

Effectiveness and Challenges of Social Safety Net Programs: A Study on Vulnerable Children of Southwest region in Bangladesh

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Article History

Received: 19/09/2025

Revised: 30/10/2025

Accepted: 18/11/2025

Published: 01/12/2025

How to Cite:

Amin, Al; Bashar, Abul; & Rahman, Habibur. (2025). Effectiveness and Challenges of Social Safety Net Programs: A Study on Vulnerable Children of Southwest Region in Bangladesh. *Journal of Social Science and Multidisciplinary Enquiry (JSSME)*, 1(2), 1–15.

<https://doi.org/10.65496/jssme.2025.49>

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness and challenges of Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) in supporting vulnerable children in the Southwest coastal region of Bangladesh, with a focus on Khulna District. Vulnerable children in this area often face poverty, food insecurity, limited access to education and healthcare, and heightened risks from climate-induced shocks. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research draws on survey data, focus group discussions, and secondary sources to assess both the benefits and limitations of existing SSNPs. The findings indicate that SSNPs such as education stipends, nutritional support, and health services have contributed to improved school enrollment, reduced child labor, and enhanced household food security. Systemic challenges, such as inefficient targeting, resource shortages, corruption, and weak monitoring mechanisms, significantly constrain these impacts. Moreover, most programs fail to adequately address the specific developmental, psychological, and protection needs of children in disaster-prone contexts, as they remain household-focused. The study concludes that we urgently need a child-sensitive and climate-responsive social protection framework. Strengthen transparency, ensuring inclusive beneficiary selection, and enhancing collaboration between government and civil society actors are critical for maximizing the transformative potential of SSNPs in promoting equity and sustainable child development in Bangladesh.

KEYWORDS

Social Safety Net, Vulnerable Children, Poverty, Lack of Health, sustainable child development

1. Introduction

Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) have emerged as essential policy instruments in Bangladesh playing a pivotal role in reducing poverty, addressing inequality, and safeguarding vulnerable populations from economic and social shocks. These programs, implemented by both governmental and non-governmental organization (NGOs), cover a wide range of interventions, including cash transfers, food aid, education stipends, healthcare services, and skill development initiatives (M. N. Islam et al., 2025). While these programs aim to provide minimum protection to marginalized groups, children remain among the most affected demographics, as they face heightened risks of deprivation, exclusion, and systemic neglect.



In Khulna district, located in the southwest coastal region of Bangladesh, children experience amplified vulnerabilities due to recurring climate-induced hazards such as cyclones, salinity intrusion, flooding, and riverbank erosion (Karma Raptan, 2018). These environmental stresses significantly disrupt livelihoods, weaken household resilience, and hinder access to education and healthcare services, thereby intensifying child poverty. Consequently, many children in Khulna are pushed into cycles of malnutrition, school dropout, hazardous child labor, and health risks. The combined effect of chronic poverty and environmental fragility underscores the importance of examining how effectively SSNPs address the unique needs of children in this climate-stressed region. Although Bangladesh has expanded SSNP coverage nationwide, studies reveal that most program evaluations focus on broader poverty reduction indicators and adult beneficiaries, often overlooking the distinct requirements of children (Barkat-e-Khuda, 2011; Hebbar & Shebab, 2020a). Furthermore, SSNPs are frequently designed at the household level and rarely incorporate child-sensitive elements addressing developmental, psychosocial, and educational needs. This oversight raises serious policy concerns, particularly in disaster-prone regions like Khulna, where child-specific vulnerabilities are acute. While initiatives such as the Primary Education Stipend Program (PESP), Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), and Maternity Allowance have demonstrated positive contributions to reducing school dropout rates and improving nutrition, these outcomes are often undermined by issues such as administrative inefficiencies, poor targeting, corruption, and inadequate coordination among implementing agencies (S. S. Ahmed, 2005; TIB, 2012a).

2. Objective of the Study

The overarching objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness and identify the challenges of social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) in enhancing the lives of vulnerable children in the southwest region of Bangladesh, with a particular focus on Khulna district. By situating the analysis within a climate-vulnerable and socio-economically marginalized context, this study seeks to understand how well SSNPs address child-specific needs and contribute to long-term development outcomes. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To assess the impact of SSNPs on the well-being, education, and protection of vulnerable children in Khulna.
2. To evaluate awareness, accessibility, and use of SSNPs among households with children in climate-affected areas.
3. To identify key challenges such as poor targeting, corruption, political influence, and lack of child-focused design in SSNP implementation.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Overview of Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) in Bangladesh

Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) are government- or donor-funded initiatives aimed at reducing poverty, ensuring food security, and protecting the most vulnerable segments of society. In Bangladesh, these programs form a core part of national strategies to address chronic poverty and social exclusion. SSNPs include interventions such as cash transfers, food assistance, stipends for education, employment generation schemes, maternity allowances, and disability support (S. Khan & Arefin, 2013).

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (Income, 2011), over seven million individuals benefit annually from SSNPs, many of whom are children or indirectly affected through household-labels support. Key programs include the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Primary Education Stipend Program (PESP), Maternity Allowance, Child Grant Program, Employment Generation Program for the Poorest (EGPP), and Food for Education (Idris, 2022).

3.2 Impact of SSNPs on Children's Welfare

SSNPs have had notable positive impacts on children's education, health, and nutrition especially in climate-affected areas such as Khulna in southwest Bangladesh. Studies by Ahmed and Del Ninno (found that the Food for Education Program (FFE) increased school attendance by 21% in poor households, particularly benefiting girls. Similarly, the Primary Education Stipend Program (PESP) reduced dropout rates in disaster-affected communities, preventing children from leaving school for income-generating activities. Programs like VGD and Maternity Allowance have improved child nutrition and healthcare (A. U. Ahmed & Del Ninno, 2002). reported that children in VGD-assisted households exhibited lower rates of stunting and underweight, especially post-cyclone (Kabir et al., 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, observed that unconditional cash transfers helped maintain minimum nutritional intake among poor children (Ramanujam et al., 2024). Highlight that financial stability through SSNPs reduces child labor and early marriage by lessening household economic pressure. However, few programs directly address child abuse, trafficking, or mental health, revealing a critical gap in the system (Ramanujam et al., 2024; Razzaque & Rahman, 2025).

3.3 Targeting and Inclusion Challenges

Despite their reach, SSNPs face serious targeting ineffectiveness. Many genuinely poor households, especially those displaced by climate disasters in Khulna, are excluded due to inadequate identification or lack of political connections (Bharadwaj et al., 2025). Nonpoor households often benefit through favouritism, nepotism, political pressure, diluting program effectiveness. Transparency International Bangladesh found widespread irregularities in beneficiary selection, including bribery and manipulation of recipient lists by local elites. These practices compromise fairness and weaken the intended impact of SSNPs (TIB, 2012b).

3.4 Governance and Institutional Limitations

Governance issues, including political interference, corruption, and weak monitoring, undermine the performance of SSNPs. Most programs are household-based, not child-centered, and fail to differentiate between adults' and children's vulnerabilities. Barkat et al. emphasized that SSNPs lack specialized components for children's mental health, trauma recovery, and disability support. Furthermore, limited coordination between social protection, education, health, and child protection sectors reduces overall effectiveness (Moazzem & Shibly, 2023).

3.5 Climate Vulnerability and the Need for Adaptive Social Protection

In the disaster-prone southwest region, recurrent cyclones, river erosion, and salinity intrusion intensify children's vulnerabilities. Yet most SSNPs remain reactive rather than preventive. Paul and Hasnat argue that climate-smart social protection integrating shelter, healthcare, and psychosocial support is essential. Current programs operate under constrained budgets and often fail

to scale up during emergencies, leaving displaced families and children unsupported (Nampoothiri et al., 2024).

4. Study Area

The series of maps illustrates the geographical context and study area for the current research in Khulna district, Bangladesh. The first map provides a detailed view of Khulna, highlighting specific sampling sites: Sorkari Shishu Poribar (Balok), World Vision Bangladesh, SOS Children's Village, and Ashar Alo, marked with red pins for easy identification. Khulna district is shaded light blue, and the map scale (1:449,360) allows precise localization of study sites.

The central map situates Khulna within its administrative division, showing neighboring districts including Shatkira, Jessore, Narial, Bagerhat, Magura, Kushtia, Chuadanga, Meherpur, and Jhenidah. At a scale of 1:882,601, it provides an overview of the district's regional connectivity.

The national-level map highlights Khulna in light brown, with other districts in orange, situating it in southwestern Bangladesh. This map, at a scale of 1:2,095,522, offers a broader geographic perspective. All maps include north arrows and coordinate grids for orientation, providing a hierarchical visualization from national to local scale to support a understanding of the study area.

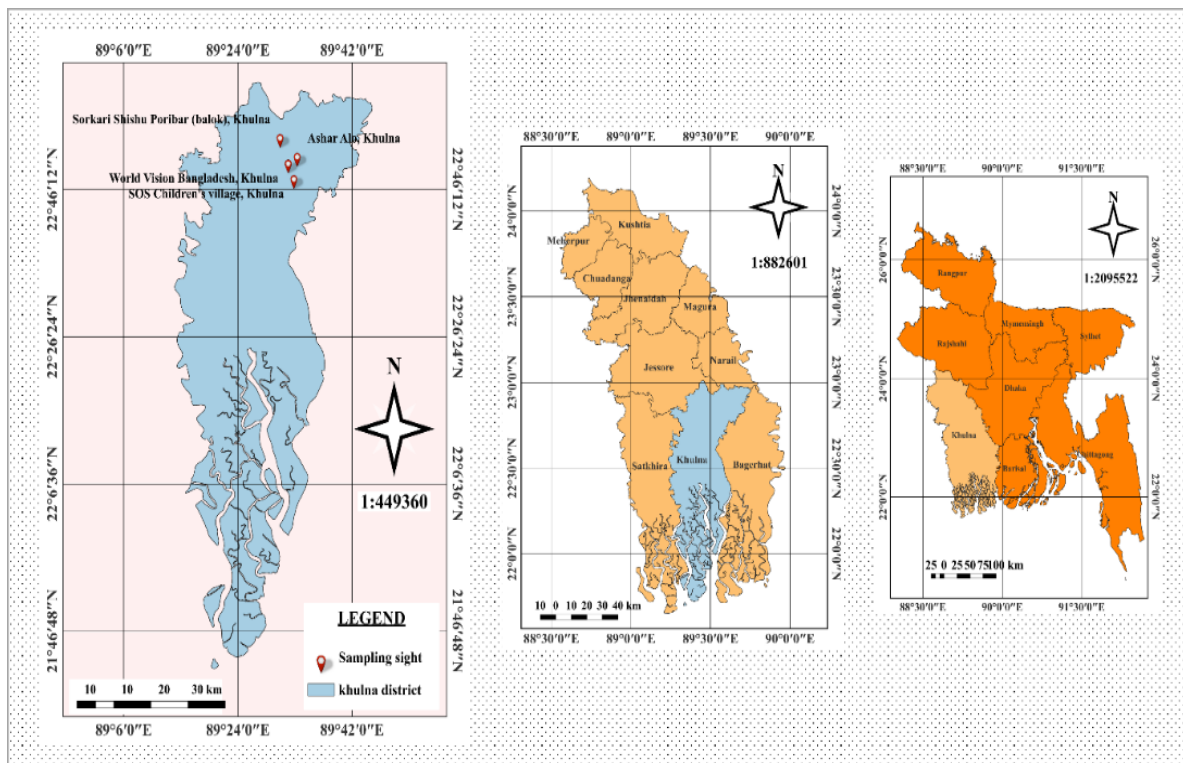


Figure 1 Map showing the study area of Khulna

5. Materials and Methods

This study employed a mixed-method research approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and challenges associated with Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) targeting vulnerable children in the climate-sensitive southwestern region of Bangladesh, with a particularly focus on Khulna district. The mixed-method design was selected to leverage the strength of both numerical data and rich contextual insights,

facilitating a more nuanced exploration of the operational dynamics and impact of SSNPs in this specific setting.

The study was structured as a descriptive and exploratory investigation. The descriptive component aimed to assess the current status of SSNP coverage, awareness, and accessibility among beneficiary children and their families. The exploratory component sought to uncover structural, administrative, and socio-cultural barriers hindering the effective implementation of these programs, particularly in the context of recurrent climate shocks that exacerbate vulnerabilities.

Data Sources

5.1 Primary Data

Data were collected directly from key stakeholders through: Structured questionnaires administered to a diverse group of respondents, including child beneficiaries, their parents or guardians, local government officials involved in program implementation, school authorities, and representatives from NGOs active in social protection. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted separately with groups of child beneficiaries, caregivers, and community leaders to facilitate open dialogue around lived experiences, challenges, and perceptions regarding the SSNPs.

5.2 Secondary Data

To supplement primary findings and provide broader contextual background, secondary data were reviewed from: Government publications such as the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) reports (M. M. Islam et al., 2022). Academic research papers and policy briefs on social protection and child welfare in Bangladesh. NGO and donor agency assessments and evaluations of SSNP implementation within the region.

5.3 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select respondents who have direct or indirect involvement with the SSNPs. This non-probability sampling method was chosen to ensure the inclusion of knowledgeable participants who could provide relevant insights on program operations and beneficiary experiences. The sample size totaled 325 respondents, consisting of: Parents or guardians of beneficiary children. Local government officials and SSNP administrators. School teachers and principals from institutions serving the target communities. NGO representatives engaged in social protection activities. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in respondents across age, gender, socio-economic status, and geographic locations within the district.

5.4 Sample Size Estimation

The sample size of the study was determined by using the formula of Godden. According to the apply formula of (Nsoke et al., 2021).

$$s = \frac{z^2 p(1-p)}{M^2}$$

$$s = \frac{1.96^2 \times .692(1-.692)}{(.05)^2}$$

$$s = \frac{0.81878}{(.05)^2}$$

$$s = 327.5$$

$$\cong 325 \text{ (Approximately)}$$

Here,

S= Sample size

Z= Standard normal Deviation set 95% confidence level = 1.96

P= Percentage of Population picking a choice, expressed as decimal = 6.92% = 0.692

M= Margin of error 0.05% = 0.050

5.5 Data Collection Process

Data collection was conducted Over three months, with enumerates trained in ethical practices, particularly when working with children and vulnerable populations. Structured questionnaires with closed and Likert-scale questions captured quantitative data from child beneficiaries, caregivers, local officials, school authorities, and NGO representative. Focus group discussions (FGDs) followed semi-structured guides, allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes and gather qualitative insight on experiences, challenges, and perceptions regarding SSNPs.

Quantitative data were entered into SPSS for analysis, with descriptive statistics summarizing demographics, program awareness, and access levels. Chi-square tests assessed associations between sociodemographic factors and SSNP utilization. Qualitative FGD data were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded to identify patterns and key themes related to program effectiveness, operational challenges, and contextual barriers such as political influence or social stigma.

Ethical protocols included verbal informed consent from participants and guardians, anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. Special care ensured a safe environment during FGDs, especially when discussing sensitive issues.

6. Findings and Results

Table 1 Socio-demographic Information and Awareness of Vulnerable Children

Variable	Category	TP	PP	A	PA	NA	PNA	X ²	P-value
Age Group (Year)	<= 08	77	23.69	49	21.49	28	28.87		
	09–15	141	43.38	100	43.86	41	42.27	2.293	0.318
	16-18	107	32.92	79	34.65	28	28.87		
Sex	Male	210	64.62	139	60.96	71	73.20	4.452	0.035*
	Female	115	35.38	89	39.04	26	26.80		
Relationship to Child	Parent	225	69.23	150	65.79	75	77.32		
	Guardian	75	23.08	57	25.00	18	18.56	4.82	0.020*
	Local Leader	25	7.69	21	9.21	4	4.12		

Note: * indicates statistically significant results at $p < 0.05$

TP= Total Population, PP= Percent Population, A= Aware, PA= Percent Aware, NA= Not Aware, PNA= Percent Not Aware

Table 1 a chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the association between demographic variables and awareness status. The results indicated no significant association between age group and awareness, $\chi^2 (2, N = 325) = 2.29, p = .318$, suggesting that awareness levels did not differ meaningfully across children aged ≤ 08 years, 09–15 years, and 16–18 years. However, a

significant association was observed between sex and awareness, $\chi^2 (1, N = 325) = 4.45, p = .035$, with females reporting proportionally higher awareness compared to males, who were more likely to be unaware. Similarly, the relationship to the child was significantly associated with awareness, $\chi^2 (2, N = 325) = 4.82, p = .020$. Parents demonstrated the highest levels of awareness, followed by guardians, whereas local leaders reported the lowest levels of awareness. Taken together, these findings suggest that while age group did not influence awareness, females and parents were more likely to be aware compared to males, guardians, and local leaders.

Figure 2: Age group in context of Social Safety Net Awareness

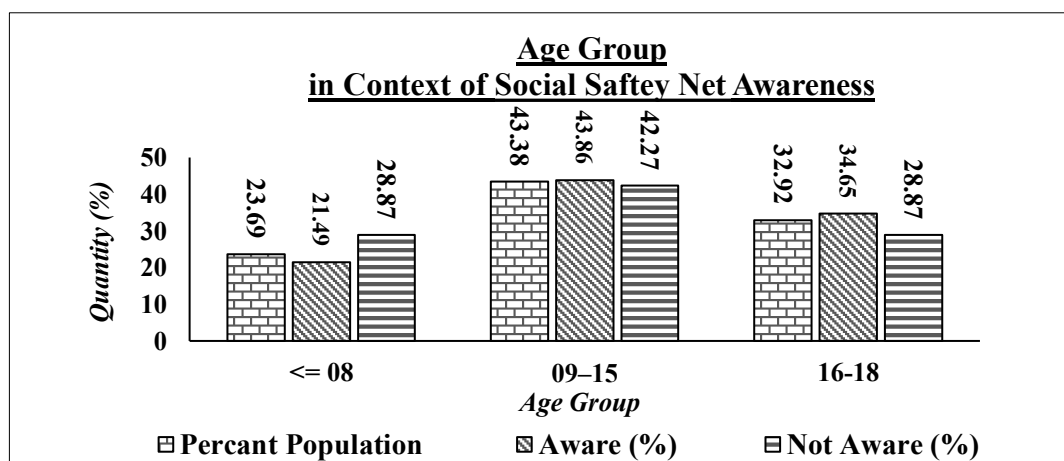
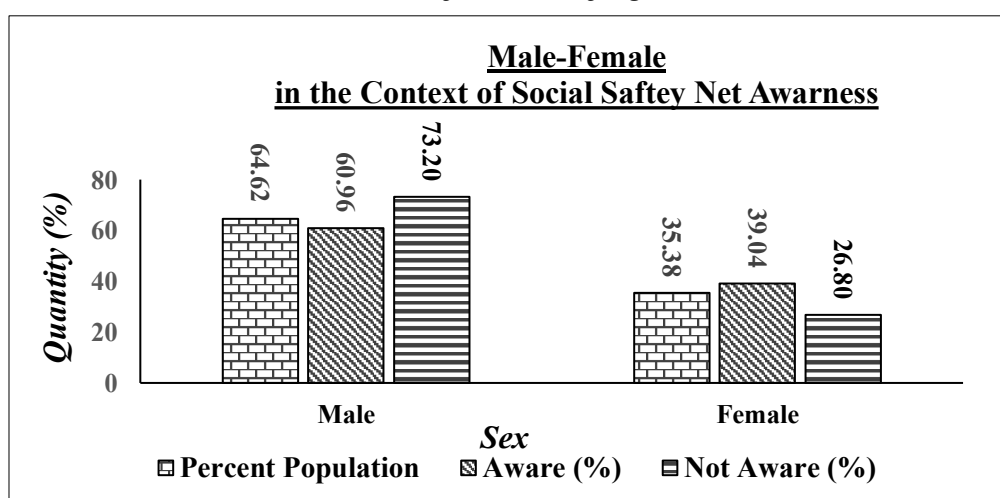


Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of social safety net awareness across age groups (≤ 08 , 09–15, and 16–18 years). Children aged ≤ 08 years had the lowest representation in the sample (23.69%) and demonstrated limited awareness (21.49%), with a relatively higher proportion being unaware (28.87%). In contrast, adolescents aged 09–15 years constituted the largest age group (43.38%), with the highest awareness (43.86%) yet also a substantial proportion who remained unaware (42.27%). The 16–18-year-old group represented 32.92% of the sample, with slightly higher awareness (34.65%) compared to unawareness (28.87%). These findings suggest that awareness of social safety nets increases with age, peaking in early adolescence before stabilizing in later teenage years.

Figure 3: Male-Female in the Context of Social Safety Net Awareness



As shown in **Figure 3**, males constituted a larger portion of the sample (64.62%) compared to females (35.38%). Awareness of social safety nets was notably higher among males (60.96%) than females (39.04%). Interestingly, despite males having higher awareness, they also reported a greater proportion of unawareness (73.20%) compared to females (26.80%). This indicates a paradoxical pattern where males dominate both awareness and unawareness categories, suggesting possible variations in information exposure and engagement with social safety net programs across genders

Figure 4: Relationship to child in context of aware and not aware

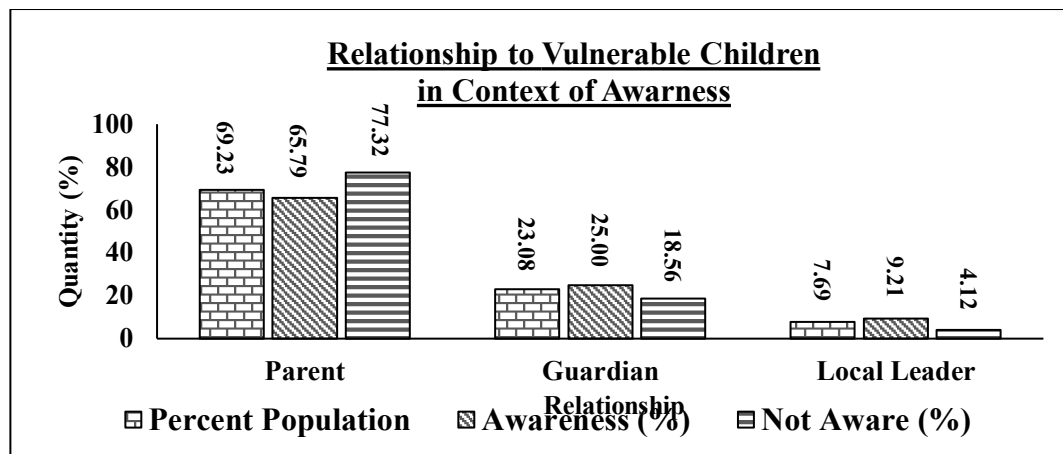


Figure 4 presents the relationship-based distribution of awareness. Parents represented the majority (69.23%) of the population, with a high awareness rate (65.79%) but also the highest proportion of unawareness (77.32%). Guardians accounted for 23.08% of the population, showing moderate awareness (25.00%) and unawareness (18.56%). Local leaders represented the smallest group (7.69%) with relatively lower awareness (9.21%) and minimal unawareness (4.12%). The findings highlight parents as the central group in both awareness and unawareness, underscoring the importance of targeted interventions for parental sensitization, given their pivotal role in the welfare of vulnerable children.

A key issue emerging from the study is targeting inefficiency, which echoes concerns identified in prior research (Nsoke et al., 2021). Beneficiary selection is oftenn compromised by political favoritism, nepotism, and non-transparent processes, resulting in the exclusion of eligible children while non-poor households are included. This misallocate undermines the credibility of SSNPs and weakens their intended impact on the most vulnerable groups.

The findings also reveal the pervasive influence of corruptionn and bureaucratic barriers, corroborating evidence from Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB, 2012c). Participants consistently reported bribery, favoritism, and delays in fund disbursementt, particularly within Union Parishad administered programs. These challenges disproportionately affect poor household, which often lack the necessary resources or social capital to navigate administrative complexities.

Awareness of SSNPs was found to be uneven across gender and social roles. Female caregivers and relatively better-off households reported higher levels of awareness, while the poorest and most marginalized families were less informed. This aligns with earlier observations by (UNICEF, 2020) regarding inequitable access to program information and reflects persistent barriers to inclusion.

A critical gap identified in this study is the lack of child-centered design in current SSNPs. Existing initiatives are primarily household-focused and insufficiently address children's unique vulnerabilities such as trauma, disability, disrupted education during disasters, and protection concerns. This finding echoes calls from Save the Children (S. S. Khan & Khan, 2021; UNICEF, 2020) for more child-sensitive approaches to social protection. Particularly in disaster-prone areas like Khulna, the absence of tailored measures exacerbates children's exposure to risks associated with displacement, malnutrition, and interrupted schooling.

The study further highlights the inadequacy of SSNPs in responding to climate-induced shocks. Despite the region's heightened susceptibility to cyclones, flooding, and salinity intrusion, respondents indicated those programs rarely incorporate adaptive or emergency features. Only a small proportion reported receiving increased support during extreme weather events, confirming arguments (Haq, 2024) that Bangladesh's social protection mechanisms remain poorly equipped to address climate-related risks. Institutional trust also emerged as a central theme. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and school authorities were perceived as more equitable and reliable providers compared to Union Parishads, reflecting broader concerns about governance and accountability. This finding suggests that community-based and school-linked program delivery models may enhance both transparency and trust in SSNPs. Taken together, these findings underscore the dual nature of SSNPs: they remain crucial instruments of social equity and child welfare but are constrained by operational inefficiencies, governance deficits, and insufficient child- and climate-sensitive design.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm the critical role of Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) in mitigating child vulnerability and promoting social welfare in the southwest coastal region of Bangladesh, particularly in Khulna District. Consistent with earlier studies (A. U. Ahmed & Del Ninno, 2002) the results suggest that programs such as the Primary Education Stipend Program (PESP), Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), and the Maternity Allowance have positively influenced school enrollment, reduced child labor, and improved household food security. Nevertheless, despite these positive contributions, the study reveals persistent institutional and administrative challenges that continue to undermine the overall effectiveness and sustainability of these initiatives. A major challenge identified in this study is the inefficiency in targeting beneficiaries. The results indicate that errors of inclusion and exclusion are prevalent, frequently attributable to political interference, nepotism, and insufficient verification capabilities at the local level. These observations are consistent with those of (Akand, 2022) and Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB, 2012d), who noted that such governance weaknesses distort equity objectives and reduce public confidence in SSNPs. To ensure fairness, future implementation should emphasize data-driven beneficiary selection through digital databases, community validation, and third-party monitoring systems that can prevent corruption and political manipulation. Corruption and administrative inefficiencies also emerged as key barriers to program success. Respondents reported instances of bribery, fund misallocation, and delays in benefit disruption, particularly within local government structures such as Union Parishads. These findings are in line with the analyses of (Hossain & Osman, 2007; Hunter & Brill, 2016) who argued that weak

oversight and bureaucratic rigidity significantly hinder SSNP performance. Decentralizing fund management and engaging local civil society organizations in monitoring could enhance transparency, reduce administrative bottlenecks, and ensure timely service delivery to the most vulnerable children. The study also highlights disparities in awareness and access to social safety nets. The chi-square analysis revealed that female caregivers and parents exhibited higher awareness of SSNPs than male guardians or community leaders. This trend suggests that existing awareness campaigns have been only partially effective, reaching certain groups while leaving others uninformed. As (Unicef & Unicef, 2016) observed, information dissemination mechanisms in rural and climate-affected areas remain inadequate. Increasing communication within the community, getting schools involved, and reaching out to local media could help close these gaps and make sure that families who are on the outside are well-informed about program options and how to apply. Another important finding concerns the lack of child-centered design within most SSNPs. The current framework remains largely household-oriented and does not adequately address children's developmental, psychological, and protection needs. This aligns with the conclusions of Save the Children (Shekhar & Rai, 2025), who emphasized that most programs focus primarily on economic relief rather than comprehensive child welfare. Children in disaster-prone areas often face trauma, interrupted education, and increased exposure to abuse or exploitation. Incorporating psychosocial support, mental health care, and child protection services into the SSNP design could therefore strengthen the developmental and productive impact of these programs. Climate sensitivity also remains a critical gap in the implementation of social safety nets in Khulna and other coastal regions. The study found that current programs lack adaptive components to respond effectively to climate-induced shocks such as cyclones, floods, and salinity intrusion. Respondents reported little or no additional support during such crises, reinforcing the observations of (R. Islam et al., 2025) and the United Nations Development Program (Hebbbar & Shebab, 2020b) that Bangladesh's SSNPs remain reactive rather than anticipatory. Integrating climate-responsive mechanisms such as flexible cash transfers, early warning linkages, and emergency funding would enable the system to provide rapid assistance and enhance resilience among vulnerable households. Institutional trust also emerged as a sinefficient determinant of program perception and participation. Respondence expressed greater confidence in NGOs and schools compared to local government authorities, citing hhigher levels of transparency, efficiencyy, and fairness. Similar patterns have been observed by BRAC (Krishna, 2012; Medani, 2017) who argued that community and school-based delivery mechanism foster greater accountability and public engagement. Strengthening partnerships among government agencies, NGOs, and local institutions could therefore improve program coordination, reduce corruption, and build greater trust within beneficiary communities. Based on these findings, the study proposes several key policy recommendations to enhance SSNP effectiveness and inclusivity. These include improving targeting accuracy through digitalized databases, ensuring transparency via social audits and independent oversight, and embedding child-sensitive components such as psychosocial care and child protection into program frameworks. Additionally, adopting climate-responsive features that activate during emergencies, fostering community participation in beneficiary selection and monitoring, and

strengthening capacity building for local administrators can significantly improve program performance. Such reforms would help transition Bangladesh's SSNPs from short-term relief instruments into long-term, adaptive social protection systems capable of addressing both poverty and vulnerability in an equitable manner. While SSNPs in Bangladesh have played a valuable role in reducing child vulnerability and promoting basic welfare, structural inefficiencies, governance weaknesses, and limited child- and climate focused integration continue to constrain their transformative potential. To achieve sustainable progress, a holistic approach is needed one that aligns social protection goals with national development priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By fostering transparency, inclusivity, and resilience, Bangladesh can ensure that its social safety net system effectively safeguards the rights and futures of its most vulnerable children.

8. Limitations

This study provides important insights into the effectiveness and implementation dynamics of Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) for vulnerable children in the southwest coastal region of Bangladesh. At the same time, several limitations point to promising directions for future inquiry. First, although the study focuses on the Khulna District one of the country's most climate-vulnerable areas its geographic scope remains limited. Expanding future research to include additional coastal and non-coastal districts would allow for comparative analyses, helping to identify regional disparities and broader national trends in SSNP performance. Second, the use of purposive sampling enabled the collection of rich, context-specific information from stakeholders directly involved with SSNPs. However, incorporating probability-based sampling designs in subsequent studies would enhance the representativeness of findings and allow for more generalizable conclusions regarding program coverage, equity, and effectiveness across heterogeneous populations. Third, while the study relied primarily on self-reported data from beneficiaries, caregivers, and local officials, future research could benefit from integrating multiple data sources. The inclusion of administrative records, audit documentation, and digital beneficiary management systems would facilitate data triangulation, strengthen measurement validity, and provide a more holistic assessment of program outcomes and implementation processes. Fourth, the mixed-methods design employed here effectively captured both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of SSNP impacts. Building on this foundation, longitudinal or panel data approaches would offer deeper insights into how child well-being and household resilience evolve over time, particularly in contexts experiencing recurrent climatic shocks and socioeconomic instability. Finally, although this study highlights general SSNP outcomes for vulnerable children, further research could explore more specialized program areas, including mental health support, trauma recovery, disability services, and child protection mechanisms. Integrating psychological, development, and protection-oriented indicators would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how SSNPs can be tailored to address the diverse and evolving needs of children living in climate-affected regions.

9. Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest several important recommendations for strengthening the effectiveness of Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) for vulnerable children in the southwest coastal region of Bangladesh. First, targeting and beneficiary identification processes should be enhanced

through transparent, data-driven mechanisms, including digital beneficiary registries and GIS-based poverty and climate-vulnerability mapping, to ensure that the most at-risk children are prioritized. Increasing community awareness and improving accessibility to SSNPs is also essential, which can be facilitated through local outreach campaigns, child-friendly communications materials, and accessible support desks at Union Parishad offices. Administrative efficiency must be improved through the use of digital payment systems, biometric verification, and strengthened grievance redress mechanisms, supported by regular audits to reduce corruption and delays. Benefit adequacy and timeliness should be reviewed and adjusted to reflect rising living costs and the heightened needs of families during and after climate-related disasters. Furthermore, incorporating Child-sensitive components-such as educational support, nutritional assistance, psychosocial care, and disability-specific services-would enable SSNPs to more effectively address the multidimensional vulnerabilities of children. Strengthening the institutional capacity of local government bodies through training in digital recordkeeping, transparency protocols, and child protection is crucial for more efficient program implementation, while partnerships with NGOs can further enhance service delivery. Finally, the integration of climate-responsive social protection measures, as well as stronger multi-sectoral coordination among social protection, education, health, and disaster management agencies, is necessary to provide comprehensive and resilient support for children in climate-affected regions.⁸

10. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) play a vital role in supporting vulnerable children in Bangladesh's southwest coastal region by enhancing educational participation, reducing child labor, and improving food security. However, their effectiveness is significantly undermined by targeting errors, corruption, limited child-specific provisions, and weak responsiveness to climate-related shocks.

The findings further point to sociodemographic disparities in awareness and access, with gender and relational roles influencing the extent to which households benefit from SSNPs. Current programs are largely household-oriented and fail to adequately address children's psychological, developmental, and protection needs, particularly in disaster contexts.

Given the compounded risks posted by poverty and climate change, reforms to SSNPs must prioritize inclusivity, transparency, and child-sensitivity. Strengthening targeting mechanisms, reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies, and integrating child protection frameworks into program design are essential steps. Additionally, enhancing climate resilience within SSNPs and fostering community-based and school-based delivery systems could improve both reach and accountability. In conclusion, while SSNPs remain indispensable for promoting child welfare and reducing inequality, their transformative potential will remain limited without comprehensive reforms. A social protection framework that is inclusive, transparent, child-centered, and climate-resilient is critical to safeguarding the rights and well-being vulnerable children in Bangladesh's coastal region.

The discussion should interpret the study's findings in relation to the research objectives and existing literature. Authors are encouraged to highlight the significance of the results, compare them with previous studies, and explain any similarities or differences. Limitations of the study and implications for future research should also be addressed. The section should conclude with a clear statement on the contribution of the study.

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