
EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION – BANGLADESH’S ACHIEVEMENTS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION SECTOR

Hoimonti Barua

*Ph.D. Research Scholar, Centre for South Asian Studies,
School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India*

Abstract: Societies around the world are experiencing progressive changes by realizing the importance of education especially to empower women. Women empowerment is the manifestation of gender equality which is a forerunner to move a country ahead. Women will, in true sense achieve freedom when they begin to receive equal opportunity and be empowered in a more tangible manner. It has become one of the most important matters of interest among the policy makers of developing nations. Education is considered to be the key to upgrade an individuals’ well-being and ameliorate nations’ economy and improve its social development. Even the Millennium Development Goal 3 recognizes and thus promotes access to female education as it is associated with multifarious developmental aspects such as education, eliminating poverty, occupation, economy, decision making, political representation etc. Although the socio-political and economic status of South Asian women is quite uneven, Bangladesh has a different story to tell. Despite being a patriarchal society, Bangladesh has made significant achievements over the past two decades to an extent of outstripping some of its neighbours including India. Their rising participation in all sectors has brought about impressive outcomes to the national development. Bangladesh has intensively worked to make primary education accessible to all and the results have impressed the world.

This paper has been divided in to three sections. Based on the available literature, reports etc the paper firstly attempts to discuss the current situation of Bangladesh’s primary education sector. Secondly, the paper aims to explore the achievements in empowering its women in various fields especially through access to education. The last section is an analytical conclusion that discusses the preceding sections. Investing in female education has powerful impact in the society. But it will also make this world a better place for all irrespective of gender.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Education, Gender Equality, Bangladesh

“The Prosperity of a country is a must if men and women can work together. Our aim is to make the country prosperous and poverty-free one”

Prime Minister of People’s Republic of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina

Introduction: Achieving women’s education through accessibility and equity has been on the prime development goals for nations around the world for quite some time now, predominantly because education offers poverty reducing prospects through increasing scope to economic opportunities. The fact that education comes with a long-term positive outcome in not only an individual but also their families and societies has been seriously acknowledged. Abigail Hunt (2013) in reference to a study conducted by the International Centre for Research on Women opines, ‘when women have higher levels of education they are more likely to have power over their destinies and bring about changes in their communities’. Also, the concept of empowerment is being used in a more neoteric sense; being brought in the forefront and associated with mostly all activities related to women, including education. As a matter of fact, empowerment is a widely used favorite term in development scenarios.

Importance of Education

Education is often considered as a basic pivotal requisite and a unique parameter to develop an individual from within. It is a powerful apparatus for diminishing inequality as it gives people the ability to become independent by facilitating the individuals' potential to the fullest, transforming them as productive beings of the society. A way to create a civilized, socialized society which Herbert Spencer has called 'complete living'. In terms of human development education provides both input and output, therefore accessibility and equity in education will strengthen the nation fortifying national development. Article 26 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims education as a fundamental right for citizens of any nation. The Declaration states that, 'Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit'.

Any nature of development of a nation is predominantly associated with the number of educated population including their females. Hence, education is seen as a crucial tool to achieve an important developmental agenda: empowerment of girls' and women. It has been stated in the International Conference on Population and Development: '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 processes. In fact, education has been one of the primary targets of the Millennium Development Goals 3 that is: "to promote gender equality and empower women". The objective was to abolish gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 and every levels of education by the year 2015.

Correlating Empowerment and Education

Empowerment can be understood as means of engendering a social environment in which an individual can make choices and take decisions either independently or collectively for social transformation. Empowerment is defined as 'a process to change distribution of power both in interpersonal relations and in institutions in society'. Empowerment to an individual comes with acquiring knowledge, power and experience that strengthens their innate ability. Empowerment maybe highlighted into eight indicators: mobility, relative freedom from domination within the family, economic security, involvement of major household decision making, ability to make small purchase, ability to make large purchase, political and legal awareness, and involvement in political campaigning and protests. A woman who achieves these will be truly empowered. Human rights is an empowerment tool and education is a human right therefore education is an empowerment tool. Education is increasingly viewed as a basic human right leading to empowerment and awareness, as opposed to being regarded solely as a means of bringing about economic growth and political stability.

Education and empowerment is often associated as each other's backbone. Education is considered as a milestone for women empowerment. Dr. James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey had once said 'the surest way to keep a people down is to educate the men and neglect the women. If you educate a man you simply educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a family". Knowledge is power and education is the fundamental precondition to achieve that power. Knowledge enables them to exercise their rights, withstand challenges, confront their traditional roles and change their life and position in the society. Education is a pre-requisite for promoting women's economic empowerment, health and well-being (Gunilla Törnqvist, 2011). Research has revealed the extent to which education can be a pathway in promoting gender equality through improving women's occupational attainment. Education must raise women's earnings if not more than men.

Current Status of Women in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has always had a history of emancipation of women since its genesis whether as freedom fighters during Liberation War or as entrepreneurs in recent times. Empowerment of women was always in the essence of Bangladesh. In general, the potential of women are highly under-represented, untapped and unexplored as source to human capital, particularly in under-developed and developing countries. Positive results in social and economic benefits can be expected from those countries that

have adopted assertive policies to endorse gender equality in education. Bangladesh, in South Asian region has proved to be producing constructive results in the past years impressing the nations around the world. An active civil society, strong administrative structures and legal frameworks, and the establishment of rights have laid the foundation for women's movements and pro-women services. The Government of Bangladesh, over the past forty years, has executed targeted social programmes with intense attention on vulnerable women and their families.

Bangladesh's aspirations to accomplish a middle income status by 2021 can transpire into reality when it fully wields the other half of the population; the female population, possible only if they are empowered fully to their best potential. There are 7.12 crore males against 7.11 crore women in Bangladesh. This suggests, women comprise half of the population. One can imagine the possibilities of financial progress if the other half of the populace is utilized fully. During the last decade an increase of women count by four million marked a 'spectacular change in sex composition'. One of various reasons was decrease in maternal and female child mortality rate. There is now greater participation of women in politics for women empowerment, the working women workforce in Bangladesh GDP growth is thirty-four percent.

Impressively the development reports revealed Bangladesh's diligent efforts in achieving the Millennium Development goals. The Global Gender Gap Report, 2017 generated annually by the World Economic Forum published their report on gender parity benchmarking 144 countries. Bangladesh ranked 47 in 2017 from being at 91 in 2006 on the basis of overall growth in four major indicators being: educational attainment, economic opportunity, health and survival and lastly, political empowerment. In Bangladesh educated women are three times more likely to participate in political meetings. One of the major milestones in Bangladesh's history in women's empowerment was the enactment of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act in 1997 that provided for direct elections to reserved seats for women in local level elections.

Women's economic empowerment is indispensable for economic development, poverty reduction, growth not only because of the income it generates, but also because it helps to break the vicious cycle of poverty. Female education creates robust poverty-reducing synergies and produce expansive intergenerational gains. It is correlated with increased economic output, more powerful labor markets, and higher emoluments, improved in nonagricultural earnings and improved societal health and overall well-being.

Increased productivity means higher economic growth and more effective reduction of poverty. Working women whether self-employed, wages earners or entrepreneurs contribute in households reduce poverty. When women participate in schooling, derive more knowledge the returns comes back not only to themselves, but passed on to the next generation as well. Indeed, studies have shown that giving women more access to education, markets (labor, land, credit), and new technology, as well as greater control over household resources, often translates into greater well-being for the household. Educated women are more likely to send their daughters to school have greater control on the household resources, take care of health issues (like HIV, AIDS, and infant mortality and child nutrition). Promoting equality in educational opportunities involves entering the education system at the primary level, progressing to higher levels, and making the transition to the labor market. In economic terms, curtailing women thwarts their options to obtain family welfare, limits economic growth and decreases progress in poverty reduction.

Achievements at Primary School level

Compared to various other South Asian neighbours and their gender-parity achievements, Bangladesh has done remarkably better. Gender parity at the primary level has improved from ninety-two percent to ninety-four percent In the South Asian region Bangladesh was the first country to attain gender-parity in primary education. The Sixth Five Year Planning (SFYP) on Bangladesh specific situation with the Millennium Development Goals shows that Bangladesh has achieved gender parity in primary education (Goal 2, Target 1 and Goal 3, Target 1). They could achieve this milestone due to a strong commitment from public-sectors and non-governmental sectors, an effective public policy, and proper resource

allocation. Women education plays a very important role in Bangladesh's overall development as a country. Accessible education and women empowerment has been long been a focus area in Bangladesh's development goals. Nationally, the Government of Bangladesh took up the 'education for all' campaign with a strong focus on girl children's education.

Around thirty percent of the total population of Bangladesh is under the age group 15 constituting school age group. They are the future generation of Bangladesh. Female literacy rate has always been lower than males for the last forty years. But both male and female literacy situation is improving and the gap between males and females are decreasing. Primary education is one the basic rights of any children in all countries around the world. Proper education to all ensures scopes to empower girls and to promote gender equality. The highest allocation in the national budget for education exposes that the Government of Bangladesh is very much keen to for human resources and development through education. With every small step of progress and improvement, Bangladesh moved one step closer to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

The literacy rate of population ranging from age group seven years and above from 1974 to 2011 has improved impressively. According to UNESCO the adult literacy rate in Bangladesh in 2015 was sixty-one percent. The female literacy level in 2016 was sixty-nine percent and that of males were seventy-five which was seventeen percent (females) and thirty-nine percent (males in 1981)

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics reveals an improvement in female enrolment in primary schools, pass rate, gender parity, dropout rates etc. Education is essential for women to allow them exercise their rights and consequently for women's empowerment. Creating incentives for households to send girls to school such as Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs in Bangladesh have been successful. Scholarships and stipends offset the cost of schooling. They compensate families from direct and indirect costs of education. They have been highly effective in some countries like Bangladesh where scholarships increased girls' enrolment to twice that of natural average. The stipend programmes for girl children at first in the primary level and then for secondary and higher secondary levels are considered a global best practice that achieved dramatic results in gender parity of education. Very few developing countries have policies and strategies for inclusive education particularly those belonging to disadvantaged sections to ensure equal opportunities for all children. Bangladesh had done significantly better in decreasing maternal mortality rate by 40 percent in the last ten years (Maternal Mortality Rate/MMR -194 in 100,000 live births) and is right on track for the MDGs of a 75 percent reduction from 1990-2015.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Bangladesh has a huge human resource which may work in their favor if it is utilized properly. Ever since its independence the country has implemented various constructive programs and policies in the field of education, health, nutrition etc in order to develop its people. A lot has been achieved so far by Bangladesh in terms of the developmental goals. Bangladesh could bring about positive changes reducing poverty level, enhancing primary school enrolment in particular to girl children, and reduce infant mortality rate. In terms of achievements in women empowerment and education Bangladesh has undoubtedly attained a lot in comparison to other countries of South Asia despite of being a patriarchal, religious and agriculture based society. Despite these achievements there is a lot more to be achieved in the times ahead. Though women comprise half the populations they are still fettered by various cultural, social, economic and political elements. In Bangladesh gender discrimination still persist at various levels in various sectors despite increasing access to education. Despite of releasing the importance of knowledge and education in uplifting a society, the women force are still not utilized fully. Gender parity has been attained yet there is a sharp drop out rate at tertiary level. This results in a sharp gap in work force between male and female. Women's employment in non-agricultural sector is at the moment around 25 percent whereas the target is 50 percent. While Bangladesh is dependent on the women workers in the readymade garments sectors we do see limitations in the female occupation. The lack of opportunity to avail educational benefits from tertiary, secondary and higher education is a persistent problem. The Government of Bangladesh has worked

diligently to reach where it is today but it is time now to restructure once again to progress in those fields in which they are lagging behind. A metamorphosis is the needed and for that education is inevitable. If progress in primary education brings so many positive changes then strengthening the next levels of education will bring even better outcomes. So if we intend to empower more women it has to be done through the medium of education at all levels and should not stop at the primary education level. Hence, it is of paramount importance to upgrade the level of education among women

References:

1. Abigail H. "Education and Empowerment: You are nobody until somebody trains you", *The Guardian*, (2013) <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2013/aug/02/education-empowerment-adolescent-girls>
2. Ibid.
3. Stromquist, NP. "Women's Empowerment and Education: Linking Knowledge to Transformative Action", *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 50, No. 3. (2015)
4. Anonuevo, CM. "Women, Education and Empowerment", UNESCO, Hamburg (1995)
5. Hashemi, S, Schuler, SR and Ripley, AP. 'Rural Credit Programs and Women Empowerment in Bangladesh', *World Development*, Vol.24, (1996): pp. 635-653.
6. WEF. "The Global Gender Gap Report", Geneva, World Economic Forum, (2017)
7. Phumaphi, J and Leipziger, D. "Girl's Education in the 21st Century" *The World Bank*, (2008)
8. SADEV, Gender Equality in and through Education Swedish Agency for Development Evaluation Report, (2010)
9. Tembon, M. and Fort, L. "Girl's Education in the 21st Century - Equality, Empowerment and Growth", *The World Bank*, Washington: (2008)