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Staffing of Primary Schools

The Government has just announced plans for the establishment of over seven thousand new primary schools in the next three years. This is undoubtedly welcome news, for Bangladesh is a country with one of the highest rates of illiteracy in the world and it cannot hope to combat illiteracy without a country-wide network of schools designed to impart instruction in the alphabet. But we have learnt with some concern about this possible progress of literacy programmes that it has also been decided to staff primary schools with women only. Having regard to conditions in our society, this policy—if the report is correct—is likely to prove counterproductive. For one thing we do not have sufficient numbers of trained females who could be appointed to any schools by order. Married women could scarcely be persuaded to leave their homes behind and accept jobs in remote areas. For unmarried women the problem would be almost insurmountable. Who would care to send an unmarried daughter or sister into a village miles away from her home, unaccompanied by a male relation? And supposing that a male relation could be found to accompany her it would be necessary to find a job for him too, and he may not be necessarily qualified to teach. Where qualified women are available locally, they may quite rightly be preferred over men in jobs calling for the handling of very young children. But to insist, regardless of facts, on the appointment of women exclusively to primary schools would be totally unrealistic and will threaten the programme, which such a policy is designed to sustain.

Those who are responsible for formulating this policy (again we speak on the assumption that the report we have received is correct) may have intended to promote the cause of feminism and open fresh opportunities of employment to women.

This in itself may be a laudable aim, but if its execution bids fair to slow down the campaign against illiteracy, as it is bound to, in our judgement, it needs to be revised immediately. The removal of illiteracy is a cause which must outweigh in importance the aim of creating employment opportunities for women. Unrealistic idealism cannot do us any good.