

## Poverty must be addressed to end girls' drop out

AN INCREASED drop-out rate of girls from secondary and higher secondary education proves that government programmes to promote girls' education are far from reaching the goals. Drop-out rate at the secondary and higher secondary levels, as New Age reported on Monday, is high among girls than boys because of the prevailing gender inequality in society. Although the enrolment rate for girls increased significantly in recent years at the secondary level, their dropout rate continued to be higher than boys. The Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics says that the overall dropout rate for 2016 academic year is 38.30 and gender distribution of dropout rate shows girls to be dropping out at an alarming pace. The dropout rate was higher among girls at 42.19 against 33.88 for boys. The BANBEIS statistics also show that the overall dropout rate at higher secondary level was 20.08 and the rate for girls was 23.83 against 16.55 for boys. There are 4.01 crore students at the secondary level with 54 lakh girls while there are 20 lakh students at the higher secondary level with 10 lakh girls. This statistical record makes it explicit that the education system and society at large have failed to ensure girl's education sustainably.

Educationists, women rights activists as well as BANBEIS officials identified poverty, child marriage and increased gender violence as reasons for the high drop-out rate of girls in secondary and higher secondary schools. Increased poverty is forcing parents from rural areas to join informal and formal sector labour market in Dhaka or other cities. Many drop-outs work as domestic helps. Experts also blame child marriage and lack safety for girls as a factor contributing to the high rate of drop-out for girl students at higher levels. A significant number of cases of stalking and sexual harassment of girls leading to suicide recently reported in newspapers is illustrative of the way women's safety issues are interwoven with their right to education. Moreover, because of a patriarchal bias, parents still prefer to invest in their sons than daughters, with whom they consider a financial burden. Therefore, the incentives introduction of free education for girls up to the bachelor's level, scholarships and stipend for them and free distribution of textbooks to the students have increased the enrolment rate. However, the main objective of the programme - creating greater access for women to higher education - remains unfulfilled as a majority of them are bound to leave educational institutions.

It is evident from the high drop-out rate for girls that without addressing economic constraints, undoing the patriarchal bias, free and incentivised education programmes cannot ensure women's education. The government must develop a comprehensive strategy for women's education seriously taking into account issues of sexual harassment and stalking as well as economic burden of girl child in poverty.