

Journal of **Education and Practice** (JEP)

**Non-Formal Education in Bangladesh: Policy Gaps and
Employment-Linked Solutions**



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Non-Formal Education in Bangladesh: Policy Gaps and Employment-Linked Solutions

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Accepted: 20th April, 2025, Received in Revised Form: 24th May, 2025, Published: 21st Jun, 2025

Abstract

Purpose of the Study: The primary purpose of this study is to examine the current landscape of the Non-Formal Education (NFE) system in Bangladesh by identifying key policy and implementation gaps that hinder its effectiveness. It aims to explore how these gaps impact learners' ability to acquire market-relevant skills and access decent employment opportunities.

Research Methodology: This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the challenges faced by students in Non-Formal Education (NFE) programs. Ten case studies were randomly selected from two NFE centers; Shikhon Kendra and Pathsala in the Kalshi slum area of Dhaka, with five students from each center. Data collection methods included face-to-face interviews, two focus group discussions with learners and practitioners, and field observations. Both open- and close-ended questionnaires were used, and tools were pre-tested for validity. Secondary data from policy documents, NGO reports, employment statistics, and academic literature supplemented the primary data. Thematic analysis was applied to organize and interpret the findings in line with the study objectives.

Findings: The study identified key policy gaps limiting the effectiveness of NFE in Bangladesh, including the absence of a legal framework, inadequate funding, and poor integration with formal education. Socio-economic barriers like child labor, early marriage, and poverty further hinder participation. A strong demand exists for skill-based, inclusive, and employment-linked programs. The findings highlight the urgent need for standardized policies, curriculum reform, and greater community and labor market engagement.

Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy: This study advances theoretical understanding by highlighting the complex socio-economic and structural barriers that influence the effectiveness of Non-Formal Education (NFE) in marginalized urban settings. The study offers context-specific insights from learners and educators, emphasizing the need for skill-based, flexible, and inclusive curricula aligned with current labor market demands.

Keywords: *Non-Formal Education, challenge, Policy Gaps, SDG 4, SDG 8*

1. Introduction

Education is globally believed to be the foundation of a nation, which enables sustainable development and social justice. In order to strengthen this foundation and offer equal opportunities of learning to all, Bangladesh has implemented a Non-Formal Education (NFE) policy. This program is particularly designed to cater to the poor, oppressed, and disadvantaged groups of people who remain neglected by the formal schooling system. NFE is a powerful instrument for education equity, working to close gaps among advantaged and disadvantaged populations. Open to innovation—flexible enough to reach students of any age, ability, and background—NFE is a valuable tool for reaching diverse population segments. Both governmental and non-governmental agencies are actively endeavoring a number of NFE projects, in the direction of making significant advancement in expanding access to basic education. However, despite such achievements, the system continues to be plagued by some persisting issues. Some of these issues include school dropouts, early marriage, child labor, untrained teachers, and lack of adequate skilled human resources. The study seeks to identify and explore the key issues in the current NFE model. By establishing the real learning barriers confronting the learners, the study aspires to put forth empirical and pragmatic recommendations to enhance NFE programs. In the long run, the study imagines assisting in the development of a more responsive, inclusive, and efficient non-formal education system that meets Bangladesh's most vulnerable learners' evolving needs.

2. Overview: Definition of Non-Formal Education

Non-formal education is structured educational activity outside the formal education system. It is flexible, easy to access, and usually oriented to marginalized groups, school dropouts, underprivileged and adults. Non-formal education refers to a structured and intentional form of learning that takes place outside traditional formal education institutions. It is specifically designed to address the educational needs of disadvantaged individuals of various ages and backgrounds. NFE is flexible in terms of its structure, timing, and delivery, and may include basic literacy, continuing education, life skills, vocational training, and general knowledge. Its ultimate aim is to promote lifelong learning, reduce poverty by enhancing earning potential, and ensure equity in access to education and human resource development.

Non-Formal Education (NFE) in Bangladesh plays a vital role in reaching out to marginalized, out-of-school, and disadvantaged populations, particularly children, youth, and adults who are excluded from the formal education system. Recognizing the importance of inclusive and lifelong learning, the Government of Bangladesh has taken several initiatives to institutionalize and expand NFE. The Non-Formal Education Bureau (BNFE), established in 2005 under the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME), is the primary agency responsible for coordinating NFE activities nationwide. The policy framework guiding NFE is grounded in the National Education Policy 2010, which emphasizes basic education for all and lifelong learning opportunities. Additionally, the Non-Formal Education Act 2014 (drafted but not yet passed into law) aims to

provide legal recognition and standardization for NFE, though its absence remains a major policy gap.

Key components of the current NFE policy framework include:

Basic literacy and numeracy programs

Skills development and vocational training

Life skills education, including health, hygiene, and gender awareness

Equivalency programs for reintegration into formal education

Bangladesh's NFE efforts are closely aligned with international commitments such as SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Despite progress, the sector faces persistent challenges, including limited funding, lack of coordination among stakeholders, poor quality assurance mechanisms, and weak linkage with the formal education and employment sectors. To strengthen NFE, there is an urgent need for a legally binding policy framework, increased investment, curriculum reform, and better monitoring and evaluation systems.

3. Current Scenario of Non-Formal Education in Bangladesh

Current Situation of Non-Formal Education in Bangladesh the Government of Bangladesh has adopted Non-Formal Education (NFE) as a key component of its commitment to lifelong learning and Education for All (EFA). The Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE) within the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education is largely charged with the implementation of NFE. Designed to target those who are disadvantaged by the formal education system, NFE is geared towards enabling inclusive learning, reducing illiteracy, and empowering marginalized groups with vocational skills for improved livelihoods. More than 4 million students have been enrolled in basic literacy and continuing education courses under various NFE programs since 2014. These programs target disadvantaged children, youths, and adults who are unable to access or remain in formal education. The principal types of NFE programs in Bangladesh include: Basic Literacy Program (BLP) Continuing Education Program (CEP) Technical and Vocational Training Life Skills and Income-Generating Training Religious Education, e.g., certain Quami Madrasas, which, although non-formal in character, are yet to be formally encompassed within the NFE policy framework. There are presently approximately 10,000 NFE learning centers, of which most are operated by NGOs and community groups. These centers provide flexible, localized learning programs that are adaptable to the specific needs of disadvantaged groups. Non-formal education programs—particularly in urban areas like Dhaka—despite remarkable achievements, are faced with significant challenges. Case studies and focus group discussions in two Urban Community Learning Centers (UCLCs) reveal that the majority of the learners are rural migrant families now settled in urban slums. These were typically low-income families, and most of the children—especially boys—were child laborers, which resulted in irregular attendance, tiredness, and poor academic achievement. While women students are more visible in NFE centers due to targeted outreach, they too face systemic barriers to ongoing learning. The academic challenges are severe.

They include deficits of qualified teachers, poor classroom management, absence of assessment mechanisms, and minimal attention to extracurricular activities. Teachers often receive insufficient honorariums, thereby resulting in low motivation, poor curriculum implementation, and ineffective time management. Budget constraints also undermine the ability of institutions—such as Dhaka Ahsania Mission—to sustain co-curricular programs due to a lack of materials, qualified facilitators, and funds. Institutionally, the sector is confronted with ineffective monitoring, fragmentation of stakeholders and limited possibilities for educator training. It also has a high staff turnover rate, and lacks equivalency systems to facilitate NFE learners' transitions to formal education or work paths. The majority of the learners are not at age-appropriate levels of enrollment, and impoverished living conditions in slums also undermine their capacity to learn. Each of these challenges underscores the urgent necessity for systemic change, increased financial commitment, and stronger linkages between work and education. Only then can non-formal education truly fulfill its role as an inclusive and empowering influence on Bangladesh's development process.

Table 1: Key Challenges of Non-Formal Education Programs in Dhaka

Category	Challenges Identified
Socio-Demographic	Rural-to-urban migration, slum residence, age-inappropriate enrollment, child labor
Academic	Untrained teachers, poor pedagogy, lack of assessment, weak classroom management
Institutional	Teacher demotivation due to low pay, high turnover, inadequate monitoring
Financial	Limited funding for activities, shortage of learning materials and trainers

4. Research Methodology:

This study follows a qualitative research approach, employing the case study method to gain in-depth insights into the challenges and experiences of students enrolled in Non-Formal Education (NFE) programs. The research draws upon a combination of primary and secondary data sources. A total of ten case studies were selected using the simple random sampling method from the population of students enrolled in NFE programs in the Kalshi slum area of Dhaka city. Data were collected from two non-formal education centers: Shikhon Kendra (Outreach Children Program under the Non-Formal Education Bureau) and Pathsala with five individual case studies selected from each center. To gather detailed and authentic perspectives, the study utilized face-to-face interviews and conducted two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving learners and NFE practitioners. Both open-ended and close-ended questionnaires were used as tools for data collection, and all instruments were pre-tested to ensure clarity and relevance. Field visits were carried out to collect first-hand observations and narrative data. The information gathered was then

categorized and analyzed based on thematic characteristics and aligned with the study objectives. To complement the primary data, a wide range of secondary sources were reviewed, including policy documents such as BNFE reports, the EFA National Review, and NGO publications from organizations like BRAC, CAMPE, and Dhaka Ahsania Mission. Additionally, the study utilized employment statistics from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), as well as relevant research articles, theses, books, ministry reports, newspapers, and official websites to enrich the theoretical framework.

5. Policy Gaps in Non-Formal Education (NFE) in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the non-formal education (NFE) sector is hindered by critical policy and structural gaps that limit its effectiveness and reach. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2010 sets ambitious goals for providing education to marginalized and out-of-school populations, its implementation remains weak due to the absence of a legally binding framework. The delay in enacting a dedicated Education Act to enforce these policy commitments leaves many children, particularly those in vulnerable communities, without access to quality second-chance education.

Key Policy Gaps in NFE Implementation

1. Lack of Enforcement Mechanism

One of the most pressing gaps is the absence of a legal framework to operationalize NEP recommendations. As highlighted by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) KIX initiative, without a formal Education Act, the NEP's goals remain largely aspirational rather than actionable.

2. Inadequate Funding

Sustained and sufficient financial support for NFE programs is lacking. The Financial Express reports that funding constraints especially affect programs targeting marginalized and out-of-school children, limiting their scope and sustainability.

3. Curriculum and Quality Assurance

Although programs like BRAC's Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) have shown success in reintegrating learners into formal schooling, the sector lacks a standardized, quality-assured curriculum. This inconsistency affects the learning outcomes across different providers.

4. Weak Integration with the Formal Education System

Some NFE initiatives enable transitions to formal education. However, there is no robust national mechanism to ensure a smooth and consistent pathway, leading to frequent dropouts among learners who attempt to re-enter the formal system after NFE participation.

5. Limited Community Engagement

Many NFE programs depend on community involvement, yet a systematic model for community participation—particularly in selecting teachers, managing centers, and choosing locations—remains underdeveloped.

6. Inadequate Attention to Diverse Needs

NFE initiatives often fail to address the specific needs of various vulnerable groups such as working children, those in remote or rural areas, and children with disabilities. A more inclusive approach is necessary to ensure equitable learning opportunities.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation Deficiencies

Though some mapping of NFE activities exists, the sector lacks a standardized and robust monitoring and evaluation system. This limits the ability to measure impact, ensure accountability, and improve program effectiveness over time.

8. Insufficient Capacity Building

The quality of instruction in NFE programs is compromised by a shortage of trained and motivated educators. Investment in teacher training and professional development is critical to improve learning outcomes and retention.

Examples Highlighting Implementation Gaps

Dropout Prevention: Despite NEP's call for extending primary education and introducing initiatives like midday meals, implementation has been inconsistent. As reported by Prothom Alo, this has contributed to persistently high dropout rates.

Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities: Although policy mentions inclusive education, its execution faces obstacles due to negative social attitudes, lack of resources, and insufficient training among teachers.

Second-Chance Education: While NGOs such as BRAC have pioneered successful second-chance learning programs, there is no unified national strategy to comprehensively support all out-of-school children, including those in remote areas or facing unique barriers

6. Field Study, Results, and Discussion

In Bangladesh, more than 1.4 million students are currently studying in Quami madrasas, which remain outside the purview of formal education governance. While these institutions provide religious education, they lack contemporary curricula, including life skills, technology education, and vocational training. As a result, madrasa graduates often find themselves disconnected from employment markets, with no recognized certification to pursue jobs or higher education in the formal sector. Most end up becoming madrasa teachers themselves or remain unemployed—highlighting a structural dead-end in the current system.

This study, conducted in the Kalshi slum of Dhaka city, aimed to understand the realities of children enrolled in Non-Formal Education (NFE) programs. Ten case studies were selected using

simple random sampling from two learning centers: Shikhon Kendra (run under the Non-Formal Education Bureau) and Pathsala. Five students were chosen from each center to provide a diverse perspective. Face-to-face interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with learners and guardians to gather both qualitative and contextual insights.

Key Findings from Student Interviews

Early Marriage and Dropouts (30%)

Many girls drop out between the ages of 15–16 due to early marriage. These students are pressured by cultural expectations and poverty, which lead families to consider marriage as a form of financial security. The education of these girls is abruptly halted, denying them both personal agency and future economic opportunities.

Child Labor Engagement (20%)

Among children aged 12–14, 20% drop out to support their families through work in informal sectors such as street vending, factories, or domestic work. This deprives them of a stable childhood and education, and subjects them to physical and mental strain.

Begging Among the Youngest (5%)

A small but alarming portion—5% of children aged 5–6—are involved in begging, often alongside their parents. These children are particularly vulnerable, and their exposure to public spaces without protection or learning greatly endangers their development.

Lack of Interest in School (50%)

Half of the student respondents reported that they do not enjoy school. Reasons include monotonous learning processes, lack of interactive teaching methods, and absence of play or creativity in the curriculum. This disengagement increases the likelihood of early dropout.

Negative Teacher Behavior (20%)

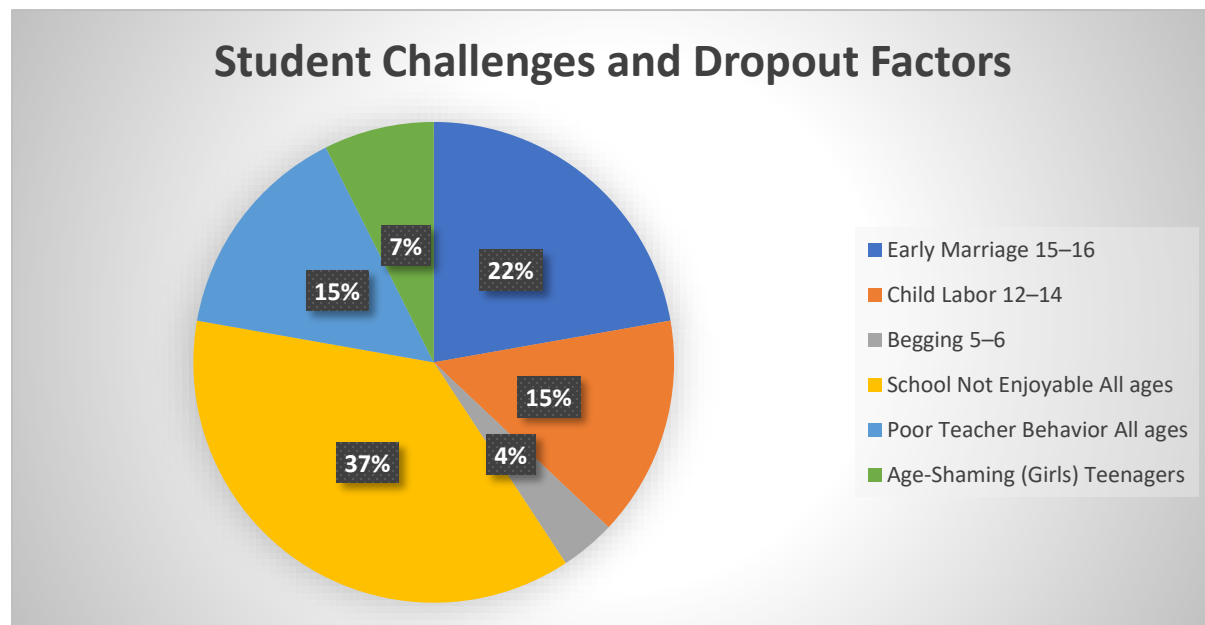
20% of students cited poor behavior by teachers, such as verbal scolding, disrespect, and lack of empathy, as a reason for skipping classes or feeling demotivated. This directly impacts students' self-esteem and willingness to participate in learning.

Age Shaming (10% of Girls)

A concerning 10% of female students reported facing age-shaming from peers or teachers. These students were often older than others in their class due to interrupted education. Instead of receiving support, they face ridicule or exclusion, which further discourages them from attending school.

Table 2: Student Challenges and Dropout Factors

Issue	Age Group	% of Respondents	Explanation
Early Marriage	15–16	30%	Cultural pressures and financial hardship lead families to marry off daughters
Child Labor	12–14	20%	Children forced to work to support household income
Begging	5–6	5%	Young children accompany parents in begging; deprived of safety and learning
School Not Enjoyable	All ages	50%	Lack of engaging teaching methods, no extracurricular activities
Poor Teacher Behavior	All ages	20%	Harsh discipline and lack of emotional support discourages student attendance
Age-Shaming (Girls)	Teenagers	10%	Older girls mocked for studying in lower classes, leading to dropout anxiety

**Figure 1: student challenges and dropout factors****Key Insights from Guardian Focus Group Discussions****Low-Income Households (80%)**

The vast majority—80% of guardians—reported working in low-paid jobs such as rickshaw-pulling, cleaning, or garment work. Their daily earnings are often insufficient to afford educational expenses, even when tuition is free.

Single-Parent Families (58%)

A significant 58% of the households are headed by single mothers, as fathers have either abandoned the family or are not taking financial responsibility. These mothers often juggle multiple jobs and struggle to support their children's education.

Need for Skills-Based Education

Many guardians expressed the desire for their children to learn vocational or technical skills, such as tailoring, mobile repair, or computer training, which could lead to income-generation in the future.

Teacher Quality and Behavior

Guardians highlighted the importance of trained and child-friendly teachers. They stressed that untrained teachers or those who humiliate children often push students away from school.

Link between Education and Employment

Families want assurance that education will lead to jobs or economic stability. Without visible benefits, they question the value of keeping their children in school.

Demand for a Supportive School Environment

Parents emphasized the need for extracurricular activities, nutritious food, clean classrooms, and psychosocial support. They believe a welcoming environment would encourage retention.

Financial and Material Support

Guardians proposed stipends, school meals, free uniforms, and learning materials to help reduce the economic burden of education.

Recommendation for ICT Training

Many parents suggested introducing ICT and computer literacy for children above a certain age. They see this as a gateway to modern job markets and digital inclusion.

Table 3: Guardian Perspectives and Recommendations

Issue / Suggestion	% of Guardians	Explanation
Low-Income Occupation	80%	Daily wage workers, no savings, cannot afford education-related costs
Single-Mother Households	58%	Fathers absent; women bearing all responsibilities, limiting support for education
Need for Vocational Education	Majority	Tailoring, electrical work, ICT to help youth find sustainable jobs
Demand for Quality Teachers	Majority	Trained, empathetic teachers critical for creating trust and engagement
Education Must Link to Employment	High	Families want visible job opportunities after completion of school
Need for Safe & Engaging School Settings	Majority	Clean, playful, and child-sensitive environments to reduce dropout
Financial Support and Incentives	High	Requests for stipends, meals, uniforms, books
ICT and Digital Literacy Recommendation	Significant	Suggested from age 13+ to prepare for tech-based work opportunities

7. Solutions and Recommendations

To strengthen the Non-Formal Education (NFE) system in Bangladesh and ensure its alignment with national development goals, especially SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), a set of actionable solutions are proposed. These recommendations are informed by field findings, guardian feedback, and analysis of national policy gaps.

1. Establish a Legal Framework for NFE

Bangladesh must enact a comprehensive Education Act that formally incorporates Non-Formal Education into the national education structure. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2010 includes NFE, its lack of legal enforceability has limited its practical impact. A legally binding framework would obligate the government and stakeholders to implement, monitor, and report on NFE programs and outcomes, ensuring consistency across the country.

2. Ensure Adequate and Sustained Funding

Sustainable financing is critical to expanding and improving NFE programs. The government should allocate a dedicated budget line for NFE under the national education budget, focusing particularly on vulnerable groups. Simultaneously, partnerships with development agencies, donor organizations, and private sector entities can mobilize additional resources. Funding should prioritize infrastructure, teacher salaries, materials, and learner support (e.g., meals, uniforms, stipends).

3. Standardize and Diversify the NFE Curriculum

There is an urgent need to design and implement a standardized NFE curriculum that ensures uniformity in quality and outcomes across different service providers. The curriculum should cover basic literacy and numeracy, life skills, civic values, health and hygiene, vocational and ICT skills. It should also be adaptable to learners' ages and learning needs, using interactive and play-based learning methods to improve retention.

4. Improve Teacher Recruitment and Training

Teachers are the backbone of any education system. NFE educators should be recruited from within the local communities to foster trust and understanding. They must be trained in inclusive, multi-grade teaching strategies, especially since learners in NFE centers often vary in age and ability. Training must emphasize compassion, positive reinforcement, and learner engagement. Regular refresher courses and performance-based incentives will boost teaching quality and commitment.

5. Link Education with Employment Opportunities

Non-formal education should directly contribute to improved livelihood prospects. This can be achieved by aligning NFE skill training with local job markets—such as tailoring, agriculture, mobile servicing, food processing, and freelancing. Training centers should establish partnerships with local enterprises to provide internships and apprenticeships. Additionally, learners should receive recognized certificates that can help them transition to the formal sector or access entrepreneurship support.

6. Promote Inclusive and Gender-Sensitive Learning Environments

NFE programs must be inclusive, ensuring access for girls, adolescents, working children, children with disabilities, and those from minority communities. Centers must be equipped with gender-sensitive facilities, flexible schedules, and supportive environments. Teachers must be trained to recognize and counteract age-shaming, gender bias, or any form of discrimination. Special psychosocial support should also be provided to learners facing trauma or emotional distress.

7. Integrate ICT and Digital Skills into NFE

Digital literacy is increasingly important in modern economies. ICT-based modules should be introduced into the NFE curriculum for learners aged 12 and above. These should include basic computer operation, internet navigation, and simple coding or digital entrepreneurship. NFE centers must be equipped with computer labs or mobile tech kits, especially in urban slums and rural areas. Partnerships with ICT companies can support equipment and content development.

8. Enhance Community Engagement and Awareness

Community participation is essential for the success and sustainability of NFE programs. Parents, guardians, and local leaders should be actively involved in managing centers, monitoring progress,

and encouraging student attendance. Awareness campaigns must be launched to highlight the importance of education, dispel misconceptions about NFE, and promote second-chance education as a valid path to success. Community ownership also fosters accountability and local solutions to local challenges.

9. Develop Strong Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

To ensure continuous improvement, NFE programs must be monitored through a centralized Management Information System (MIS) that captures enrollment, dropout, learning progress, and post-program outcomes. This should be supported by regular field visits, stakeholder consultations, and feedback loops. Data-driven decision-making will enhance accountability and ensure that policies respond effectively to ground realities.

10. Foster Coordination among Government, NGOs, and Stakeholders

Collaboration is key to scaling successful NFE initiatives. A national coordination body or platform should be established to unify efforts from the Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE), NGOs, INGOs, local government, and private sector partners. This body can streamline resource use, avoid duplication of services, share best practices, and push for unified policies and standards that serve all learners equally.

8. Conclusion

This study investigated the landscape of non-formal education (NFE) in Bangladesh with the objective of identifying key policy gaps and assessing how these gaps impact learners' access to relevant skills and employment opportunities. Grounded in qualitative methods, including policy review, interviews, and focus group discussions, the research provides evidence that, although NFE has improved access to education for marginalized populations, it remains constrained by systemic shortcomings. These include the absence of a legal framework for enforcement, insufficient funding, and lack of standardized curricula, limited integration with formal systems, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Field findings further illustrate how social and economic realities—such as early marriage, child labor, poverty, and school disengagement—undermine the effectiveness of NFE initiatives. Specifically, the research highlighted that students in slum areas and Quami madrasas face structural disadvantages due to a disconnect between the education provided and the skills demanded in the labor market. In parallel, parents and guardians expressed the urgent need for skill-based, inclusive, and flexible education aligned with modern employment trends, such as ICT training and vocational pathways. In line with Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), this study emphasizes the importance of enacting a legally binding education act to institutionalize and standardize NFE provision. The proposed recommendations—including capacity building, curriculum reform, employment linkage, and enhanced community engagement—seek to reframe NFE as a viable, lifelong learning system that supports equitable socio-economic development. The study successfully fulfilled its objectives by offering a comprehensive policy analysis,

documenting field-level realities, and proposing actionable, evidence-based reforms. Future research may benefit from longitudinal tracking of NFE learners to evaluate long-term impacts on employment and well-being.

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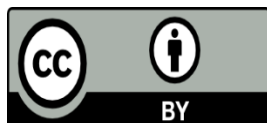
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