

FOR RAISING FEMALE LITERACY

by Ahmed Fazl

There are deep-rooted inequalities afflicting the Bangladesh education system and the more pronounced among these are the gender prejudices. Girls and women are the most disadvantaged group among all other sections of the society in relation to the access to education. The situation in reality is a genuine cause for concern and makes a stinging indictment of the apathy and indifference of the past administrations and policies of successive governments.

The overall national literacy stands at around 30 percent but development planners estimate that the illiteracy rate among women is as high as 85 percent. The figure would be still higher among rural female population alone. Further there are regional disparities. For example illiteracy is higher in the northern districts than in the southern and eastern regions. In the North female illiteracy may peak at 95 per cent in economically depressed and impoverished Kurigram district.

Statistics relating to school enrolment and school attendance are equally disturbing. One estimate says that about 60 percent of boys in the age group of 6-14 years at an all Bangladesh level are attending schools on a regular basis. But almost half that

rate is applicable to girls in the same age group. It is said that 30 percent of the school going girls go to schools or attend any centre in the non-formal sector.

The gender disparity is more pronounced if one considers the rural popula-

tion separately.

If we look at higher education which is a privilege

for the top 10 to 15 percent

of the population, the picture is no less bleak. The representation of women in higher education is desperately low. Another interesting aspect of the female education picture is that the

majority of women who

reach the doorsteps of

higher education enrol

themselves in arts courses

and a lesser number of them

go for science and engineer

ing education. In the latter

two areas, some noticeable

improvement in enrolment

was achieved in recent

years.

Statistical data have re

vealed that poverty may not

be the only or the principal

factor behind literacy for

girls, especially after their

puberty have kept girls and

women in their place.

Women. For 12 countries

with per capita GNP of less

than 1000 dollars have se

male literacy rates of 60

percent or better. Four of

them—Sri Lanka, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic

and the Philippines have

surpassed the 80 percent

mark.

How does one explain the

inequality picture. Research

analysts point to a multi-

plicity of reasons many of

those are socio-cultural

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