in the everyday lives of males and females in the process of research as well as using qualitative methods to understand empowerment and other sensitive issues, such as gender-based violence (p. 200). Questions were designed to reflect the conceptual framework of social conditions or structures, relations, and agency that affect educational well-being.

The school-age children's interview included closed- and open-ended questions that aimed to understand what they valued about education as well as the conditions they regarded as limiting their educational well-being. Each interview lasted an hour to one-and-a-half hours. Questions related to material or physical conditions asked about access to clean water, adequate amount of food, and a healthy environment. Social conditions were examined through understanding issues of safety in their home, school, and community, norms and beliefs about gender equality, and the quality of education. The relational dimension included support from family, community members, and teachers, as well as their interactions with teachers and peers in school. Lastly, questions about agency included the perceptions of children regarding rights to basic needs, such as education and healthy and safe environments, as well as their perceived capabilities to enact those rights.

Girls and boys also participated in separate focus groups and discussed what they liked and didn't like about school. Participatory learning methods included drawing and sharing pictures and stories of safe and unsafe areas in the school and community, as well as telling stories about the people who support their education. Similar interview and focus-group questions were asked in separate groups of mothers, fathers, and community members. The interviews and focus groups were conducted in Bangla and a local dialect, with data collectors who were familiar with the communities. The interviewers were Bengali researchers and NGO staff with whom we had worked to develop the interview protocol, to translate and pilot the questions, and to agree on critical meanings of the questions. The data from the interviews and focus groups were translated and coded by Bangladeshi researchers.

### *Analysis*

We analyzed closed-ended questions using a cluster analysis to understand which children in this study grouped together around similar conditions related to educational well-being. Cluster analysis is 'a way of grouping cases of data based on the similarity to several variables' (Field, 2000, p. 1). This analysis technique was considered useful because we aimed to identify underlying social and material conditions that girls and boys perceive as important to their educational well-being. Based on their responses, this technique clustered children who have similar response patterns to the questions related to structures, relations, and agency. The clusters were limited to two to reflect positive and negative response patterns. The positive responses represents the group of children who enjoy favorable conditions related to their educational well-being, whereas the negative responses reflect conditions that marginalize children and do not foster educational well-being. For most questions, many children answered positively about their education. However, a substantial number of students responded negatively to questions related to safety, educational support, and relevance of education. To further understand these positive and negative responses, we analyzed the qualitative data for gendered patterns related to educational well-being in these villages. We argue on the basis of these findings that despite the increase in the number of girls in school in Bangladesh, educational inequities persist and these inequities illustrate gendered patterns.

### Conditions that Marginalize or Empower

In these villages in Bangladesh, most of the children who participated in this study were aware of their rights to education, as well as their rights to adequate food, clean water, and safety in their environment. Having these rights and being aware of them are important conditions that enable empowerment. Knowing their rights, however, was distinguished from acting on these rights or being able to achieve well-being from the rights. Less than a quarter of the children felt they could act on or achieve well-being through these rights, while the other children stated they were not able to act on their rights to education or to a healthy and safe environment. More girls than boys suggested they could not act on these rights. In our analysis of the groups of children who are marginalized or empowered through conditions affecting educational well-being, we found nearly a third of the girls and boys stated they felt unsafe in school, at home, and in the community. Similarly, nearly a third of the children did not feel supported in their education by their parents, teachers, or community members. Finally, education was not regarded as relevant to the current or future lives of a third of the children (Table II). We examine below these conditions that foster educational well-being for some children, and those that marginalize others.

Themes	Clusters	No.	%
Safety	Safe	46	69
	Unsafe	21	31
Support	Supported	48	74
	Not supported	17	26
Relevancy	Relevant	53	68
	Not relevant	17	32

Table II. Clusters of children around common themes.

#### *Physical Safety and Gender-Based Violence*

Despite gender parity in access to schools having been achieved, this study reveals that being safe and free from violence affects the educational well-being of girls and boys. School as a safe space is critical not only for these children to attend classes, but also to learn and to play with other children. Most children liked school and felt good about learning, especially when their parents encouraged them to go to school. Likewise, not being punished or harassed by a teacher, other students, and parents because they have not been able to do their school work was important to these children. Finally, not being harassed or violated because they are being educated also mattered, especially for girls.

While being schooled did not result in feeling unsafe for many children, nearly a third of the children (21 students) in these communities stated they felt unsafe at home, in school, and in their community (Table III).

		Safe	Unsafe
Sex	Boys	26	7
	Girls	20	14
School-going	School-going	35	14
	Drop-out	11	7

Table III. Safety and violence as perceived by groups of children.

The number of girls who felt unsafe is double the number of boys, and many of the children who felt unsafe are also going to school. More than 50% of the girls in these communities who participated in the study said they did not feel they could enact their rights to be protected from abuse and violence in the community, school, or home. Girls and their parents stated that school and the way to school are not safe places, and the majority of girls stated that they could not move



freely around the community out of fear for their safety. They expressed concerns about being harassed on the way to school. 'Eve-teasing' is a euphemism for public sexual harassment that is regarded as a common social behavior by boys and men toward girls and women. It was a concern often mentioned by girls, who stated that they felt uncomfortable in situations in which they encountered it. In one community, girls recounted stories of being teased and solicited by boys and men as they passed through a market on the way to school, inhibiting some of them from going to school, or resulting in them being prohibited by their parents from going to school.

In addition to safety issues directly related to school, many mothers whom we interviewed also felt that they and their girls were not protected from abuse and violence in the community. Nearly half of male and female community members felt that girls could not enact their right to be protected from abuse and violence. Girls were most often concerned with being a victim of violent acts, such as acid throwing. Acid throwing is a form of domestic violence in which a husband or other male family member throws acid on the face or other body parts of female family members, which burns and deforms them. The victim often survives and endures long-term emotional, psychological, and physical challenges, including living in secret to avoid shame. In Bangladesh, adolescent women have been a target of this violence, despite it now being a criminal act. The underlying causes for these violent acts may be the desire to deter girls from changing social norms by such ways as choosing to be educated (Schuler, 2007).

While the safety issues affecting girls tended to be associated with sexual intimations as young girls are approaching puberty and are regarded as 'opportunities' for marriage, boys were concerned about being beaten by the teacher or their peers or at home for not listening or for not doing their work. These statements reveal that girls and women are most concerned about sexual and/or domestic violence, while boys' concerns were related to being disciplined for school and home behaviors related to achieving in school. Girls and women in these communities not only suggested a lack of agency to act to protect their safety, they were also aware of the gendered norms, the structures in these communities that perpetuated discrimination and a lack of well-being. While they discussed these issues, they also found it difficult to make them visible to the community and to transform them.

#### *Support, or Lack of Support, for Education*

Building schools in communities and providing stipends have helped Bangladesh to greatly increase enrollment and achieve parity. These resources or material conditions are crucial in terms of enabling many children to obtain an education. A group of children acknowledged that support from their parents and the community was critical to their participation in school. Most often monetary support was considered necessary to have school materials as well as tutoring. Other children stated that the provision of transportation by boat is an important contribution by the community, and still others stated that having enough food to eat was important for schooling. Some children who did not have enough food either did not attend school or were not allowed to attend school, as they needed to help to get food for the family. Beyond monetary resources, however, the boys and girls were aware of the emotional and learning support needed for their educational well-being. Relational support of family, the community, and teachers is also necessary. Half the children suggested that their parents support them by asking them to go to school on time and to do their homework. One boy noted that his family supports his education by having him do less housework, including preparing food. For many children, they felt they could get help or advice from the community or elder family members as a critical support factor. However, most children felt there was only moderate support for their schooling in the form of small stipends, or emotionally through encouragement from the community, and girls tended to feel less support than boys. Children also recognized the importance of the support, or lack thereof, from teachers. For example, in one school, a girl talked about being afraid that the teacher would get angry when she asked questions about something that she did not understand.

While government stipend programs are targeted at these villages, it appears that these resources are not allocated to the children who most need support. Girls, particularly secondary-age girls, have been the focus of the government stipend programs. In these communities, however, primary-age girls are still vulnerable to not having support for their education, and

support is a persistent gendered problem. A group of children are marginalized by material and relational conditions that do not support their education. Seventeen children, or 26% of those in the communities with whom we spoke, stated they were not supported by the community for their education, nor did they feel their teachers or family encouraged them to study (Table IV). More than half of the students who did not feel supported were girls, and the majority of them identified as Muslims. Mothers and fathers who participated in focus groups acknowledged that girls more than boys are not able to exercise their right to education. Additionally, 80% of parents and community members expressed support for boys' schooling, whereas only 44% supported girls' schooling.

		Supported	Not supported
Sex	Boys	25	5
	Girls	23	12
School-going	School-going	40	9
	Drop-out	8	8
Religion	Muslim	26	15
	Hindu	16	2
	Christian	6	0

Table IV. Support, or lack thereof, for education as perceived by groups of children.

Girls' concerns for a lack of support were distinct from boys'. Girls stated they had to stay home or did not have as much time to do homework because they were asked to do housework. Being punished for not working at home was also a concern of girls, whereas boys were not supported to go to school or study because they were needed for work outside the home, including doing paid labor, such as fishing. These boys were also keenly aware that they did not have enough food; while girls did not suggest a lack of food to be a problem, they might have different expectations than boys do about what and how much they should receive. Another critical way in which girls were not as supported in their schooling was through tutoring. Money to support tutoring was provided more often to boys, and this support is linked with fathers making decisions about education, particularly monetary expenditures for education. While costs of tutoring differentiated girls' and boys' opportunities for it, reasons for not tutoring girls went beyond monetary support. Another reason for not supporting girls to be tutored is the concern that they may be sexual harassed by young men who serve as tutors for the villages. Nearly a quarter of the parents also felt that teachers treated boys better than girls - they engaged boys and provided more direct learning to them in classes.

These findings of differential support for girls' and boys' education are similar to Raynor's (2008) research with parents and children in Bangladesh, and Schuler's (2007) study examining changes in gender norms in Bangladesh: they concluded that gender norms related to educating girls or boys have not substantively changed. Even though more girls are going to school than in past decades, they do not get equal support to go to school – particularly relational support to learn, achieve and become an educated woman.

#### *Relevant or Not Useful Education*

Obtaining a certain level of education or simply being enrolled in basic education, while regarded as positive indicators of educational success for Bangladesh, may be an indicator of educational well-being only for some children. Despite high enrollments in primary grades, nationally only 54% of all primary children survived to grade 5 (Global Monitoring Report, 2006). In the surveyed communities, achievement of basic competencies was even lower. Nearly 50% of boys and girls received marks of less than 20% in grades 1-5, with girls having slightly lower marks overall. Girls were also slightly less represented in the higher-achieving categories. Given that secondary schools are located in the sub-district towns, which are generally several hours away by water and road

transportation, only some of these children will have the opportunity to enroll in secondary school. Children who regarded their education as relevant and important for their well-being suggested that by being able to read Bangla and do math, they could assist their parents in work, tutor their siblings, or find a job.

For some children in these villages, going to school was not sufficient for their educational and overall well-being. Nearly one-third of the children in this study responded negatively to questions about whether education would provide better opportunities, help their families, or be useful for their future, indicating that their experiences and learning in school are not relevant to their lives (Table V). More than half of the children who did not regard their education as useful or relevant were girls. These children also felt they did not learn well in math, Bangla, or English. Most children who felt education was not relevant or useful are school-going. This finding suggests that a substantial number of students, and particularly girls, in school do not consider education as helpful as it could be for their lives. This suggests a need to examine the educational conditions (Unterhalter, 2005) and the gender responsiveness of the educational curriculum and pedagogy, as well as the norms and discourse taking place in schools and the community.

		Relevant	Not-relevant
Gender	Boys	28	7
	Girls	25	10
School-going	School-going	39	14
	Drop-out	5	12
Ethnicity	Bangla	43	14
	Garo	7	3
	Balman	3	0

Table V. Relevant or not useful education as perceived by groups of children.

In these villages in Bangladesh, the educational curriculum and pedagogy do not include or critically examine alternative gender roles and norms related to learning and the future opportunities for girls and boys. Raynor (2008) illustrates how the official discourse for nearly a hundred years, and continuing today, portrays education for girls as being important to make them into good wives and mothers. She argues that the curriculum does not disrupt these commonly held ideas about gendered roles. While teachers tend to be supportive of girls and do not overtly discriminate against them, our observations in classrooms suggest that they do not directly address gender roles or norms in their lessons. The roles, norms, and attitudes within the communities reinforce the idea that schooling is not necessary for most girls and that if a girl is schooled, it is in order to be a better wife. All the women from these communities worked in unpaid household labor, and another 20% also had paid work, such as trading. Males in the community worked as traders, paid laborers or farmers. The lack of support and the perceived irrelevancy of education, particularly for girls, suggest the persistent gendered norms and attitudes about how education is not necessary in girls' lives. While some boys also stated that education was not relevant for their lives, the reasons often discussed related to the lack of skills needed to work in fishing or farming, the two sectors of paid labor in these communities. In this case, education holds value if it supports boys and men's well-being in productive labor.

Using education to achieve well-being in these children's lives, or alternatively being marginalized in and through education, depends on material structures, norms and relational support that are gendered. Being empowered through education depends on structural and relational supports particularly from fathers and mothers, as well as from community members. Family support is both material and emotional, such as providing financial support for school materials and tutoring, as well as giving encouragement to study at home. Community support was often relational and emotional, consisting of giving advice, providing inspiration for learning, and not deterring them from studying. This relational support was often gendered and calls attention to the gendered power relations that affect the everyday lives of girls and boys. Those

who are marginalized, and more often girls, do not experience the same material and relational support for schooling.

Relational support for schooling was linked to a sense of safety and being free from violence in regard to schooling. Those who felt education can foster well-being in their lives did not feel unsafe or concerned about violence. Most concerns of safety and violence stemmed from gender discrimination and social norms, in particular with regard to girls' future roles as wives rather than educated women.

Finally, education that fosters well-being for girls and boys in these communities needs to be linked to relevant and applicable work that improves the lives of families. These findings illustrate the gendered educational conditions of schooling – curriculum and pedagogy that are not linked to girls' and boys' lives, and that do not offer alternative possibilities for the future well-being, particularly of girls.

The findings presented here illustrate an alternative way of understanding marginalization and empowerment through education. Data from girls and boys in these rural communities in Bangladesh suggest that educational well-being needs to include a safe learning environment, material and relational support from families and community members, and relevant education that is gender sensitive and offers opportunities for well-being for young women and men.

### Discussion

How does this analysis, drawing on data from marginalized villages in Bangladesh, further our understanding of marginalization and empowerment for girls and boys? We suggest that an analysis of marginalization as defined by the extent of education, or by the group identity one has, is insufficient for understanding the underlying conditions and causes that perpetuate inequalities. As the Global Monitoring Report notes in its conclusion, we need to understand the underlying causes, or the 'drivers of marginalization' (UNESCO, 2010, p. 272). It further states that the disadvantages experienced by young girls, ethnic minorities, or children with disabilities are reinforced by *different* social attitudes and structures. It continues that 'understanding these differences is important because, to be successful, interventions against marginalization have to target specific underlying causes that blanket interventions may miss (UNESCO, 2010, p. 272). This analysis of these persistent gendered inequalities related to safety, support, and the relevancy of education has implications for the policies and strategies that the government of Bangladesh and NGOs take up with regard to achieving the EFA goals.

This approach and analysis reveals that the concerns about violence and abuse are critical to girls' educational well-being. These concerns reflect broader gender-based violence and inequalities in Bangladesh. Almost 50% of Bangladeshi girls are estimated to be married before the age of 19, which is the highest percentage in South Asia, and the protection of women's physical integrity is extremely low (World Health Organization, n.d.). In studies of gender-based violence in Bangladesh, half to two-thirds of women report having experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives (Bates et al, 2004). Perhaps the broad social changes that have occurred in Bangladesh have resulted in a backlash and increased violence. Schuler et al (1998), in their study of women's micro-credit programs in Bangladesh, suggest that violence can be an unfortunate consequence of shifting gender norms and roles. Men who were not able to provide for their family financially, when their wives were able to through micro-credit programs, were infuriated as they felt they were no longer the breadwinner; as a result, the incidence of domestic violence increased. This shift in roles among men and women and the social responses to it can inform some of the attitudes persisting with regard to girls' education. If education for girls is valued more than being a good wife, this shift in value of girls' education affects the roles that men play. For instance, a shift in men's role might include providing emotional supporting for wives who work in the labor market, or sharing in financial decision-making.

Beyond seeing violence and abuse as a problem for women and girls, these issues call for greater attention to relations between women and men as well as to the dominant norms of masculinities and femininities (Dunne et al, 2006). For example, what is expected of girls/women and boys/men with regard to their roles and behaviors in school and at home? How are girls and boys to be cared for and disciplined at home and in school? How can these roles and norms be less rigid and serve

girls and boys in their educational well-being? These issues must be addressed in the community and school, as curriculum and school policies are only partially effective in creating change (Dunne et al, 2006).

In addition, attitudes about the relevancy of education for girls' future lives suggest that while changes are occurring with regard to women's representation in the workforce in Bangladesh (Kabeer, 2000), a lack of workforce opportunities in these communities, and attitudes that suggest women's roles are in the home, reinforce a concern about the relevance of education. Given the lack of work opportunities in general in the communities (nearly 50% of men and women said they did not have access to paid employment in their communities), education may be limited as a transformative catalyst for empowering women socially and economically in these communities.

These findings also have implications for how educational innovations address gendered inequalities, as materialized through teachers' attitudes about girls and boys, as well as for how the gendered beliefs are manifested in the curriculum and pedagogy. Attitudes about girls' ability to learn and their perception of the value of learning for future opportunities, while having distinct characteristics in these Bangladeshi villages, are also found in studies across many countries. Parental attitudes and encouragement to learn, particularly in math and sciences, are related to opportunity structures for future learning and work (e.g. Baker & Jones, 1993) as well as to attitudes and influences of teachers and schools (Wiseman et al, 2009). These studies suggest that in much of the world, parents, teachers, girls, and boys hold different attitudes about girls' and boys' learning ability and opportunities to use that learning, which may in turn affect girls' and boys' participation in and outcomes from schooling. In Bangladesh, while considerable attention has been given to supporting girls to attend school through stipends, much less attention has been given to gendered beliefs and norms in pedagogy and the curriculum. This is an area for further development by the government, NGOs, and communities.

Finally, the findings from this study confirm and further our understanding of capabilities that matter for gender equality. Walker (2007), in her list of capabilities for gender equality, suggests that safety, or bodily integrity, is critical. This study illustrates how feeling a sense of safety and not having fear of violence matter for girls' well-being, and that when conditions to ensure safety do not exist, girls are marginalized in their educational well-being. Social relations comprises another capability that Walker (2007) suggests. While Walker does not specifically address family and community members' support, we find that this matters in girls' lives. This finding extends an important conceptual issue in the capabilities approach for gender equality – namely, that not only does supportive relations constitute a valued capability that can be individually transformed into well-being, but relations are also affected by the social conditions in which girls and boys can exercise agency, or agency freedoms (Sen, 1999, 2009; Unterhalter, 2005). Likewise, the relevancy of education is also an educational condition that matters in empowering or marginalizing. This analysis is an attempt to respond to the lack of specification of these social conditions that matter, in addition to stating what we know about individual aspirations or capabilities that a girl or boy has reason to value (Unterhalter, 2003). Empowerment from a capabilities approach is more than the individual girl aspiring to be or becoming an educated woman; critically important are the societal structures and conditions for educated women that address broader equity concerns for achieving well-being.

In conclusion, we offer an alternative to dominant analyses of marginalization by showing what girls and boys in rural villages in Bangladesh value with regard to their educational well-being, and what they understand as conditions that marginalize. We suggest that a capabilities approach, integrated with a critical feminist perspective on empowerment, allows us to understand structures and relations that marginalize or empower girls and boys differently.

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