

A chance to dream

SHAMPA wants to be a banker when she grows up. She's studying commerce in school, and it's her strong suit. But she's worried that she'll never be able to realize her dream. Less than a year ago, her father, a day labourer and the family's primary breadwinner, had a debilitating accident that turned her world upside down.

While the family was still reeling from the catastrophe, Shampa went to stay with her aunt, who had a solution. At 15 years old, Shampa would be married.

"Baba and Ma couldn't afford the expense of my education," Shampa explains between tears. "So they thought that one less family member would help – it would make things easier."

Shampa refused to cooperate. Determined to finish her education, she enlisted the support of a local 'adolescent club', a group of youth activists who have been organizing for greater government accountability and an end to child marriage in Bangladesh. All Shampa had to do was say the word, and the group sprang into action.

A posse of seven teens showed up at the doorstep of her family's two-room bamboo hut to lecture her parents on the risks of early

marriage. They explained that early pregnancy is associated with higher mortality rates for both mother and baby, that Shampa would be forced to spend her days doing household chores and that she would not be able to complete her education. They argued that if Shampa were to finish school, she would be in a better position to earn and support the family in the future. Finally – and this is what Shampa suspects did the trick – they reminded her parents that marriage before 18 is illegal in Bangladesh, and that this law is enforced.

In the end, her aunt's scheme did not come to pass. Still, the experience rattled Shampa. "Even now," she says, "when I recall those days, I get scared."

Shampa's parents have committed to supporting her through the end of the school year, so that she can attain her secondary school certificate, awarded at the end of Grade 10. But they say they cannot afford to sponsor her studies beyond that point.

Although primary school tuition is free in Bangladesh, making it through the secondary school system becomes difficult for many. Group tutoring, or 'coach-



ing' before or after school, is rampant, and most students consider it essential for success. In addition to textbooks, students rely heavily on supplementary study guides, which the school does not cover. And for the very poorest, attending school comes with the opportunity cost of lost income from work.

Shampa wishes she had the choice to work instead of getting married. "If I were a boy they would not have considered marrying me off...I could have started doing some job and supported my family." But there aren't many options for girls: "They can only work as a maid in the house." ■



PHOTO ESSAY

Education is not only about gaining access to school; learning is what counts. Rakib Hosain Sabbi, 9, a star cricketer at his primary school in Satkhira Sadar, receives tutoring after school. He would like to go on to secondary school and beyond, perhaps eventually becoming a doctor.

Investing in EDUCATION pays DIVIDENDS

IN the next 15 years, the world's population of 15- to 24-year-olds will increase by nearly 100 million. Most of these young people will be in Asia and Africa. They will be the parents who raise tomorrow's children, the workers who keep the global economy going, the leaders who determine what kind of world we live in.

Today, they are children. They urgently need the quality education to which they have a right – and the world urgently needs every one of them to get it.

On average, each additional year of education a child receives increases future earnings by about 10 per cent. Each additional year a country manages to keep its children in school can reduce that country's poverty rate by 9 per cent. Poorer countries see the highest returns.

Learning makes a real difference, too: If all children born in lower-middle-income countries today learned basic reading and math, their countries' GDPs could increase thirteen-fold over their lifetimes. Making sure that all children can acquire these skills would also create the conditions for more equitable patterns of growth, while increasing the size of the economy and reducing poverty.

If every child has the opportunity to enter adulthood with the skills needed to build a secure livelihood and participate fully in society, the effects could transform societies and economies. ■