Beyond Circulars: How Shared Responsibility Can Change Society

Every government office in Bangladesh knows the circular. It arrives with a memo number, a date, and a clear instruction: ensure students attend school, prevent child marriage, keep drugs away from campuses.

Circulars matter. But anyone who has worked in the field knows that issuing an instruction is only the beginning. What happens next depends on whether people carry it into daily life.

The challenges facing young people cannot be solved by one office alone. Secondary-school dropout in Bangladesh was nearly 33 percent in 2023, according to BANBEIS. About half of Bangladeshi women aged 20 to 24 were married before turning 18, among the highest rates in Asia, UNICEF has reported. Families and teachers compete with smartphones for children's attention, while communities confront narcotics and groups of adolescents drawn into neighbourhood violence.

These problems are connected. A child who leaves school loses not only lessons but the daily support and protection school provides; for many girls, early marriage closes the door to education altogether. The risks grow in the space where the school's authority ends and the family's attention has not yet begun.

Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom used the term co-production to describe how public services work better when citizens contribute alongside public institutions. A school is not created by teachers alone. Parents, students, and the wider community all shape whether children attend, learn, and feel safe.

But partnership does not appear simply because an office announces it. Research in Jaunpur, India by Abhijit Banerjee,

Esther Duflo, and colleagues shows why. Informing villagers about their roles on school committees raised awareness but brought limited change. Real progress came when trained local volunteers were given a clear task: running reading classes. Participation needs structure, a practical role, and someone accountable for it.

Iceland offers another example. In 1998, 42 percent of Icelandic 15- and 16-year-olds reported having been drunk in the previous month; by 2016, the figure had fallen to 5 percent. The approach involved more than a single law: parents, schools, local authorities, and researchers worked together, with organised activities for young people and regular survey data to guide decisions.

The lesson is not that one model can simply be copied elsewhere. It is that government and community bring different strengths. Government provides direction, resources, and authority; communities offer trust, local knowledge, and steady daily attention. Neither is as effective alone.

I have seen a small version of this in my own work. With the guidance of the Pirojpur district administration, we developed a framework that assigned clear responsibilities to students, teachers, parents, and school governing bodies, and asked each to report on their work.

At Karimunnessa Girls' Secondary School, where I chaired the managing committee, we focused on practical barriers to attendance: regular parent-teacher meetings, bicycles for girls who lived far away, and basic hygiene support. Attendance improved, and the SSC pass rate rose from 65.4 percent in 2025 to 71.9 percent in 2026, even as the national rate fell from 68.5 to 62.3 percent. The headmaster attributed part of the improvement to these shared efforts.

We also brought teachers, journalists, women, young people, and local leaders together in a citizens' platform against narcotics, which carried awareness work into every union. Residents began reporting suspected drug activity more readily. These efforts belonged to no single office or person;

they gained strength because people came to see the problem as their shared responsibility.

Bangladesh already has many of the structures such work needs: school managing committees, parent-teacher associations, village courts under the Village Courts Act 2006, and committees under the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017. The challenge is to make them active partnerships rather than names on paper. Five principles can help.

First, give everyone a clear role. A parent who knows when a meeting will take place and why her presence matters is better placed to contribute, as is a teacher who knows that punctuality and attendance will be reviewed.

Second, make schools places where young people want to spend time. Libraries, sport, and cultural activities give adolescents something worthwhile to do after lessons.

Third, bring different voices to the same table. When teachers, religious leaders, journalists, women's groups, young people, and elected representatives speak together, messages about drugs or child marriage travel beyond the school compound.

Fourth, support families rather than blame them. Many parents in rural Bangladesh work long hours, migrate for employment, or had little chance to study themselves, and may not feel equipped to guide children through smartphones and social media. Courtyard meetings and regular contact with teachers help. Parents work with a school when they feel respected by it.

Finally, review progress openly. Simple data on attendance, dropout, and child marriages prevented, shared regularly at union and upazila levels, shows where efforts are working and where more support is needed.

Not every step requires a large new budget. But each requires time, trust, and follow-through: officials who listen as well as instruct, teachers who treat parents as allies, and

citizens who feel that public institutions belong to them.

One case has stayed with me. A girl in Class Nine was at risk of being married off after her parents separated and her father remarried. Preventing the marriage was only the first step. Her head teacher agreed to keep a close eye on her, and her teachers made sure she felt welcome in class. She is still in school. No circular could have done that alone. It took a school that cared and a community that refused to look away.

The circular will always matter. It sets direction and carries the authority of the state. But the classroom that fills each morning, the adolescent who chooses a football field over a street corner, and the girl who stays in school instead of marrying at fifteen are not the work of a memo alone. They reflect the shared resolve of a community.

When public administration and society work together, change becomes more than an instruction. It becomes a habit.

The writer is a civil servant. The views expressed are personal.