

# Education must become more 'girl-friendly'

by Ahmed Fazl

There are deep-rooted inequalities afflicting the Bangladesh education system and the more pronounced among these are the gender prejudices. Girls and women are the most disadvantaged group among, all other sections of the society in relation to the access to education. The situation in reality is a genuine cause for concern and makes a stinging indictment of the apathy and indifference of the past administrations and policies of successive governments.

The overall national literacy stands at around 30 percent but development planners estimate that the literacy rate among women is as high as 85 percent. The figure would be still higher among rural female population alone. Further there are regional disparities. For example literacy is higher in the northern districts than in the southern and eastern regions. In the North female literacy may peak at 95 per cent in economically depressed and impoverished Kurigram district.

Statistics relating to school enrolment and school attendance are equally disturbing. One estimate says that about 60 percent of boys in the age group of 6-14 years at an all-Bangladesh level are attending schools on a regular basis. But almost half that

rate is applicable to girls in the same age group. It is said that 30 percent of the school going girls go to schools or attend any centre in the non-formal sector.

The gender disparity is more pronounced. If one considers the rural population separately, If we look at higher education which is a privilege for the top 10 to 15 percent of the population, the picture is no less bleak. The representation of women in higher education is desperately low. Another interesting aspect of the female education picture is that the majority of women who reach the doorsteps of higher education enrol themselves in arts courses and a lesser number of them go for science and engineering education. In the latter two areas, some noticeable improvement in enrolment was achieved in recent years.

Statistical data have revealed that poverty may not be the only or the principal factor behind literacy for women. For 12 countries with per capita GNP of less than 1000 dollars have female literacy rates of 60 percent or better. Four of them—Sri Lanka, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic

and the Philippines have surpassed the 80 percent mark.

How does one explain the inequality picture. Research analysts point to a multiplicity of reasons many of those are socio-cultural

which stand as the foundations of Bangladesh's patriarchal society. The existing cultural norms of gender behaviour and the accepted 'domestic' and 'reproductive' roles of women have been found to adversely affect the education of girls. Such patriarchal values like a negative attitude to girls' schooling, maintaining them in school should they evergo start, the mobility of girls, especially after their puberty have kept girls and women in their place.

This gender prejudice reflects on many aspects of the educational system included among these are inadequate facilities for

girl's education at different stages, unequal access to 'non-traditional' courses, gender stereo-type in the curriculum, negative attitudes of teachers and poor representation of women in position of authority and

power in the educational departments. Shouldn't something be done to change the situation? The demand for equal education for girls and women is a demand for social justice and an egalitarian system but because of the prevalent hardened prejudices there is need for a special attention to gender issues.

Females must be given full access to educational facilities which foster personal reflection and development. Education should enable girls and women to gain a greater social understanding an awareness of

their position in society. Education should provide girls and women with access to important sources of information, particularly in the field of personal and social health and family planning.

It is obvious that the education of the girls child and

the woman has to be viewed within the larger context of development. The government's policy on education must address the structures and attitudes which tend to prevent women's equality and have either perpetuated or strengthened the patriarchal institutions which tend to put women in a subordinate position. There should be a new commitment in education towards promoting equality in the roles and rights between men and women. Specific areas of concern which require immediate attention and action to rectify the gender inequality in educa-

tion include the availability of facilities for schooling within easy reach of girl's necessary for access to and retention of girls in school. It is important to realise that the involvement of girls in sibling care and domestic chores and other socio-cultural constraints make a primary school even a kilometre away beyond the walking distance for them. There should be schools and facilities in all centres of habitation.

It may seem strange but it is a reality that the education of girls is linked to the availability of water, fuel, fodder and child-care facilities to individual families. A young girl in a village spends a lot of time every day in the collection of fuel and in fetching water for the family.

In fact, improvement in a girl's access to school and her retention in the classroom is linked to efforts in social forestry, drinking water supply and greening of villages. It is important for Bangladesh education to become more 'girl-friendly'. There should be an increased visibility of women and the projection of a positive image of the role of women in society and history.