

Empowerment of Women through Education in Bangladesh

Md. Shafiul Islam¹

Abstract

This paper examines the place of education as the key to women empowerment in Bangladesh. The paper, using secondary sources of data, has shown that in spite of all the laudable goals and objectives of education, women of Bangladesh still face a lot of constraints and inhibitions which weigh down their personal and national development. The paper recommends, among others, the involvement of women in educational policy formulation, and women must organise themselves to meet the challenges of an encouraging and meaningful role in the struggle for personal and national development.

Keywords: Education, Women Empowerment, Bangladesh

Introduction

Although education is very important for everybody living on this earth, it is more pivotal for women. Educated women are not only important because it gives them an opportunity to earn but also the most important reason is because they are the one who develop the whole family. Keeping in mind, perhaps, Napoleon Bonaparte says, 'Give me an educated mother and I will give you an educated nation.' According to ICPD Programme of Action, 'Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process.'¹ Therefore, girls should always be given every opportunity to gain proper education. And thus, educating a woman is actually providing her with a weapon to live up her customary part, fight with the challenges and bring positive change in her life as well in society.

It is said that education is the backbone of a nation and no nation can be a great nation unless and until they have educated and healthy

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh, Rajshahi-6205. E-mail: shafiul_luc@ru.ac.bd

mothers. But in most cases, girls cannot continue their education for many reasons, despite many laudable initiatives undertaken by concerned state and authorities. Bangladesh is not out of this purview. The government of Bangladesh since its independence in 1971 has been undertaking a series of initiatives, policies and programmes for women empowerment. Some noticeable progresses have also appeared in some fields but expectations have not yet fulfilled. In spite of especial steps such as providing stipend for students, the dropout rate in primary level schools is still high².

Background of the Study

According to Simon de Beauvoir (1997), women are individual like men but they have hardly any opportunity to realize their inner potentialities³. In third world countries, especially in Bangladesh, the condition of women is not out of this net. In our society this is very vivid that apart from thankless jobs, women have to take the risk of repeated child bearing in the hope of giving birth to a son. And son is considered as blessing whereas girl is treated as burden or curse. Thus, we see that although man and women both belong to the same human species, their life styles, ways of thought, and above all their duties are markedly different from one another and society has embedded such ideas into human brains through customs and mores. Bangladesh is a developing country and according to the census of 2011 (BBS, 2012⁴), the total population of the country is about 150 million and the ratio of female and male is 101:100. The majority of people are poor and amongst the poor class, the condition of the poor village women is the most precarious one because the village women can never participate in political, social and familial decision-making process. Khan (2003) rightly observed that rural women faced the larger extent of abuse and negligence due to poverty, ignorance of law and dependence on what is imposed on them by the social and the religious elite and the locality. It is generally convinced that illiteracy, malnutrition and lack of opportunity for economic activities have aggravated their situation further⁵. Sultana (2004) reveals that women in Bangladesh get 29 percent less calories than men and 70 percent of women suffer from malnutrition⁶. Naz (2004) further stated that it was a common picture of disparity in every field such as food, clothing, education, age of marriage⁷, etc. According to UNFPA, 66 percent of girls before the age of 18 are got married in Bangladesh followed by Chad (72%) and Niger (75%) respectively (UNFPA, 2012⁸). Many studies also reveal that lack of approach to money, inability to purchase necessary things for themselves, lack of decision making power, superstitious beliefs, familial violence, etc. have intensified women's

downgraded status. Consequently, the poorer section of women have almost no voice in determining the most important events of their lives like marriage, child birth, children's education, purchasing the daily necessities etc.

So, it is clear that the main causes of the downgraded status of women are the lack of power of decision making in the family and economic dependency on men and most importantly it is happened due to lack of education.

Objectives

This paper explores to achieve the following objectives:

- a. To argue for education which will stimulates the empowerment of women;
- b. To highlight the factors impeding women's education in Bangladesh; and
- c. To put forward recommendations for way of these barriers out.

Methods

This paper relied on secondary sources of data which include books, journals, previous studies, government documents, newspapers and periodicals. A qualitative data analysis technique was employed in order to analyze data.

Theoretical Framework

This section clarifies the concept of education and women empowerment. It also examines the gap between the literacy level of male gender and that of the female gender.

Education: education is considered as the cornerstone for sustainable development. It is a fulcrum around which quick development of economic, political, sociological and human resources of any country resolves⁹. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000), education means `a process of teaching, training and learning, especially in schools or colleges, to improve knowledge and develop skills¹⁰. Okafor (1984) defines education as a process through which the individual is helped to attain the development of all his potentialities and their maximum activation and thereby achieve his perfect self-fulfillment. Education is the aggregate of all the processes by which a child or young (male or female) develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behavior which are of positive value to the society in which he/she lives¹¹.

It is a process through which a person acquires knowledge, skills, habits and values that enable him to play role effectively as a member of the society. Education helps one to maximize his physical, mental and emotional capabilities which are useful for him and his society. In this sense, women education means the process by which women acquire the knowledge, skills, norms and values that are necessary for their development and that of the society. It is also the basis of full promotion and improvement of the status of women. So, education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to respond to the challenges and change their life.

Women Empowerment: The concept of women empowerment was introduced at the international women conference at NAROIBI in 1985. Since then scholars and academics of different countries define women empowerment in different ways. Consequently, there is no universally accepted definition of women empowerment. So, many authors define women empowerment in many ways. Sako defines empowerment as:

The process of strengthening the existing capacities and capabilities of disadvantaged groups in society so as to enable them perform towards improving themselves, their families and the society as a whole. It involves the provision of enabling environment for their productive and intellectual abilities to be realized. In some societies where some groups have suffered discrimination for a long time, ways have been found to address this problem. Laws have been made to protect these groups against future discrimination with the goal of providing equal opportunities for all¹² (1999:32).

Enemuo quoting Sandbrook and Halfani, views empowerment as:

A multi-dimensional process involving the transformation of the economic, social, psychological, political and legal circumstances of the powerless. In the specific case of women, empowerment entails not only positive changes in these critical respects but also the dismantling of the cultural norms and traditional practices that devalue, disempower and dispossess women. The process must necessarily also include the expansion of women's access to educational opportunities, facilities for skills acquisition and positions of authority¹³ (1999:233).

So, women empowerment means giving traditional and legal status to the efforts of women to develop and contribute to the creation of wealth, participate in decision making of their families and societies and reduce their present status of vulnerability and dependency.

Education and Women Empowerment: Many writers highlight the role of education for empowerment of women. Islam (2010) said that lack of education means lack of confidence for women. An educated woman naturally will have various decision-making and problem-solving skills and she will want to use those to benefit herself and her family members¹⁴. The National Education Policy of Bangladesh¹⁵ (2010) has emphasized the promotion of women's education in all areas of learning to eliminate any sex based stereo typing with the guarantee of equality. The policy has also emphasized on women's education to ensure women's comprehensive development and empowerment as well as women's participation in social advancement.

Status of Women in Education in Bangladesh

The successive governments of Bangladesh have taken a series of initiatives for women education. Consequently, educational levels have increased among women. The following table shows the literacy rate of Bangladesh.

The Literacy Rate of Population¹⁶ (7 years and above) of Bangladesh by Sex, 1981-2011

Year	Male	Female	Both Sexes
1981	33.84	17.52	25.99
1991	38.90	25.45	32.40
2001	49.56	40.83	45.32
2011	58.8	53.4	56.1

Source: Population Census 2001&2011

Owing to affirmative action undertaken in the allocation of budgetary resources in the education sector and women friendly education policies, gender gap in this sector has narrowed down significantly. It has been found from the Population Census-2001 of Bangladesh that during the last 20 years (1981-2001), literacy rate for population 7 years and above rose from about 26 per cent to 45.32 percent. In 2011, it reaches at 56.1 percent. Remarkable rise in women's education during this period has contributed greatly to this improvement of literacy rate in Bangladesh.

Extent of Gender Gap in Primary Education

Due to various budgetary measures and the policy of compulsory primary education, Bangladesh has achieved notable progress in the primary level education. Gross enrollment rate in the primary schools has reached at more than 97 per cent. However, findings of some micro level studies show that gross enrollment rate has already reached at 100 per cent.

However, net enrollment rate is about 87. It is interesting to notice that enrollment rate of girls is higher than that of boys. As a result, gender gap in primary education has been eliminated almost totally in 2002¹⁷. Food for education, now cash for education programme undertaken in the education budget since the fiscal year 1993-94, and the programme of supplying free books has contributed greatly to achieve gender equality in primary education. But the completion rate is almost half of the enrolled students. The drop-out rate has increased from 47.2 % in 2005 to 50.5% in 2007¹⁸.

Extent of Gender Gap in Secondary and Higher Secondary Education

Emphasis has also been given on qualitative improvement of secondary and higher secondary education through improvement in science and technological education in Bangladesh. Education in information and communication technology has been given priority in our country. Currently there are 16,166 secondary schools, 2427 general colleges, 7651 secondary and higher secondary level madrasah¹⁹. In each of these institutions, the number of student has increased over time. A study shows that number of students in the secondary level schools (Class V to Class X) raises by about 21 per cent over the period between 1998 and 2002. It is very encouraging to notice that the rate of enrollment of girl students in the secondary level schools is far more than that of boy students. The number of girl students has increased by about 26 per cent. It can be noticed that in the year 2002 girl students constitute about 54 per cent of all secondary level students, whereas in 1998 they constituted a little more than 51 per cent of all secondary level students. This reveals that gender gap in the secondary education has been more than eroded and a gender gap is created against boy²⁰.

Extent of Gender Gap in Tertiary Education

Over the time, the number of students in the tertiary level educational institutions has also increased. Like primary and secondary levels, the tertiary level of education sectors, including private colleges and universities, has grown in number and in enrollment rapidly. The politics-free environment in contrast to public universities, assurance of completing the courses of studies within the designated time, might have attracted a growing number of students to private universities. May be for the same reason, it has been found that share of female students in the total number of college and university are higher in the private institutions. However, yet, enrollment in higher education is very low. Only 7 out of every 1000 students participate in higher education in

Bangladesh. This rate is even lower for female students. Therefore, gender gap in tertiary level of education remains very wide. Ratio of male and female students enrolled in the tertiary level of education is 61:39. Gender gap in the tertiary level of madrasah education is even higher, female students in the tertiary level of madrasah education have increased by 40 per cent whereas female students in the tertiary level of general education have increased by only 21 percent²¹. According to the annual reports of the University Grants Commission²² (UGC), the enrollment rates of female students at public universities were 25 percent in 2008, 27 percent in 2009 and 28 percent in 2010 respectively and 27.15 percent in 2011²³. Observing bitter experience of Bangladesh, Shehzad Noorani says that girls are less likely to go to university and if they do go, their dowry increases²⁴.

Results and Discussion

Now, we can say that it is clear that there is gender gap at various levels of education. It is also evident that the gender gap widens when the level of education rises up.

Decision making power is most influential in making women powerful since this power touches the core of patriarchy that sanctions male control over resources and institutions of state and family. Education is a dominant factor affecting decision-making power of women. Hence, it is expected that with the rise of educational level, decision making power of women will also be increased and they will have more access to political power and decision making both at state, institution and household levels. For example, Union Parishad election in 1997 and 2002 brought a significant change in the women's participation in the arena of governance and decision making. Approximately 13,000 women became the member of the Union Parishad. But it is very disappointing to know that about 20 per cent of women members do not have any education.

The presence of women in the cabinet, the highest decision making body in the country, remains extremely low, ranging between 2 to 6. Presently, there are 70 members of parliament (MP), including 50 of reserved seat. Recently, the Speaker of the parliament has been elected from women MP. There is one Justice in the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. This situation remains the same in course of the last three decades of Bangladesh's political history, whereas during this period, educational attainment of women is noteworthy. In other areas of decision making such as the bureaucracy and high level jobs also

women's presence is negligible. As per recent statistics, there are only two women out of 70 secretaries and 11 women among 243 additional secretaries respectively. There is no female deputy commissioner (DC) at present in the country (Ministry of Public Administration, April, 2013).

Against such backdrop, we can identify some obstacles encountered by female in education to include the followings:

Economic Constraint: For economic reasons, many parents consider women's education as a waste of money. They think that money spent on a girl's education is a waste, since she will soon marry into her husband's family, thus leaving only boys in their original family to cater for their parents. Therefore, when families are faced with the option of choosing between sons' and daughters' education, the daughters are always the victims.

Religious Constraint: The forces of religion are also partly responsible for the present plight of women's education in Bangladesh. Although Islam has emphasized access to knowledge for all, the education of Muslim girls, particularly in the areas of religious scholarship and authoritative expertise, has been seriously marginalized in most parts of the Muslim world historically²⁵. Bangladesh is not out of this purview.

House Keeping, Family and School Life Constraint: Generally, people of Bangladesh believe primarily in the role model of women as perfect housewives. Most women therefore struggle to be successful housewives. In some situations, such struggles keep women out of the school system.

Unequal Employment Opportunities: Another serious but subtle constraint is the discrimination against women by employers. It is not strange these days to discover in many advertisements for vacancies that the jobs are exclusively for males; so women (especially the married ones) need not apply. It is just exception in garments sector of the country.

Early Marriages: Early marriage is a permanent feature in Bangladesh. This condition can lead to serious health hazards. In this case, the girl's opportunities are destroyed. She then misses the chance of furthering her educational career and this no doubt can upset her otherwise, peaceful life.

The Impact of Education for Women Empowerment:

Contribution of Educated Women in National Development

The benefits derivable from education include many such as enhancement of the quality of living, housing, clothing, food, health, transport, communication, entertainment and gainful use of leisure. If the vast majority of our women folk are educated, their personal development can be enhanced remarkably. Children and husbands also stand to gain tremendously. Women are likely to have more confidence in themselves and their ability to contribute effectively to national development.

Marital Obligation: Education helps in the fulfillment of women's obligation. A married woman is expected to take care of her home – husband and children. She is expected to use whatever knowledge and skills she has to cook, clean and rear her children.

Health: Mothers help in no small measure in securing perfect health for the children and by so doing for the entire community and nation. Attaining good health starts right from the womb. It starts from the pregnant mother knowing and taking what constitute balanced diet, abstaining from damaging drugs, and actions inimical to the health of the baby. A woman can be aware of all these harmful conditions if she is educated.

National Reconstruction: If women are educated, they will be able to assist in nation building and reconstruction. A few women are currently holding powerful positions, Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition in the Parliament, Speaker of the Parliament, Deputy leader in the Parliament, some ministers, including foreign affairs, Justice of Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, in Bangladesh.

Conclusion and recommendations

Women empowerment is an essential element in national development. Since women constitute half of the population there can be no development unless the needs and interests of women are fully taken into account. In fact, empowered women are a nation's strength. Since development means improvement in the living conditions of the society, as a whole, it is logical to expect that this also means improved status for women. In the context of Bangladesh, no one can achieve the whole purpose of women's empowerment and emancipation within a short span of time. However, women have utilized the chances given to them and made considerable progress. As formal agency, the government of Bangladesh wanted to improve the living conditions of women at

different times. Here education has played an important role for women empowerment.

Considering all the efforts made by the various levels of government, together with non-governmental organizations and donor agencies, there are still more to be done in the area of women education. The following suggestions may, therefore, bring about improvement in women's education and *ipso facto* the attainment of their individual and national development.

Involving Women in Curriculum Board:

It is found that curriculum formulators in the past have been predominantly male and hence the gender biases often reflected in textbooks, course contents and examinations. The full involvement of female in the curriculum formulating and censor will be helpful to detect and remove possible gender bias that may be in the curriculum.

Pro-women Government Policies: Pro-women policies should be taken more for women empowerment through education. For this, the ministry of women and children affairs can take more initiatives in this respect.

Research Centers for Women Studies: Continuous research into factors affecting the education of women must be launched and supported by appropriate educational research organizations and governmental departments. In service and pre-service education of teachers should be developed and thereby helping the teachers develop skills to combat stereotyping and raise awareness of the constraints that gender stereotyping imposes on the development of young girls. Besides, some more recommendations are to include in the following:

- Poverty alleviation programmes should be well articulated, vigorously pursued and objectively carried out so that poverty level of parents will be reduced. This will enable parents to give equal opportunities to their children for education.
- The clauses in the National Education Policy relating to equal opportunities for all in Bangladesh should be genuinely executed.
- Political leaders are very important on the issue of women empowerment. There must be sincere action on the part of our leaders that they are actually interested in solving this problem through meaningful programmes. Whatever plans are initiated, these should be fully implemented and reviewed periodically. This allows for amendments where necessary.

- Positive attitudes towards women empowerment on the part of all walks of life would accelerate the process, and
- Lastly, women must organize themselves to meet the challenges of a positive and meaningful role in the struggle for national emancipation, development and progress through the acquisition of functional education which will usher in a new lease of life.

Endnotes

- ¹ International Conference on Population and Development, 1994. Cairo, Egypt.
- ² Participatory Evaluation: Causes of Primary School Drop-out, 2009. Directorate of Primary Education, Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, GoB.
- ³ Beauvoir, Simon de., 1997. *The Second Sex*, Translated by H.M. Parshley, London, Vintage.
- ⁴ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2012. *Census Report 2011*, Ministry of Planning, Government of Bangladesh
- ⁵ Khan, Saira, R., 2000. *The Socio-legal Status of Bengali Women in Bangladesh: Implications for Development*, UPL, Dhaka.
- ⁶ Sultana, Parvin., 2004. Pitritantrik Somaj Bebestay Narir Adoston Obosthan Prekkrit Bangladesh (in Bengali), *The Chittagong University Journal of Social Science*, XXI. 1.
- ⁷ Naz, Farzana., 2004. *Pathways to Empowerment: The Role of Grameen Microcredit in Changing the Life Patterns of Women in Monigram Bangladesh*, Unpublished M. Phil Thesis, Bergen: Centre for Women's and Gender Research, University of Bergen, Norway.
- ⁸ UNFPA, 2012., *The State of World Population*, UNFPA, New York, USA.
- ⁹ Ojobo, James. A, 2008. Education: A Catalyst for Women Empowerment in Nigeria, *Etiop. J. Educ. & Sc*, Vol., 4 No. 1, 93-108.
- ¹⁰ *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (6th edition), 2000. Oxford University Press, UK
- ¹¹ Okafor, R.K, 1984. *Nigerian Teacher Education: A Search for New Direction*, Enugu, Fourth Dimension Publishers Co. Ltd.
- ¹² Sako R. ed., 1999. *Women Empowerment and Advancement Manual, Kaduna: League for Democratic Women* (Leads).
- ¹³ Enemuo, F.C, 1999. "Gender and Women Empowerment" in Anifowose and Enemuo, FC (eds), *Elements of Politics*. Lagos: Match House Press Ltd. P. 226-237

- ¹⁴ Islam, Mohammed Rafiqul, 2010. Women's Empowerment for Sustainable Development in Bangladesh, OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development 01:08
- ¹⁵ National Education Policy, 2010. Ministry of Education, The Government of Bangladesh
- ¹⁶ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2012, Census Report-2011, Ministry of Planning, the Government of Bangladesh.
- ¹⁷ Paul-Majumder, Pratima, 2005. National Education Budget of Bangladesh and Women Empowerment, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha & Institute for Environment and Development.
- ¹⁸ Participatory Evaluation: Causes of Primary School Drop-Out, 2009. Directorate of Primary Education, Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, The Government of Bangladesh.
- ¹⁹ Basic Educational Statistics, 2003. BENBAISE, Ministry of Education, The Government of Bangladesh.
- ²⁰ Paul-Majumder, Pratima, 2005. National Education Budget of Bangladesh and Women Empowerment, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha & Institute for Environment and Development.
- ²¹ *Ibid*
- ²² Annual Report-2011. Students by Sex at Public Universities, University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh.
- ²³ Basic Educational Statistics, 2011. BANBEIS, Ministry of Education, the Government of Bangladesh.
- ²⁴ Noorani, Shehzad, Women and Girls in Bangladesh, UNICEF Bangladesh website: www.unicef.org/bangladesh
- ²⁵ Hannan, Shah Abdul, 2006. The Religious Education of Muslim Women in Bangladesh, Bangladesh Journal of Islamic Thought, Vol. 2, No. 2. Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought.