

# Women's education in Bangladesh

SHAMIMA ISLAM

Access to education and training is a fundamental right of the individual. The extent to which women are able to effectively enjoy and exercise these rights serves as significant indication of the socio-economic and legal status of women in the society. The contribution of research and studies can help in understanding the situation pointing to new directions and can be of paramount importance.

There is no denying the fact that majority of women remain outside the realm of the formal education system. Recent studies on women's education which are predominantly FREPD based reflect that:

a) negligible number of women has yet attained literacy which is retainable over years;

b) illiteracy rates are much higher among females;

c) women constitute the majority of illiterates and school dropouts and their number is increasing;

d) regional imbalances not only exist among women improvement is minimum in geographic areas where it has already been low;

e) there is acute rural-urban imbalances;

f) male-female ratios of enrolment are 63:37 in the primary stage 75:25 in the secondary stage and 81:19 in the universities in 1982 (FREPD 1983);

g) only 9 per cent primary school teachers ((1982) and 2 per cent (1980) teachers in secondary schools were women;

h) nearly 60 per cent of primary age-group girls numbering 5.15 million are outside the formal education system;

i) women don't participate in vocational educational programmes which are formal

male-dominated and urban-centred;

j) women's education in most stages suffers because of the serious lack of residential facilities;

k) over half of the organisations offering non-formal training programmes for women are located in 3 districts of the country; and

l) only 4 per cent of non-formal programmes for women offered training in agriculture and livestock.

Beyond the dark walls of facts and statistics one can discover concerted action devised policies and strategies which has followed the recent emerging concerns effecting limited progress. Female enrolment has undoubtedly increased in different stages in education (especially in Primary Training Institutes which reflects massive increase) but falls far below the desired level.

Each one of the FREPD findings related to women's education is sufficient enough to warrant discussion. Is the educational scene only the deviation from the other phases of women's life? Health is another aspect which indirectly reflects women's inadequate education. Existing data-base does not reflect adequately that maternity-related deaths are the prime cause of women's deaths.

a) 27 per cent of women in 15-54 age-group die due to child bearing reason;

b) approximately 20000 women annually die due to child bearing act

c) 85 per cent of adult women suffer due to maternity related mal-nutrition;

d) approximately 10000 women die every year due to indigenous abortion;

e) death rates among female child under 5 years old is 35-50

per cent higher compared to male children and so on.

The severity of data-gaps reflect the dark side of the society where women are expected to play their roles against severe adverse circumstances. Among the many phases and faces of adversity the prime hindering factor is the mass poverty which although affect both the sexes severely it is the women who became doubly affected; first because of their poverty and second because of their expected role and status which affect their health nutrition and education. Poverty-stricken females have lesser chances of getting access to modern formal education.

The limited success of formal education programmes as reflected in FREPD women's studies lead us to consider certain realities:

a) the vast majority of women who live in rural areas are born in poverty brought up in poverty and die in poverty. If poverty is the biggest hindrance in realising the goals of education are the current educational effort adequate enough to cope with our increasing pauperisation which is expected to deteriorate women's fate even further? Recent studies already point to a devaluation of women due to changing marriage pattern resulting from increasing pauperisation.

b) although vast majority of women stay outside the formal school system this does not mean that they remain without education. Elaborate informal education procedures take care of their socialisation which dictate their behaviour. Rural women don't stand in vacuum.

TO BE CONTINUED