

## Addressing the Loopholes of Female Education: A Study on the SSC and HSC Level Students of Rural Bangladesh

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### Abstract

Holistic development of a country requires diligent participation from every section of people regardless of race, class or gender. In this respect, female education is considered as a dynamic ladder for human resource development in the truest sense. This study aimed at revealing the loopholes of female education among the secondary and higher secondary level female students in rural Bangladesh. This qualitative research followed a semi-structured way of interviewing the participants who were basically the female students of SSC and HSC level and some other persons associated to their education. The participants were primarily chosen from Shariatpur district and Madaripur district of central Bangladesh as the representatives of rural areas. The findings of the research revealed a number of barriers faced by female students including familial inclination to female education, lack of social awareness, financial insufficiency, misinterpretation of religious values, sometimes the psychological ignorance of the students themselves as well. This research also shed some light on the reduction of the obstacles. It recommended some crucial moves like the initiation of educational workers, enough financial assistance, ensuring moral and religious support etc. to smoothen the way to female enrichment through education.

**Keywords:** Secondary and Higher Secondary Level of Education, Female Education, Dropout, Rural Bangladesh

### Background

In Bangladesh, the dropout rate after the primary schooling to SSC and HSC level is alarming, more specifically the dropout rate of female students after JSC (Junior School Certificates) or before SSC and HSC, though the overall dropout rate has been decreased (ESBGP 2017). The achievement of Bangladesh in primary level female education is appreciable. From 2011 to 2015, the gross enrolment rate of girls in primary education was higher than boys. Moreover the dropout rate of female students is lower than males in primary level; whereas in secondary and higher secondary level it fluctuates. Before 2015, the boys' dropout rate was higher than girls' in secondary level, and after 2015 it turned in the reverse way. Not only the dropout rate, but also the enrollment rate has been decreased. For higher secondary level, the gap between male and female dropout has been increased. In the year 2011 this gap was only 1.27 that increased to 7.77 in year 2015; and definitely the dropout rate increased for female (BANBEIS 2015). The dropout rate in rural Bangladesh is higher compare to urban part, and female dropout is higher in both rural and urban Bangladesh.

**Table 1: Enrollment and Completion Rate in secondary and higher secondary level 2011 – 2015**

| Year | Gross Enrollment (%) in SSC |       | Gross Enrollment (%) in HSC |        | Gross Completion (%) in SSC |       | Gross Completion (%) in HSC |        |
|------|-----------------------------|-------|-----------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|-------|-----------------------------|--------|
|      | Boys                        | Girls | Male                        | Female | Boys                        | Girls | Male                        | Female |
| 2011 | 57.04                       | 66.91 | 25.48                       | 25.96  | 53.27                       | 43.57 | 73.66                       | 74.93  |
| 2012 | 57.37                       | 71.31 | 48.65                       | 53.66  | 65.10                       | 47.64 | 72.10                       | 75.41  |
| 2013 | 59.63                       | 71.86 | 48.65                       | 53.66  | 65.82                       | 51.11 | 79.69                       | 76.71  |
| 2014 | 62.94                       | 75.88 | 42.29                       | 52.05  | 65.48                       | 52.33 | 74.68                       | 82.95  |
| 2015 | 67.75                       | 77.84 | 42.12                       | 35.86  | 66.28                       | 54.08 | 83.17                       | 75.40  |

Source: BANBEIS report 2015

**Table 2: Dropout rate in secondary and higher secondary level 2011 – 2015**

| Year | Dropout (%) in SSC |       | Dropout (%) in HSC |        |
|------|--------------------|-------|--------------------|--------|
|      | Boys               | Girls | Male               | Female |
| 2011 | 46.73              | 56.43 | 26.34              | 25.07  |
| 2012 | 34.90              | 52.36 | 20.31              | 23.29  |
| 2013 | 34.18              | 48.89 | 20.31              | 23.29  |
| 2014 | 34.52              | 47.67 | 25.32              | 17.05  |
| 2015 | 33.72              | 45.92 | 16.83              | 24.60  |

Source: BANBEIS report 2015

From the tables, we may get the current scenario of female education, in secondary and higher secondary level. The dropout rate is tremendously high. So this is high time to find out the causes of the tremendous increasing of female dropout in secondary and higher secondary level. Otherwise, ensuring women development will certainly be disturbed. If we do not have any clue about the traps that endangers the girls' institutional education in the right time, we won't be able to recognize their future chances that they deserve. Therefore, it is very imperative to comprehend these huddles (Drèze & Sen 2013)

In rural Bangladesh, the obstacles for female education are basically the outcome of illiteracy, financial insolvency, religious misinterpretation, family attitude or overall socio-economic structure that we learn from different sources. Those documents are mostly focused on female education or finding out the barriers of female education overall, rather than any particular level of education. It is already known that, Bangladesh government started different projects for giving stipend to the female students from class 1 to 12 in rural area, that proved to be an amazing achievement in primary level, but might not be sufficient enough to decrease the dropout rate in secondary and higher secondary level. Previous research tried to find out the obstacles by collecting the data from the current student. Current students may know one side of the struggles, which they may overcome; at the same time it is significant to find out the reasons from the point of view of the dropout students who are the real sufferers and their guardians who are the decision makers. This research tried to find out these obstacles by interviewing the current students, drop-out students, their teachers and their parents. As this research was not only based on the data from current students, but also from the drop out students, teachers and parents, we may assume to reach some strong findings. Moreover, this study was not a general one which discussed about female education in every level, rather it focused thoroughly on a particular level of female education, that was from class 9 to 12 (secondary and higher secondary level), as maximum number of dropouts was recorded at this level of female education.

### Literature Review

Globally female education is considered as panacea to sustainable social development. In fact, it is considered to be a key element for empowering women (Hill & Elizabeth 1995). It is identified as the precondition of balanced and equitable socio-economic development. In case of education, developing and underdeveloped countries has a large numbers of dropout students or out of school children, and girls' dropout and out of schooling is higher than boys'. At the same time, this issue is a key concern for policy making in developing or underdeveloped countries. As a result, there is a rich literature on finding out the reasons for dropping out of the students, and Bangladesh is not out of them. Large numbers of literature has been found on gender and education in Bangladesh with several international conferences and summits especially from the year 1990 to 2000, which mainly focused on population, development, education and women. These conferences and summits revealed the all-inclusive messages of promising education for each and every children (Chowdhury et al. 2002). It can also be noted that most of the international conferences and summits drew highest amount of attention to the abandonment of discrimination in educating all irrespective of age, caste, gender etc. (UNDP 1999). According to these evidences collected, a number of varied initiatives brought about some notable changes to the development of education, making it approachable to everyone (UNDP 1996). But in reality the permission to the access as well as completion of girls' education in secondary and higher secondary level is very much unwelcoming, especially in the context of patriarchal social setting where traditional gendered norm is maintained strictly (rural Bangladesh).

Prevalent familial ideology, that is patriarchy, dominates the beingness of the women in Bangladesh which was widely acknowledged by the researchers who worked on gender ideology and analyzed the role of women's involvement in different branches of progressive activities (Karim 2006a, Karim 2006b, Karim et al. 2012, Khattak et al. 2008). Many literature have showed that in the rural Bangladesh, where religious dominancy with misinterpretation exists ('a *Purda* bound society'), equal access to women education is no more than a lame theory in reality, leave alone the implementation and the situation is worse for the underprivileged population (Chowdhury et al. 2002, BBS 2001, BBS 2002, BBS 2005, BBS 2008). This research has showed that this is not only true for the disadvantaged population, but also true for many well-established families in rural Bangladesh,

who take 'not educating' or 'early marriage' of their girls as pride. Consequentially, girls face a serious crisis in meeting the requirement of participating in educational activities, being a victim of gender-biased socio-cultural atmosphere (NIPORT 2005). Another issue that influences the girls' educational attainment and sometimes, causes their withdrawal from studies after a certain period of time is financial scarcity (Ali 2008), and in this situation, the unjust familial treatments get boosted up considering girls as the burden of the family, with no earning capability and on the contrary, boys are thought to be the asset for the family who will add to the family income (Cain et al. 1979, Jahan 1994, Karim 2006a, Karim 2006b, Karim et al. 2012). This unequal ideology in terms of economic crisis stimulates the family decision of educating the male child of the family rather than a female one. Other studies revealed that the poor families are more biased in this aspect if compared to the rich ones (BBS 2001, BBS 2002, BBS 2005, BBS 2008, NIPORT 2005). Therefore, the ratio of female students with little or no education is very high in the under-privileged, marginalized families where the parents, being trapped by their social, cultural and financial life, want their daughters married off quickly to get rid of the burden (NIPORT 2005, Baden et al. 1994, Baden 1996).

Traditional conservative gender ideology still exists in rural Bangladesh (some urban part as well) which expects that women should be restricted within the households (Baden et al. 1994, Baden 1996, Cain et al. 1979, Hashmi 2000, Jahan 1994). They are considered too valuable as household workers to be able to fulfill household responsibilities (Hashmi 2000, Jahan 1994, Karim 2006a), which plausibly limit their chances to be attached with educational institutions after a certain age. A very notable variation in the household finance is made by the frequent participation of the children in household chores like looking after the pets or taking care of the siblings when the mother is not available for any reason like earning money and so on (UNICEF 1992). This is a start to the girls, having added responsibilities with the passing days, in a traditional rural poor family as she will require to join in the maintenance of the house ultimately. That is why the guardians are always reluctant to their girls' education (Ali 2008). However, in rural Bangladesh, there is a number of education programs run by the NGOs for improving the women's situation though that does not look very fruitful in terms of developing under-privileged women and their education level. These may make people aware in a very little number, and that is why only a small number of women can go up to the secondary and higher secondary level of education. Present research attempts to explore the reasons behind the negligence of female education in SSC and HSC.

### **Research Methodology**

This qualitative study was an exploratory one which built the proposition to follow the social happenings in a natural context paying required attention to the opinion of the participants (Mays & Pope 1995). The article was based on in-depth interviews. In-depth interview is a type of semi-structured interview which plays a significant role in identifying the individual perspective of the people (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2010).

This study was conducted among 30 participants from the Madaripur district and Shariatpur district of Bangladesh. Among the participants, 10 participants were dropout from colleges; 5 of them were from Madaripur and the other 5 from Shariatpur. In addition, 10 more participants, still pursuing their higher secondary level of education, were chosen evenly again from both the districts. The last 10 participants were picked from the teachers and guardians/parents of the students, 5 from the each type. Among 5 teachers, 2 were from Madaripur, 3 were from Shariatpur. Similarly, among 5 parents, 2 were from Madaripur and 3 were from Shariatpur. The interviews were conducted in both the languages, Bengali and English, depending on the comfortability of the participants.

### **Findings**

The availability of regular education to the girls is highly influenced by a number of underlying complications (Jeffery & Jeffery 2002) and the educational output proves the discrimination solidly. In this research, the participants were interviewed to get their opinion about the barriers female students face in their attainment in education. They emphasized on some common obstacles to their study through their concerns, sometimes, varied in different points.

In the rural areas, the social structure is immensely manipulated by patriarchal gender ideology to get a family dominated by patriarchy (Baden et al. 1994, Baden 1996). Education of the children of a family mostly rests on the outlook of the family member, specially the guardians. In Bangladesh, patriarchal society is a prevalent set-up almost everywhere (Akmam 2002). Therefore, the head of the family is selected from male members of the family like father or any other male person if father is not available (Hashmi 2000, Jahan 1994). As these male members are the decision takers, they do not pay much heed to their daughters' education, thinking it a waste of time and money. According to many participants, it was true to many village girls, especially when they passed their secondary school certificate examination. Moreover, mothers of this girls played little role as they themselves were illiterate most of the cases.

In addition, early marriage was another concern of the participants which again has a relation with family

attitude. As the parents did not want their girls to go to the next level of education, they felt the urgency to get their daughters married off without wasting much time. These early marriages resulted in early motherhood and extra-responsibilities of the family causing pre-mature death of the academic career in most cases. In the rural areas of Bangladesh, the percentage of women, who are aged between 20 to 49 and married off before 18, is 78.4 whereas the situation is a bit better in case of urban areas having 65.2% (BBS 2008).

Some participants even argued that their education got hampered sometimes for the egoistical attitude of the parents as some parents were too proud and believed that their daughters were always retained inside the house, keeping their hundred years customs alive.

Some of the participants, specially the students confessed that the girls had lack to devotion and integrity, sometimes, to education which paced their dropout. They also mentioned that these insensible attitudes were sometimes influenced by the society and family they belonged as their senses and way of thinking got moulded in the way their family thought. They also got misdirected when they found out the conventional rituals in the society and readily accepted it as their fate. There girls thought that their ultimate address would be the in-laws where they would be taking care of the family and children and that's why female education was not significant, specially in the higher secondary level.

Almost all the participants emphasized on social insecurity as one of major limitations of female education. Women feel it less secured in public places, especially the grown-up girls in the rural areas. Some of participants, dropped-out of secondary and higher secondary level, informed that they got victimized to different types of insulting comments, eve-teasing in their way to school. When the parents came to know about these incidents, they felt insecure which influenced their decision, to some extent, to stop their girls' education. Some other participants who were currently in higher secondary level also confirmed that they confronted the same harassment which made the study life difficult. Moreover, the participants added that the community was not very cooperative either as in most cases; they had the notion of keeping the grown-up girls inside the home and not likely to bother if they, who did not pay attention to them, got harassed outsides. This indifferent thinking of the society basically gets its root in the unaware perception of the people living there. These people, representing the society, never bother about the holistic development of the society. They think the males as the sole contributor to the development which is the outcomes of their tendency to maintain the age-old gender biased custom.

One very significant obstacle to female education is the insufficiency in financial sector. Some of participants, who were parents, accepted that in many cases, it became difficult for them to educate their girls for the monetary constraints. Some parents started sending their daughters to schools but a certain period of time, they did not have the ability to carry on their studies. In case of more than one child, they preferred the boys to attend colleges instead of girls as girls might be married off soon and boys' educational costs were some sort of investment for the parents' future. They also focused on the irregular support from the government fund.

Religion is always predominant in Bangladesh, especially in the rural areas. Religious speeches carry heavy impact on the people. According to some participants, religious misinterpretation that women should not go outside of home or should not have any job, created impediments in their way to education. This type of misleading information from the conservative religious leaders demotivates the mass people about women's education and make them believe that educated women may get out-of control to accept the male dominance. Girls' education and women empowerment is in the center of their dis-belief (Hashmi 2000) and they think it against the law of their respective religion.

Lack of logistic support was another hindrance to female education, pointed out by some participants. This is a problem for both the male and female students but girls are obviously the worst victims. Gender biasness is also prevalent in educational institutions like schools and colleges. The participants, both the students and teachers, accepted this reality. Some of them also accused the social set-up for this behavior, some participants pointed out that they did not get equal treatment for example: participation in different sports, boys were preferred or the absence of boys were more crucially examined by the teachers. This type of attitude disturbs the educational environment. The participants also figured out some problem in sanitation for girls as separate facilities were unavailable and that discouraged them to come to colleges when they had health issues.

**Table 3: Reasons behind the increased dropouts in reference to the response of participants**

| Reason                        | Current Students |     | Dropout Students |      | Parents      |     | Teachers     |      |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-----|------------------|------|--------------|-----|--------------|------|
|                               | Participants     | (%) | Participants     | (%)  | Participants | (%) | Participants | (%)  |
| Unnecessity of education      | 3                | 30% | 7                | 70%  | 3            | 60% | 2            | 40%  |
| Performing domestic chores    | 5                | 50% | 10               | 100% | 4            | 80% | 4            | 80%  |
| Unwillingness of parents      | 7                | 70% | 8                | 80%  | 2            | 40% | 4            | 80%  |
| Lack of integrity among girls | 5                | 50% | 2                | 20%  | 2            | 40% | 1            | 20%  |
| Social Insecurity             | 6                | 60% | 5                | 50%  | 4            | 80% | 2            | 40%  |
| Financial Insufficiency       | 4                | 40% | 4                | 40%  | 4            | 80% | 4            | 80%  |
| Misinterpretation of Religion | 2                | 20% | 1                | 10%  | 2            | 40% | 5            | 100% |
| Lack of infrastructure        | 3                | 30% | 7                | 70%  | 4            | 80% | 4            | 80%  |

### Recommendations

Female education is beset with bunch of problems though it is one of the top most priorities for a nation to develop. Therefore, it is always significant to dig deep into the barriers women face in their education to find out some possible remedies.

In traditional rural Bangladesh, female students go through a lot of obstacles. In this study, the findings from the interviews pointed out the limitations of female education in our rural areas and these obstacles had its roots in the family attitude, social and religious behaviors, logistics supports and overall the psychological set-up of the students.

Considering the financial insufficiency, the amount of stipend provided by the government to the female students works as a motivator to the students and their family. This type promotional activity has got direct connection with the financial support that most of the families require to let their children carry on their studies. Moreover, when a family stops worrying about the costing of their daughter's education, they will be more supportive. Therefore government stipend is supposed to be a great promoter of female education. Very recently, the government stipend project has reduced the pace it started with a few years ago. In fact, only selected number of students who fulfill the requirements of government get the stipend in the secondary and higher secondary level which is enough to demotivate the poverty-stricken families to stop their child's education, specially the daughters. Therefore, this stipend policy should be renovated and regularized, at least in terms of female education. Further, fair disbursement of this stipend is also important so that the intended students get the maximum benefit out of it. It is the responsibility of the education ministry and local authority to ensure the fair distribution of the stipend.

The initiation of education support workers to motivate female education, referring to the number of benefits available to women if educated, can be a worth-while step. These education support workers need to be centrally appointed by the government under the guidance of the local authority. In addition, occasional training session can be arranged to make the workers more efficient as motivating the parents to get their daughters education in rural Bangladesh is certainly a difficult task. These workers will go door to door and will keep each family aware of female education. Special attention is required for the dropout students and make them start their academic journey afresh. Moreover, these education workers follow-up students on a regular basis to be informed about their participation. The last month of the year like December and the first month of year, January is the perfect time for following-up and managing the dropout students back to school. Besides, the period between the end of secondary school certificate exam and the starting of higher secondary admission, usually March to June, is very crucial. If the parents can be motivated at this time period, they will allow their girls to continue education to the next level.

According to the constitution of Bangladesh, she is a secular country. People from different religion live here though most of the areas are muslim dominated. However, rural people of Bangladesh are always more influenced by the religious discussions and comments regardless of any particular religion. That's why if the necessity of women education can be transmitted by the religious institutions or the religious leaders, it will reach to the mass people easily with better effect. But it is only possible if these religious leaders can be convinced about the usefulness of female education to the nation and to make this happen, again the government support is important. Meetings and seminars on the significance of female education can be organized specially

for the religious leaders to demonstrate the true picture of an educated nation. The motivation, the instructions one may call, should come altogether from the central government, local authority and NGOs to the religious leaders to make people aware about female education.

Infrastructural development is one of the basic needs of rural education in Bangladesh. Lack of teachers, insufficient number of class rooms and books, damaged transportation can demotivate a student to participate in school or college activities. This support is even more imperative for the girls if they are not given some extra facilities. For example, sufficient number of washroom or resting places should separately be allotted for girls. These extra support will stop them feeling vulnerable anymore and make them comfortable in the schools and colleges.

Psychological support is always considered highly to get a job done. In addition, the learning attitude of the children varies according to the social learning strategy which is always considered as a significant contributor to natural learning (Bandura 1971). According to the findings of this study, some participants of this study and their parents do not want to bother about education which is basically the result of their psychological absurdity. Therefore, they need moral guidance. In this case, teachers fit in the role more appropriately than anyone else as they work like a guide to the students. If the teachers take care of this responsibility, it can do much good. Regular meeting with the students and their guardians will make them feel comfortable. Extra consultation hours after the school session discussing over the negative issues girls face in terms of education can motivate them overcome the problem or at least face them. A more caring attitude from the teachers will encourage not only the students but also their guardians. This will keep the guardians stress-free and make them share their problems to the teachers as well. As the teachers are considered as important and respected member in the society, their opinions and suggestions will be a great contribution to the social awareness, diminishing all odds against female education.

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