

26 MAY 1989

THE BANGLADESH OBSERVER

DHAKA FRIDAY MAY 26 1989

5

(4)

Single-sex Schools

139

Many rural areas in Bangladesh where separate schools for girls do not exist have been forced, in response to demands for facilities for female education, to allow girls to be admitted to boys' schools. A separate school for girls being too costly a proposition, this is regarded as a partial solution of the problem of getting girls educated. But reports that we regularly receive suggest that the results have been far from satisfactory. Juvenile delinquency has risen sharply, and the incidence of rape and kidnapping has so increased that many parents fear to expose their daughters to the risks involved in sending them to boys' schools. The choice is between denying them a formal education and facing the danger of having them kidnapped or abducted by adolescents devoid of parental control and discipline.

The fact which has to be acknowledged is that Bangladeshi rural society is far from being used to the kind of atmosphere which co-education among adolescents is bound to create. To throw teen-agers together and expect them to be models of moral behaviour in a conservative society which does not approve of free mixing, is to be totally unrealistic. Besides, ours is not the only society where the value of co-education among adolescents is questioned. Muslim parents in Britain have been agitating for some years for single-sex schools for girls and in some areas won the right to establish them. The necessity of such schools in our country is all the greater.

Not to speak of rural areas, we have heard parents in the capital complaining of lack of moral security for girls in the University. Many complain that relaxed proctorial discipline allows young men and women to waste a great deal of time indulging in what can only be termed pranks. When anything spectacular happens, the incident is headlined in the press; this has the effect, paradoxically, of encouraging young people in villages to think that the example set by their contemporaries in urban areas is well worth emulating.

Matters have reached a pass where some positive action is necessary to enable girls to be educated in a secure atmosphere free from risk of forced gregariousness. Rather than finance more co-educational institutions in villages, efforts ought to be made to establish separate single-sex schools for boys and girls after the primary stage. Whether segregation of the sexes is desirable or not is a question into which we would rather not enter. But to ignore the fact that millions favour segregation on religious grounds and would rather let their daughters remain uneducated than allow them to attend mixed schools is to try to impose on society a code it is not prepared to accept. The consequence of insisting that all education must be co-education would only be to retard the spread of female education. This is indefensible.

As things are, number of schools in the country is out of proportion to the size of the population, but we have often seen funds being allocated for collegiate education at the expense of primary and secondary schools. The country needs more primary and secondary schools than colleges, and wherever possible separate single-sex schools. Good schools are the foundation of the educational system. To build an educational pyramid without taking care to lay the foundations well is to waste money in the pursuit of worthless certificates. Mixed schools today have grown into an additional threat to the quality of education for both boys and girls by generating temptation on one side and fear on the other. In many cases the temptation factor operates on both sides. The real casualty is education. This truth needs to be faced.