



THE SCHOOL ACROSS THE RIVER

TEXT & PHOTOS: ZYMA ISLAM

Taslima, the eighth-grader, may not be one much longer and it has nothing to do with getting promoted to the next class.

"I'm going to get her married, I can't afford the boat fare she needs to go to school," says her mother, a weather-beaten woman who is all skin and bones. Taslima's goes to Haji MA Jahan High School which lies across a floodplain. "For six months a year, there is no water and I can just walk across," says Taslima. The rest of the year she has to wait for a boat to appear.

Her eldest sister was married at 13 when she finished eighth grade and could no longer afford to take a boat to school. School for her was a bit further away. She had her first child at the age of 15, and got pregnant with her second when she was 17.

As is the norm with underage mothers who drop out of school early, she too had little knowledge on what is required for a healthy pregnancy. "I delivered my babies at home because nobody advised me to go to the hospital," says the sister, Moushumi Akhter. She had only one pre-natal check-up done when she tripped and fell in the water. Even when she was

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pregnant at 15, nobody saw it as a risk and took her to a hospital.

The link between accessibility to education and early marriage is undeniable but is best illustrated by the

fact that Taslima and Moushumi's family would much rather have kept their girls in school.

Their 17-year-old middle sister Murshida, for example, passed her SSC exams and is now going to 11th grade at a college further inland just out of sheer will. "I needed to reserve an entire boat for Tk 100 to take me to school yesterday because there were no ferry-boats in sight. My father barely earns that in a whole day, and I just wasted it going to school," laments the girl.

So strong is her desire to keep her daughters in school that her mother Honufa Begum had crossed the village to seek out this correspondent when she heard that a journalist was going around asking questions about child marriage. While other women hid their underage daughter-in-laws out of sight of the cameras, Honufa Begum just had one wish—to find a way to pay for Taslima's ferry-fare.

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high school. Even among that tiny population, women are more prone to complete secondary education compared to men, according to the study.

The sisters live in a village called Matikata in Sunamganj that can very easily contend for paradise-on-earth. The villages are surrounded by haors littered with seasonal white water-lilies that children pick while wading their way to school in waist-deep swamps.

The region lies in a valley and is flanked by the cloud-topped mountains of Meghalaya. For most of the year, rapid creeks wash coal and fertile silt downstream, which in monsoon, whimsically swells up to destroy.

Each year when the waters rise, the haors and surrounding areas go underwater for months at a time. Sometimes it is high enough to trigger evacuation; other times it is just bad enough to impede transportation. One thing stays in common though, every time the weather takes a turn for the worse, children going to school are among the first to be affected. Either the schools are under-water themselves, or the roads leading to them are under-water, or the schools end up being used