

Are Women Better than Men at Knowledge Absorbing? : An Empirical Search in NGOs

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of males and females' knowledge absorption capacity among the NGO (Non-Governmental Organisational)-beneficiaries in Bangladesh. A massive number of NGOs (appx. 22000) are in operations in Bangladesh. The NGO-beneficiaries are the main stakeholders engaged in receiving and absorption of the knowledge transferred by the NGOs. Multi-staged sampling procedure is used. 14-NGOs (7 large and 7 small of the NGO Affairs Bureau enlisted NGOs) from each administrative division of Bangladesh (Bangladesh has seven administrative divisions) are purposefully selected. 54-semi-structured interviews consisting of top, middle and lower levels based on the salary grades (18X interviewees from each level) were interviewed. Simultaneously, 35 questionnaires among the beneficiaries were also administered (5 from each administrative division, e.g. 5X7=35). Content analysis technique is used to analyse the interview transcript. The study reveals that female beneficiaries have more capable in absorbing knowledge than those of the male beneficiaries. Future researchers may carry out similar research in a different country.

Key Words: Knowledge Transfer, Knowledge Absorption, NGOs, Bangladesh

Background

Now-a-days, the word "NGOs" is synonymous with "Socio-economic development". The NGOs' contribution to the socio-economic development of developing countries has been widely acknowledged. The contributions of NGOs in various aspects of human lives such as poverty alleviation, education (Ahmad, 1999), family planning, employment, relief operations in natural calamities (Rahman, 2000), and health (Gauri and Galef, 2005) and infrastructure development for the poor, have made this sector indispensable in modern society. In many areas, the NGO sector could supersede the public and private sectors. Stiles (2002) finds that, "NGOs, by virtue of their relatively independent character, their non-profit making status, and their link to the poor communities that they have generally served well, offers donors a relatively safe and convenient means of avoiding both public and private sector and all their dangers" (p.836). So this sector is addressed as the third sector, while public and private are named as first and second sectors (Panda, 2007; Lewis, 2005), and it works as supplementary to the other two in any country. NGO activities may be broadly categorised as, income generation programmes, provision of social services and social organizing (Buckland, 1998). Najam (1996) identifies the beneficiaries/clients, the donors/patrons and the NGO itself/employees are the most vital stakeholders in the NGO sector. In the NGO sector knowledge transfer mainly occurs between the NGOs and their beneficiaries. The beneficiaries need to absorb knowledge received from the NGOs. Bangladesh is a country of South East Asia. The total population of Bangladesh is 140.6 million (male population: 72 million; Female population: 68.6 million), out of which 34.6 million people (24.61%) live in rural areas. 50.62 million (36%) of the population live in poverty (World Development Report, 2002). The literacy rate of the country is 43.1% (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2009). From the above statistics, it is clear that more than 40% of the population live under the level of poverty. More than 50% of the population is illiterate. 35% of the country's population is enjoying the benefits of the NGOs (Devine, 2003) as more than 22,000 NGOs are providing their services to the people in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2006). It may be mentioned that a huge number of country's illiterate population are the NGO-beneficiaries. The illiterate beneficiaries find it difficult to absorb knowledge transferred by the NGOs.

The NGO activity intensified in Bangladesh after the cyclone disaster of November 1970. A cyclone injured nation and the liberation war of 1971 paralysed the country's socio-economic conditions. Many local and foreign NGOs came forward to rescue the country from the privations of social and economic devastation. Supply of relief goods, distribution of medicine, healthcare, construction of shelters and rehabilitation were the main agenda of the NGOs at that time. The NGO activities got momentum in Bangladesh after the liberation war of 1971 (Rahman, 2006; Lewis, 1997; Devine, 2006; Karim, 2001; Karim, 2008), although one or two NGOs had been operating as missionary organisations before this time. CARE, a US based NGO was pioneer in starting activities in 1949 in the then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. The number of NGOs in 1980s accelerated in an experiential fashion with multidimensional activities such as education of rural people, health and medicine, poverty elevation, and family planning.

The gradual expansion of the NGOs has made this sector a powerful and strong industry in Bangladesh. Due to their activities in human resource development, they could earn an inseparable entity in the culture of the country. NGOs transfer knowledge on microcredit (Rahman, 2006a), social awareness (Ahmad, 1999), health (Mahamud, 1998), education (Buckland, 1998), agriculture (Lewis, 1997), income generating skills (Begum, 2008), disaster management (Rahman, 2000) etc. in Bangladesh. Thus they could reach the doorsteps of millions

with new hope, where government activities have yet to start (Ahmad and Townsend, 1998). Presently NGOs in Bangladesh are at the top in respect of contributions to the country's development (Devine, 2003). Knowledge Management is progressing into a new paradigm (Takeuchi, 2001). Its popularity has increased significantly, especially since 1995, and it has become the elementary theme of both management philosophy and management tools (Edvardsson, 2006), with multi-dimensional and advanced approaches (Chae and Bloodgood, 2006). Knowledge management is comparatively new (Schütt, 2003), promising (Jashapara, 2004; Prusak, 2001; Beckman, 1999) and is a popular segment in the dictionary of management (Nan, 2008). Organisations could realise the importance of managing knowledge nowadays. It deeply focuses and relies on a strong culture of cooperative, sharing and supportive, social community, with a view to achieving organisational strategic requirements (Debowski, 2006). Knowledge Management ensures superior and excellent productivity (Fireston and McElroy, 2005). Several theorists and researchers (Gamble and Blackwell, 2001; Zuckerman & Buell, 1998; Jasimuddin et al., 2006) have mentioned elements of the Knowledge Management process. For example, Gamble and Blackwell (2001) find identifying, organizing, transferring and using to be some of these elements. Zuckerman and Buell (1998) identify collection, storage, sharing, and linking as part of the process. Jasimuddin et al. (2006) describe identifying capturing, storing, retrieving, and transferring as the important elements of knowledge transfer. Heavin and Neville (2006) find capture, storage, dissemination, and creation are the crucial ingredients of knowledge management process. So various elements of the knowledge management process have been proposed by the researchers (Holsapple and Jones, 2006). The phases may be fragmented, and divided into various sub-phases. The major elements of the knowledge management process are: creation, storage, transfer and use.

Knowledge transfer is receiving wide attention (Argote et al., 2000) as it is essential for the survival and prosperity (Wathne et al., 1996) of the NGOs. Learning and implementations of others' experiences for social and organisational benefit necessitate the relevance of the concept of knowledge transfer. New knowledge may promote organisational learning and innovations in new methods and practices, which may also be absorbed into routines and culture (Darr and Kurtzberg, 2000). Out of the new knowledge all stakeholders of the NGOs may be benefitted. Knowledge transfer provides value (Hogberg and Edvinsson, 1998) and force (Hall, 2001) to the present knowledge stock of the NGOs and their beneficiaries.

Several researchers (Szulanski, 1996; van Wijk et al., 2008) argue that lack of absorption capacity in the recipient's end is a barrier to knowledge transfer. Davenport and Prusak (2000) go further by arguing "if knowledge is not absorbed, it has not been transferred" (p. 101). Many knowledge management researchers consider knowledge absorption as an integral part of knowledge transfer, but unfortunately they did not empirically examine the impact of gender and age on knowledge absorption.

Many researchers (Naderi, Abdullah and Aizan, 2008; Zaidi, 2010; Lynn and Kanazawa, 2011) have investigated the IQ level of the males and females. However, hardly any knowledge management guru (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Chae and Bloodgood, 2006; Hasnain, 2012; Jashapara, 2004; Prusak, 2001; Hasnain and Jasimuddin, 2012; Argote, Ingram, Levine and Moreland, 2000) has investigated the issue. Naderi, Abdullah and Aizan (2008) investigated the differences of IQ levels between men and women. Lynn and Kanazawa (2011) carried out a longitudinal study on sex difference in intelligence. Stoet, et al. (2013) investigates the capabilities of men and women on multi-tasks. Zaidi (2010) made a review on gender differences in human brain. She exhibits the anatomical differences of male and female human brains and finally concluded "both sexes are equal in intelligence, but tend to operate differently" (p. 37). Similarly, Jensen and Johnson (1994) find that there is no impact of sex on IQ. Chowdhury, Butel, Hakki and Ismail (2009) argue "transfer of knowledge includes two actions; one is transmission which means sending knowledge to potential receiver, and another is absorption meaning that knowledge must be incorporated either by a person or a group" (p. 53). So Knowledge transfer is useless if it is not absorbed by the knowledge recipient (Davenport and Prusak, 2000).

Research Methodology

The present study needs a detail view of the topic under study and a solid validity. The researcher here studies the subject in the natural setting (Bangladeshi NGO-scenario). The interviewees had the chances to explain their views and experiences on the subject matter, while the questionnaire-respondents help in finding the validity of the interview findings and vice versa. In research, it is the use of multiple but independent measures (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002) in a same phenomena or programme (Patton, 1990) under study. More comprehensively, Denzin (1978) finds triangulation as "combination of methodologies in the study of same phenomenon" (p. 291). In fact, it is the art of employing of one method to cross-check the results of another (Jankowicz, 2005).

Multi-staged sampling as described by Saunders et al., 1997) is followed. This study carried out semi-structured interviews for the NGO-employees and questionnaire survey for the NGO-beneficiaries simultaneously. For sampling the whole Bangladesh is geographically divided into seven administrative divisions. From each division a single district, from the selected district a single Thana, from Thana an union and from the selected union 5 beneficiaries were randomly selected for questionnaire survey (5X7=35). Drop and collect (e.g. in person)

technique was applied as the respondents (the NGO-beneficiaries) needed a detail explanation about this study and questionnaire. Further, this technique (drop and collect) is supported by many researchers (Brown, 1987; Hair, et al., 2007; Ibeh, Brock and Zhou, 2004). This technique is also fast, reliable, cheap and suitable to those who are having the resource constraints (Brown, 1987). Out of listed 2445 NGOs (excluding the cancelled memberships) 14 NGOs (out of which (i) 7- large NGOs and (ii) 7- small NGOs) were purposefully selected for the interviews. Total 54-semistructured interviews consisting of their top, mid and lower levels based on salary grade (18 from each) employees were selected for the semi-structured interviews. The field works of this research were carried out in Bangladesh. This research went for qualitative investigation (e.g. semi-structured interviews) and quantitative study (e.g. survey questionnaires) simultaneously. Some scholars (Creswell, 1994; Creswell and Clark, 2007) emphasis on simultaneous and sequential triangulations. In the simultaneous triangulation, both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used equally, separately and usually results are examined to cross-validate the findings (Steckler et al., 1992; Creswell, 1994). For this research all interviews (recorded and interview notes) are transcribed. This research makes an endeavor to extract final emerged themes from the study. This study borrowed the procedural guidelines to tabulate and present the content analysed data from Jankowicz (2005, p. 272-73). The data categories are put as per the research issues of this study. This study applies content analysis technique to analyze quantitative data. Regarding the qualitative data analysis techniques Jankowicz (2005) finds “the main technique associated with semi-structured interviews is called content analysis” (p. 270). Now-a-days content analysis technique is popular to academics, commercial researchers and communication practitioners (Neuendorf, 2002). For this research all interviews (recorded and interview notes) are transcribed. This research makes an endeavor to extract final emerged themes from the study. This study borrowed the procedural guidelines to tabulate and present the content analysed data from Jankowicz (2005, p. 272-73). The data categories are put as per the research issues of this study. Three copies of the coding sheet were prepared. To check the coding, two coders were requested. They were given the hard copy of the coding sheets. Firstly, this researcher coded using the symbol tick (✓) in a sheet, Coder-A used the symbol star/cross (* / X) in a sheet and Coder-B used circle (o) in a sheet. The coding sheets of coder-A and B were collected. Now the differences of the coder-A from this researcher are transferred to the sheet of this researcher. Further, the differences of the coder-B from this researcher are transferred to the sheet of this researcher. At this stage, both the coders’ percentage agreements with this researcher is calculated separately (e.g. Neuendorf, 2002). [add up the number of cases that were coded in the same way by two coders and dividing by the number of cases. For example: Number of cases agreed=12. Total number of cases=16. So % agreed=12/16=75%]. For this study the coders had an excellent rate (e.g. above 90%) matching with this researcher. The minimum level of 80% is usually treated as normal (e.g. Riffe, Lacy and Fico, 1998). Here the rating is higher. So the other researchers may also draw the similar conclusion.

Findings and Discussion

It is mentioned in the research methodology section that this study interviewed 54-NGO officials consisting of top, mid and lower levels based on salary grade (18 from each). Table-1 and figure-1 exhibit the results of the interviews.

Table-1: The NGO-employees’ opinion on the male and female knowledge absorption capacity (N=54)

	Total in favour of males	Total in favour of females	No Comment	Total
Numbers	13	39	2	54
Percentages (%)	24.07%	72.22%	3.7%	100%

Out of 54-interviewees 13 (24.07%) informed that males’ absorption capacity is higher than those of the females, while 39 (72.22%) interviewees opined that females’ absorption capacity is higher than those of the males’ absorption capacity. Couple of opinions of the interviewees are appended below:

An NGO official claims,

“Female clients absorb and implement the transferred knowledge better. Out of 100%, I think 85% females absorb and implement the transferred knowledge, while only 10% males are capable of doing the same”

An NGO-field worker finds,

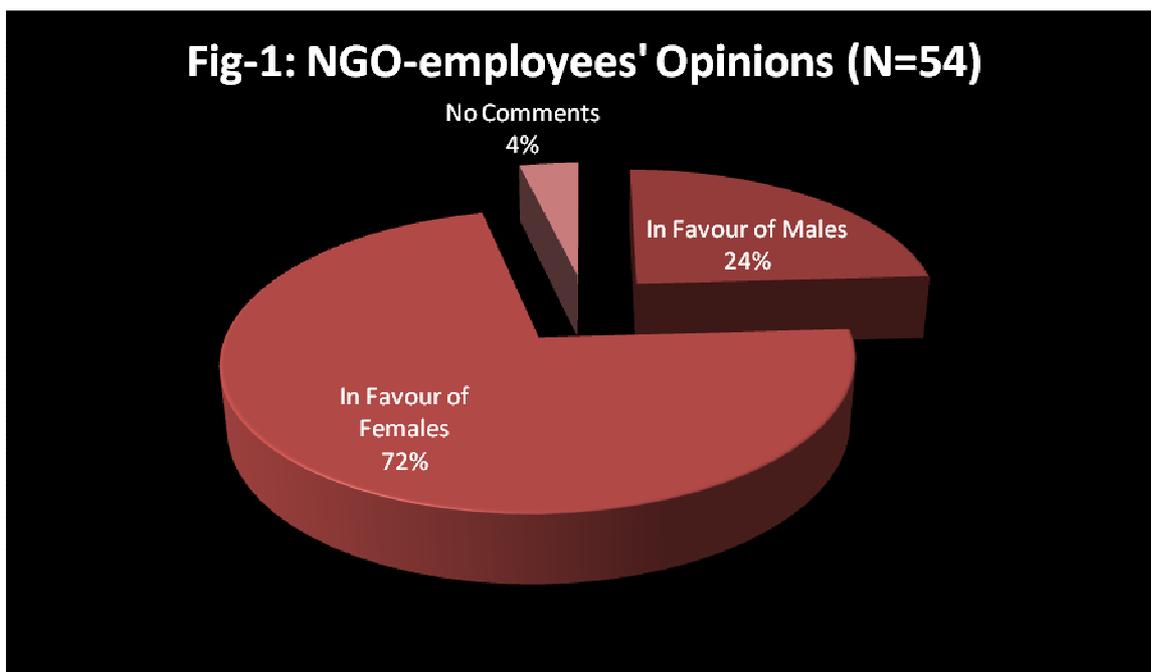
“Female clients are more active than those of the male clients. Female clients absorb and implement our transferred knowledge more. So female clients are getting the results of our knowledge. The success rate of female clients is higher than [those of] males. 70% female clients get the good results”

An Assistant Manager of an NGO observes,

“...Among the males and females, I find females are more honest, sincere and trustworthy in absorbing and implementing the transferred knowledge. In maximum projects this thing is reflected. The female clients are active and they want their social and economical developments”

A senior official of an NGO informs,

“I have two training centres and I have huge experience on this issue [impact of gender on knowledge absorption]. In case of knowledge, in our country the female groups are sincere than those of the male groups. Our females have many potentialities than those of our males. We do not want to recognise it or we are ignorant about it. Let us take that we do not know it. I have twelve trades/businesses in Mollarkat [name of a place]. We have tailoring, sewing, block batik etc. At another centre we have nursing trades for the females. In that centre we have many trades for the females. It is seen that attendance rate in the female trades is above 90%. If you visit the male trades, you will find the attendance rate is 25%. Males do not want to attend the trades. In our country women are very sincere and can quickly absorb the lessons. Their sincerity and knowledge absorption capacity is almost double than that of the men. Women are very punctual. They listen to the instructions and the lessons very carefully. They also follow those. But the males do not want not follow”

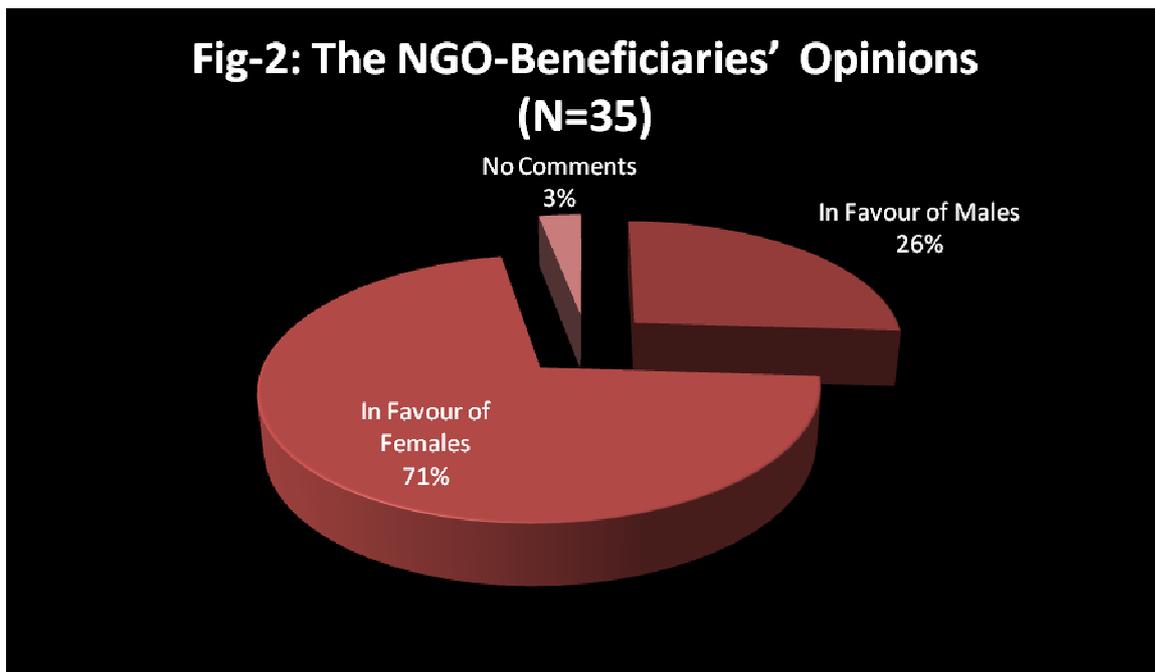


It is mentioned in the research methodology section that this study administered (5X7=) 35 questionnaires for the NGO-beneficiaries covering the whole Bangladesh. It followed multi-staged sampling. Table-2 and figure-2 exhibit the results of the questionnaire survey.

Table-2: The Beneficiaries’ opinions on the male and female knowledge absorption capacity (N=35)

	Total in favour of males	Total in favour of females	No Comment	Total
Numbers	09	25	01	35
Percentage (%)	25.71%	71.43%	2.86%	100%

Out of 35-interviewees 09 (25.71%) informed that males’ absorption capacity is higher than those of the females, while 25 (71.43%) interviewees opined that females’ absorption capacity is higher than those of the males’ absorption capacity.



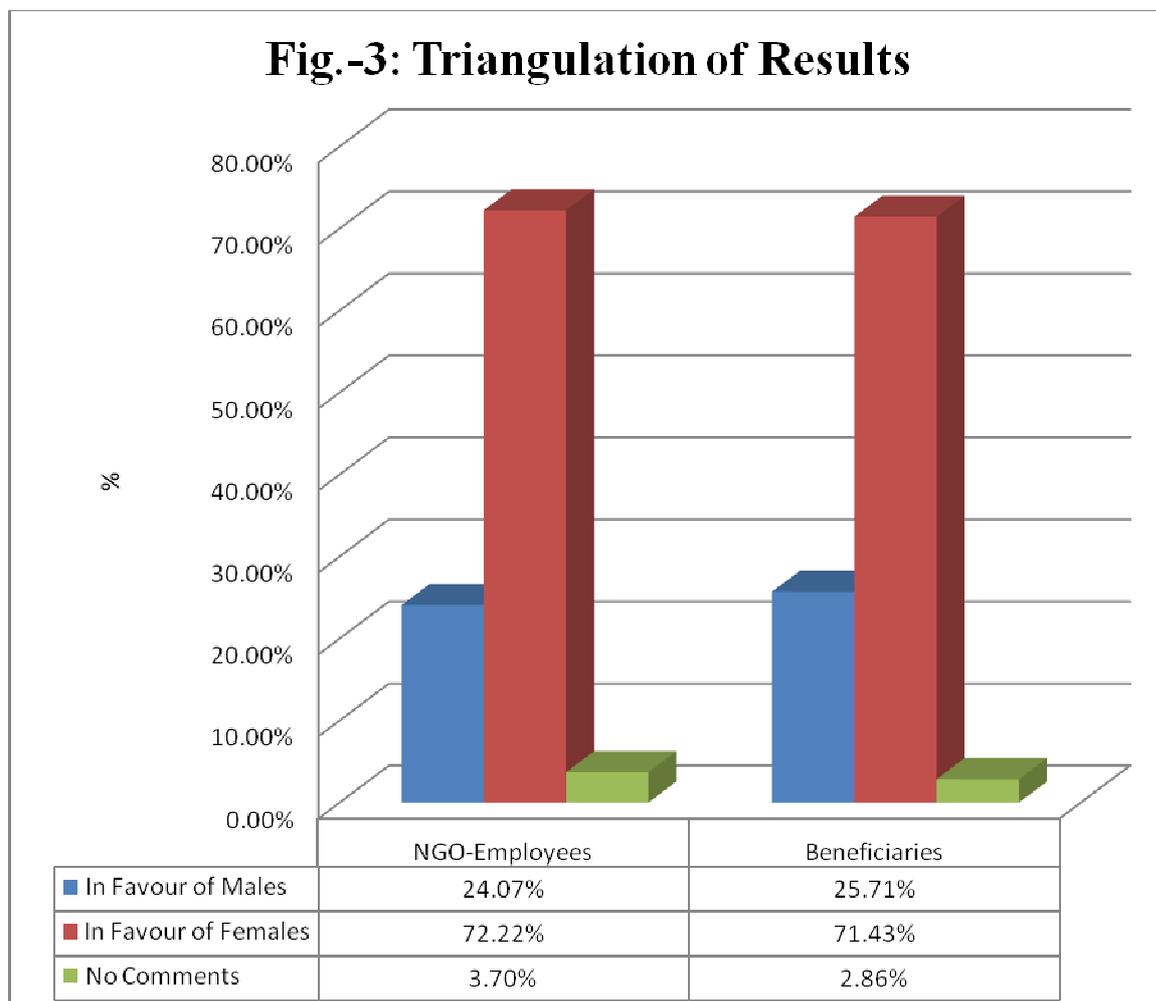
The triangulation of the findings in respect of the opinions of NGO-employees and the beneficiaries are exhibiting a comprehensive picture (see table-3 and figure-3). A side by side study of the findings depicts that in both the cases, the NGO-employees and their beneficiaries believe that female-beneficiaries absorb more knowledge than those of the male beneficiaries.

Table-3: Triangulation of Results NGO-employees (N=54) and beneficiaries’ (N=35) opinions on the male and female knowledge absorption capacity

	Total in favour of males	Total in favour of females	No Comment	Total
The NGO-employees (%)	24.07%	72.22%	3.7%	100%
The Beneficiaries (%)	25.71%	71.43%	2.86%	100%

Naderi, Abdullah and Aizan (2008) carried out the empirical investigation on the differences between the intelligence level of the male and female university students. They had a sample of 48 males and 105 females. They find that there is no significant difference between the intelligence level and the male and female students. Zaidi (2010) had the similar results. Blinkhorn (2005) also finds that there is no IQ difference between the male

and female university students. Geary, Sauls, Liu and Hoard (2000) find “males show significantly higher mean scores on the arithmetical computations, arithmetical reasoning, and special cognition measures” (p. 337). In their study Lynn and Kanazawa (2011) reveal that after the age of 16-years males start to develop higher IQ than females. 7 and 11-years girls have an IQ of 1 IQ point. But at the age of 16 the boys get an IQ point of 1.8. But the girls do not. In their recent study, Stoet et al (2013) find that women have better multi-tasking skills than men. It may be noted that in maximum cases the literature reflects the superior IQ and knowledge absorption capacity of the males than those of the females. However, the findings of this study are different from those studies. Here it is empirically established that the female NGO-beneficiaries have more knowledge absorption capacity than those of the males. It is difficult to describe the reasons for such knowledge absorption capacity of women. The Bangladeshi NGO context is different as here the female NGO beneficiaries are more sincere than those of the males. Further, the males may not like to receive and execute the knowledge of the NGOs like the women. Without empirical investigation, it would not be appropriate to conclude that outside the NGOs sector, in general the women in Bangladesh possess more knowledge absorption capacity than men



Conclusion and Future Research

Many researchers have studied the relationship between the human information/ knowledge retention capacity and demographic variables. The NGOs and their beneficiaries are the main actors in this sector and knowledge transfer mainly occurs between these two stakeholders. The beneficiaries’ successful absorption of knowledge indicates that the knowledge transfer was an effective one. If the transferred knowledge is not absorbed by the beneficiaries properly- it indicates that the entire NGO mission is a failure one as the NGOs are created for the socio-economic development of the beneficiaries, and there is no substitute to knowledge transfer for the socio-economic development of the poor and the deprived. So it is imperative to know the impact of the

demographical variables (specially, gender) on the knowledge absorption capacity of the beneficiaries. Bangladesh is selected as the context of this study as the highest number of NGOs is in operation here. More so, the positive contribution of the NGOs to the socio-economic development of Bangladesh is highly documented. The study finds the similar results from the interviews and the questionnaire survey. The triangulated result of the interviews and the questionnaire survey on the NGO-beneficiaries present that the female NGO-beneficiaries have more knowledge absorption capacity than those of the males in the NGO-sector of Bangladesh. Future researchers may carry out the similar study on other demographic variables of the beneficiaries. Future researchers may also conduct similar study in a different country.

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