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BRACademics

A Salon for Curious Minds

Fall Semester: A life in three chapters

Childhood · Adolescence · Adulthood

Three evening conversations that follow the evidence behind BRAC's landmark contributions, and the art that gives that evidence human shape.

One	**Childhood**	How little school is enough?	**20 October**
Two	**Adolescence**	Beyond the bride: the unasked question about child marriage	**17 November**
Three	**Adulthood**	Can hope become action?	**15 December**

Autumn 2026 · Tuesdays, 8:00 pm US Eastern · Online · No preparation required and no background assumed.

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What this series is

Across a lifetime, the biggest barriers are often not the ones we first assume. A child does not fail because she cannot learn, but because no one built her a path. A girl does not face child marriage only because her family is poor, but because communities inherit beliefs about what her future can be. A family does not escape extreme poverty simply by receiving resources, but by gaining the power to turn opportunity into action.

This series is about how BRAC finds those hidden barriers, and the human potential behind them.

Each session takes one of BRAC's landmark contributions, hands you the puzzle its designers faced, then follows the evidence with the researchers and practitioners who lived it. Every session closes with a creative work that lets us feel what the evidence describes.

How an evening runs:

10 min **The puzzle**

You get the constraint before you get the answer: a budget, a goal, and a decision to make.

35 min **Following the evidence**

A researcher and a BRAC practitioner in conversation with our moderator, unfolding the case in three turns.

5 min **The hidden ingredient**

Art, photography, film, or the words of participants themselves. This is the part of the story that numbers cannot carry.

10 min **Your questions**

Bring one. Questions from the room usually take the conversation somewhere the panel had not planned.

Built for every kind of learner

You do not need a background in economics, education or development to take part.

- **Nothing is assumed.** Terms are explained as they come up, and a plain-language glossary is on the last page.
- **Three depths of reading.** Each session offers a journalist’s version, a practitioner’s version and the underlying research. Read one, read all three, or read none.
- **Puzzle first, evidence second.** You are always invited to form your own answer before hearing BRAC’s.
- **Live only.** Sessions are not recorded, so the conversation stays in the room.

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The series at a glance

Three Tuesday evenings, about an hour each. Each session stands on its own, join as much as you can.

	Session	Date & time	You will hear from	The creative work
1	**Childhood** How little school is enough?	Tue 20 Oct, 8:00 pm ET / 5:00 pm PT	Samir Ranjan Nath · Safi Rahman Khan Moderator: Stephen Smith	Classrooms made by children, parents and communities
2	**Adolescence** Beyond the bride	Tue 17 Nov, 8:00 pm ET/ 5:00 pm PT	Proloy Barua, PhD · Shashwatee Biplob Moderator: Stephen Smith	Artwork and letters by girls in the SELP program
3	**Adulthood** Can hope become action?	Tue 15 Dec, 8:00 pm ET / 5:00 pm PT	Munshi Sulaiman · Hossain Ishrath Adib Moderator: Stephen Smith	Commissioned artists on reach, belonging and belief

How to use this syllabus

Read the question at the top of each session. That alone is enough to arrive prepared. If you want more, the full reading list is near the end, sorted by depth. Keep the glossary at hand during the evening and bring one question of your own.

Your part in the evening

Come with a guess. Each session opens by handing you the decision before the evidence. Guessing wrong in good company is one of the quickest ways to see why the problem is hard.

Bring one question. Our researchers and practitioners come to be asked things, not only to present.

Stay for the art. The closing work is not decoration, and several of these sessions were built around it.

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Session one · Childhood · Tuesday 20 October

How little school is enough?

What does a child actually need in order to learn?

> If you had to educate a child for $20 a year, what would you spend it on, and what could you live without?

When BRAC set out in 1985 to reach the children Bangladesh's formal school system was leaving behind, it built a radically simple model.

The result cost roughly **$20 per child per year**, against about $30 in government primary schools, while achieving equal or better learning outcomes with students who had started further behind.

So, what was BRAC keeping, and what was it leaving out? And which of the things that look optional turn out to be impossible to cut?

The evening works by elimination, and what looks at first like a bare-bones school turns out to hold a surprisingly sophisticated set of choices.

Throughout the hour, photographs and footage of BRAC classrooms across generations. Simplicity did not mean austerity and low cost did not mean joyless, which raises a second question behind the first one: what makes a child want to learn?

Come ready to decide

You will be handed a budget and a menu: teacher, building, class size, books, meals, technology, transport, training, time. Then you build a school, before you hear what BRAC built.

A second question, for later in the hour

If a child has already fallen behind and left school, do we need more school, or a different kind of school? BRAC's BRIDGE program moves students through the full primary cycle in 36–40 months. Its evaluation has less to say about speed than you would expect.

Researcher

Samir Ranjan Nath

Programme Head, BRAC Institute of Educational Development (IED), BRAC University

Practitioner

Safi Rahman Khan

Director, Education, Skills Development and Migration, BRAC

Moderator

Stephen Smith

Professor of Economics and International Affairs, George Washington University

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Session two · Adolescence · Tuesday 17 November

Beyond the bride

The unasked question about ending child marriage

> Every child marriage has another person in it: the man on the other side of it. Who is he, and why do we know so little about him?

Bangladesh has among the highest rates of child marriage in the world, and the highest in South Asia: nearly one in two girls is married before eighteen. We have spent decades studying those girls and their families.

It looks, at first, like a problem of poverty: desperate families marrying daughters early to ease the burden. It is a reasonable guess, but the evidence increasingly says it is wrong, or at least far from the whole truth. Cash alone does not reliably stop it, and the newest data suggests it is not mainly the poorest families who do it.

If not poverty, then what? BRAC investigates the invisible elements that perpetuate child marriage, and then takes it a step further.

For too long, almost everything we understood about child marriage revolved around the girls' family. The other side of the equation – the men – has been a blind spot. BRAC researchers are now turning the lens around. The early findings are not what anyone expected, including where the most promising lever may turn out to be.

The hidden ingredient: the girls speak for themselves. The investigation turns the lens toward the men; the art turns it back to the girls. We close with artwork and letters the girls made themselves, and a short film of one girl's resistance. These are not portraits of victims waiting to be rescued. They are girls setting down, in their own hands, the futures they mean to have.

Come ready to decide

You are given one goal: stop girls from being married at fifteen. What do you focus on? Paying families to keep their daughters unmarried? Investing in the girls themselves, in skills, confidence and legal protection? Investing in education broadly, not targeted at girls at all? Something else?

The three turns of the investigation

One. The obvious suspect. If this were about poverty, money would fix it. Does it work?

Two. When a cash transfer or a law meets an entrenched belief, which one bends?

Three. The half we never studied. Why did it take so long to ask about the men? A question of logistics, of program design, or of perspective?

Researcher

Proloy Barua, PhD

Associate Professor and Research Fellow, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD)

Practitioner

Shashwatee Biplob

Associate Director, Gender, Justice and Diversity, BRAC

Moderator

Stephen Smith

Professor of Economics and International Affairs, George Washington University

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Session three · Adulthood · Tuesday 15 December

Can hope become action?

The hidden capabilities behind lasting pathways out of poverty

> We know what it takes to help a family escape extreme poverty: assets, skills, savings, support. But what allows those tools to take hold?

For decades, development programs focused on what people lacked. BRAC's Graduation approach revealed another dimension: the capabilities that allow people to turn opportunity into action. Researchers call them aspiration, agency and self-efficacy. Sir Fazle Hasan Abed called it self-realization.

The session asks whether the inner changes that help people build a better future can be understood, studied and measured at all.

It is led by one of the people who ran the original evaluation, who will also take the awkward question. *How does an economist measure something like hope?*

The hidden ingredient: three pieces, three pillars. We close with three works by artists from Bangladesh, Uganda and Rwanda, each introduced by its maker, and each taking one pillar of what makes Graduation work. Reach, because the first transformation is being seen. Belonging, because nobody is expected to change alone. Belief, the moment someone starts to see themselves as capable of shaping their own future.

Come ready to decide

Graduation gives a family in extreme poverty five things: a productive asset, a cash stipend to live on while starting out, skills training, a savings and peer group, and a personal coach who visits regularly.

Then the constraint: funding is cut and you can only afford three. Which two do you drop?

Researcher

Munshi Sulaiman

Director of Research and Professor, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD); co-investigator on the original Graduation trial

Practitioner

Hossain Ishrath Adib

Senior Director, Poverty Alleviation, WASH and Social Innovation Lab, BRAC

Moderator

Stephen Smith

Professor of Economics and International Affairs, George Washington University

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Optional Reading

Every session works whether or not you have read a word. If you do want something in hand, each one offers three depths: a journalist's account, a practitioner's analysis, and the research itself. Every link below is clickable in the digital version of this syllabus.

Session one · Childhood

Start here: journalism, about 10 minutes

Where private school is not a privilege — The New York Times, Opinionator
archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/08/where-private-school-is-not-a-privilege/

Go deeper: practitioner analysis

The recurring power of a flexible system of schools — RISE Programme blog
riseprogramme.org/blog/recurring-power-flexible-system-schools.html

Into the research

Evaluation evidence on BRAC's non-formal primary education and the BRIDGE programme
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1X78SKUsZN6EAqZalp4OU-xLgZANi29rD/view?usp=sharing

Session two · Adolescence

Start here: journalism, about 10 minutes

Bangladesh's girl brides and the schools working to reach them — The Telegraph, Global Health
telegraph.co.uk/global-health/women-and-girls/bangladesh-child-marriage-girl-brides-brac-school-education/

Go deeper: the finding that reframes the problem

BRAC study reveals over 60 per cent of households practise child marriage
brac.net/stay-informed/news/brac-study-reveals-over-60-per-cent-of-households-practice-child-marriage/

Into the research

What pushes males to marry underage girls? Demand-side insights into child marriage from northern Bangladesh
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/395126213_What_pushes_males_to_marry_underage_girls_Demand-side_insights_of_child_marriage_from_northern_Bangladesh

Session three · Adulthood

Start here: journalism, about 10 minutes

The power of hope is real — Nicholas Kristof, The New York Times
nytimes.com/2015/05/21/opinion/nicholas-kristof-the-power-of-hope-is-real.html

Go deeper: the evidence, and the idea behind it

Graduation programmes: BRAC's approach to targeting the ultra-poor — VoxDev
voxdev.org/topic/social-protection/graduation-programmes-bracs-approach-targeting-ultra-poor

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed on the science of hope — Thomson Reuters Foundation
news.trust.org/item/20181017120852-ak1io

Into the research

A multifaceted programme causes lasting progress for the very poor — Science
science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1260799

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Joining the conversation

Sessions run online and last about an hour. When you register you will receive the links for all three evenings at once, so there is nothing further to book. Live captions are available.

Sessions are not recorded, so joining live is the only way to be in the room.

If you need materials in another format, or have an access requirement we should plan for, tell us when you register and we will arrange it.

Questions about the series: **Natalie Fellows**, natalie.fellows@bracusa.org

Words you will hear

Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE)	BRAC's one-teacher, one-classroom school model, begun in 1985 for children outside the formal system.
BRIDGE	BRAC's accelerated route back into primary school for children who have dropped out, covering the full cycle in 36–40 months.
Cohort	A single group of children who move through school together, with the same teacher, rather than being reshuffled each year.
Social norm	A shared expectation about what people in a community ought to do. Norms can outweigh both money and law, and they tend to become invisible by seeming natural.
Cash transfer	Giving money directly to households, sometimes on condition of school attendance or delayed marriage.
SELP	BRAC's program for adolescent girls: life skills, legal protection and confidence-building, including the Swapnosarothi platform.
Graduation approach	A two-year package of asset, stipend, training, savings group and coaching, designed to move a family out of extreme poverty for good.
Ultra-poor	Households too poor, isolated or excluded to be reached by microfinance or conventional programs.
Aspiration, agency, self-efficacy	What a person hopes for, their power to act on it, and their belief that acting will work. Sir Fazle Hasan Abed called the combination self-realization.
Randomized controlled trial (RCT)	A study comparing people who received a program with a similar group who did not, so that the difference can be attributed to the program.
Learning outcomes	What children can actually do, such as read, calculate and reason, as opposed to how long they sat in a classroom.