

Closing The Gender Gap In Education

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INVESTMENT in human capital is a key element in achieving long-term sustainable economic growth. Since children are the greatest resources of a country, future of a nation depends on the exploration of the latent quality and abilities of children to solve various problems of life; and education is the key to the success of this exploration. Various studies have shown that a strong and positive relationship exists between investment in basic education and outcomes in economic productivity, health and social wellbeing, the growth of democracy and conservation of environment.

Education is a basic human right. The rights and issues of child education have been highlighted in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), World Summit for Children (1990), World Conference on Education for All (1990), successive SAARC Summit Declarations and our constitution. Since gender disparities are distinctly visible in demographic, economic and social indicators, the education of girls is a major issue in universalising primary education in Bangladesh. In this article an attempt has been made to highlight the gender gap in primary and secondary education in Bangladesh, describe the programme undertaken by the government and NGOs, identify major constraints to girls' education and give recommendations for increased girls' education in Bangladesh.

The issue of girl child in South Asia was first raised in the SAARC Conference on Children (New Delhi, 1986) which emphasised the imperative to improve the mother-child life cycle, starting with the girl child. The Bangalore SAARC Summit (November 1986) placed children on its agenda and created a viable basis for the Islamabad SAARC Summit of 1988 to declare 1990 and the "SAARC Year of the Girl Child." The SAARC Summit held in Male in 1990 decided that the years 1990-2000 be designated as the "SAARC Decade of the Girl Child." Subsequently a SAARC decade regional programme was prepared which was endorsed at the Colombo Summit in 1991. In pursuance of the government's commitment towards improving the conditions of female children and raising the status of women, the government formulated Bangladesh Decade Action Plan for the Girl Child 1991-2000.

Action Plan Goals for Basic Education for the Girl Child :

(i) Enrolment of not less than 75 per cent of primary school-age girls, by 1995 and completion by not less than 45 per cent of girls in that age group, by 1995. The corresponding percentages for the year 2000 will be 90 per cent and 65 per cent respectively;

(ii) Reaching the SAARC norm of 50 per cent completion rate by 1995 and the global goal of 80 per cent by 2000 for girls as well as boys;

(iii) Raising the adolescent and adult literacy for women (12-35 years) from 31 per cent in 1990 to 40 per cent in 1995 and 45 per cent by 2000;

(iv) Reaching the SAARC norm of reduction of adult and adolescent illiteracy from the 1990 level by 25 per cent by 1995; and

(v) Acquisition of knowledge, skills and values required for better living for girls and women using the mass media and other forms of modern and traditional communication and social action.

Educating girls raises their productivity and approximately wages increase by more than 10 to 20 per cent for each additional year of schooling. Educating girls yields nonpecuniary benefits in five areas (Summers, 1992):

(i) Educating girls reduces child mortality because educated mothers marry later, choose to have fewer children and can invest more in health and development of each child;

(ii) An extra year of female schooling reduces female fertility by approximately 5 to 10 per cent;

(iii) By increasing knowledge about health care practices and reducing the average number of pregnancies, female education significantly reduces the risk of maternal mortality;

(iv) Educated women are more likely to enter into stable marriages and look out for their reproductive health, thereby help prevent the spread of AIDS; and

(v) Girls' education has important environmental benefits.

Over time, getting girls into schools can transform societies as their children and grandchildren reap the benefits. In calculating net social benefits of girls' education, Summers (1992) showed that in India, providing 1000 girls with an extra year of schooling would cost US\$ 32000. It would avert two maternal deaths, fortythree infant deaths, and three hundred births. Besides, one set of estimates prepared in the Women in Development Division of the World Bank suggests that a doubling of female enrolment ratios in 1975 in a large sample of developing countries could have averted nearly 4 million childhood deaths and about 30 million births.

Gender Gap in Education in Bangladesh : According to the Bangladesh Population Census 1991, female population constituted 48.52 per cent of the total population of Bangladesh. Of the total female population, female children (below 18 years old) were about 50 per cent. In almost all countries of the world, women outnumber men. In Bangladesh there are only 942 females for every 1000 males — more than 3 million women are "missing" owing to their excess mortality. Like many other South Asian countries the girl child in the family is widely discriminated against in Bangladesh.

Though enrolment of girls and their retention rate have accelerated in recent years, gender gap in education is still pronounced in Bangladesh. Literacy rate (7 years and above) of male is 39 per cent while that of female is only 25 per cent (Bangladesh Population Census 1991). Thus female literacy rate is only 64 per cent of male literacy rate. Average gross enrolment rates in primary education during 1986-92 were 83 per cent for boys and 71 per cent for girls. Female gross enrolment is thus 86 per cent of male enrolment. The drop-out rates for boys and girls are 55 per cent and 58 per cent respectively. Thus the primary school enrolment rate for girls is lower and drop-out rate is higher than for boys. At the secondary level the average enrolment rates for boys and girls during 1986-92 were 25 per cent and 12 per cent respectively. Here female enrolment is only 48 per cent of male enrolment. But the drop-out rate is higher for girls (66%) than for boys (58%). Women constituted only 20 per cent of all teaching force at the primary level and only 11 per cent at the secondary level. Monthly expenditure on education is much lower for girls (31%) than for boys (69%). (UNICEF: The State of World's Children 1995 and UNDP 1994. Human Development in Bangladesh: Empowerment of Women).

In respect of education, wide disparities exist between the Chittagong Hill Tracts region and other parts of the country as well as gender disparities within the region. Literacy rate of the region is much lower than the national average. While the primary schools have high enrolment rate which is however lower than the national average, gender gap is pronounced in the region. But the attendance rate among those enrolled, especially among girls, is one of the lowest in the rural areas mainly because of the problem of accessibility.

Female deprivation results from

what Herz (1991) calls Vicious Cycle of Deprivation. Here girls are expected merely to play traditional roles: marry out early, many children, low productivity and low earnings and parents fail to invest in their daughters' education because they do not expect their daughters to be able to make economic contribution to the family, and the prophecy turns out to be self-fulfilling. Educating girls offers the best hope of cutting into this vicious cycle.

Positive Actions taken by the Government : In order to enhance female education and raise the status of women in Bangladesh, the government has taken some positive actions which include: (i) formulation of a Decade Action Plan for the Girl Child (1991-2000), (ii) implementation of compulsory primary education programme for boys and girls (6-10 years) since January 1992, (iii) implementation of non-formal education programmes for school dropouts and those who never attended schools, (iv) education upto grade 10 in the rural areas free for girls, (v) food for education programme for boys and girls in primary schools since July 1993 to motivate the poor parents to send their kids to schools (vi) secondary school stipend project since January 1994 to enhance female education, (vii) sixty per cent quota of the posts in the primary schools for women etc.

Non-formal Education Programmes : Since the formal system of education fails to cover a large number of children who can not go to schools due to a variety of reasons as well as a substantial number of school dropouts, there is the need for non-formal education. With the flexibility in their delivery system and ability for effective communication at the grassroots level, NGOs play a very effective role in promoting and implementing non-formal education. Some notable non-formal education programmes are run by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Swanirvar Bangladesh, Village Education Resource Centre (VERC), Proshika, Bangladesh Association for Community Education (BACE) and Underprivileged Children's Educational Programme (UCEP).

Starting with some experimental schools in 22 villages in 1985, BRAC now runs more than 22000 schools throughout the country. The objective of the programme is to provide a three-year period basic literacy and numeracy to the poorest rural children whom the formal school system fails to reach. Nearly 70 per cent of the students are girls and about 80 per cent of the teachers are women. The daily attendance of students is 98 per cent and the dropout rate is only 2 per cent for the full three-year programme. The BRAC experience suggests that relevant curricula, dedicated and well-supervised teachers, effective involvement of the community in the management of the schools, effective interaction of teachers with students and guardians, small size of class (30 students), flexible school time, free supply of books and other educational material to the students and proximity of schools to home are important factors influencing parents and children's decisions about school enrolment and retention. BRAC model of non-formal education has been adopted in some countries.

Another NGO, Bangladesh Association for Community Education (BACE), piloted the Female Secondary Education scholarship Project in January 1982 with a view to encouraging girls to enter and remain in secondary schools, thereby delaying marriage and increasing contraceptive use. Encouraged by the success of the project, some countries have modeled their scholarship programmes after this project.

Major Constraints

a. Household and Community-level Barriers :

(i) Poverty of the parents; (ii) Existing socio-cultural norms and practices; and (iv) Ineffective community participation with poor representation of women in school management.

b. Institution-based Constraints :

(i) Long distances to schools in the rural areas; (ii) Inadequacy of culturally appropriate physical facilities such as separate secondary schools for girls with boundary walls, provision of latrines, supply of drinking water etc.; (iii) Shortage of trained female teachers; (iv) Lack of flexible school schedule; (v) Gender-biased curricula; (vi) Absence of information on what and how well children learn in schools and on achievement status at the termination of basic education; and (vii) Lack of effective monitoring of classroom teaching.

c. Policy-related Issues : (i) Inadequate data base for undertaking policy analysis on girls' education and raising the status of women in society; (ii) Inadequate allocation in girls' education; (iii) Lack of a definite policy and corresponding institutional framework for non-formal education; and (iv) Policies and programmes meant for promoting girls' education not operating within a properly defined conceptual framework that encompasses all issues related to role and status of women in society.

Recommendations

a. Household and Community-related : (i) Educating girls must be made more economically attractive. This means reducing labour market discrimination against women and integrating girls' education with income generation. (ii) Educating parents, particularly mothers, for sensitizing them about their daughters' education. (iii) Undertaking social mobilisation for girls' education applying three main strategies namely advocacy, partnership building and programme communication. Meena type of advocacy film, involvement of folk singers and mass media are effective. (iv) Developing viable local government which will ensure effective participation of the community in school management.

b. Institution-based : (i) Proximity of schools to girls' home like BRAC schools. (ii) Designing schools for girls consistent with cultural values: separate secondary schools for girls with high and solid boundary walls, provision of appropriate sanitation, drinking water facilities etc. (iii) Recruiting and training an increased number of female teachers to enhance girls' enrolment and retention. (iv) More flexible schedules for instructions accommodating household chore. (v) Promoting gender-neutral instruction by revising textbooks to improve perception of women's roles in family and society. (vi) Continuous assessment of achievement level of students. (vii) Continuous monitoring of classroom teaching.

c. Policy-related : (i) Developing gender disaggregated database for undertaking policy analysis on girls' education and raising the status of women in society. (ii) Allocating adequate fund for girls' education especially for books and supplies, teaching aid, utilities etc. (iii) Like primary education, sixty per cent quota of the posts in the secondary schools for women. (iv) Formulating a definite policy on complementary non-formal education for the left-outs and school dropouts. Lessons may be taken from BRAC experience. (v) Undertaking vigorous non-formal education programmes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Region. (vi) Educating girls should be the concern of national education policy, not just of special projects and programmes.

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