

# Literacy: An Overview

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**T**HE extent of literacy of a country's population reflects indirectly the stage of its development. It is extremely difficult to measure the actual amount of progress which different censuses disclose regarding literacy because the concept of literacy has not been uniform in various censuses undertaken in the area now constituting Bangladesh. Thus, one has to be cautious in making conclusions.

In 1951 literacy was defined as the ability to read any of the nine main languages of erstwhile Pakistan in clear print. The 1961 census declared a person literate if he/she could (this would include even those who could read only the Holy Quran) only read a passage of any language with understanding. The impact of this definitional change is reflected by a drop in the percentage of female literates in Bangladesh from 11.3% in 1951 to 10.7% in 1961. This decline holds true for males as well, whose literacy percentage dropped from 33.3% to 29.3%. The 1974 census in line with international usage defines literacy as the ability to read and write in any language. Since the 1961 census provides data in persons who can both read and write comparisons are possible between 1961 and 1974 using the 1974 definition of literacy.

### Literacy: Review of Progress

In 1901 in writing about the condition of literacy in the district of Tippera, the Gazetteer of the district pointed out that according to the 1901 census return of the district one Hindu woman out of every eighty and one Mohammedan woman out of every thousand could read and write.

Despite limitations of definitions a look at the following table suggests that female literacy has always lagged behind that of males, and their pace of improvement is much slower than that of males. Between 1901 and 1974, rates of improvement for females was 2% compared to 3% for males:

13.7 per cent against 29.9 per cent for males thus keeping literacy sex-differential for Bangladesh at 16.2 per cent. The range of literacy significantly varies between men and women. For men, it varies from 21 per cent to 39 per cent against 8 per cent to 23 per cent for women.

It is again evident that twelve out of the nineteen districts in Bangladesh have female literacy rates below the national average of 13.7% for females and only seven fall in the category of 14.6% to 22.3% with only one district exceeding a literacy rate of more than 20%. Comparing these rates with the proportion of male literates in the high and low category, one can find that the lowest category (21% to 25%) covering five districts are even higher than the maximum of the female literacy rate which extends beyond 20% in only one district.

It is interesting to note that the proportion of districts are more or less evenly distributed for male literacy. For example 15 out of 19 districts are equally divided into three categories i.e. 21% to 25%, 26% to 30% and 36% to 40% and the rest of them only four fall in the category of 31% to 35% implying that the majority of the districts need to intensify the drive for female literacy, whereas all the districts need equal attention in terms of male literacy drive.

The literacy rate difference between sexes varies from 11% to 21% in different districts of Bangladesh. The distribution of difference in literacy rate between sexes is uneven among districts: 11% to 15% in 5, 16% to 20% in 13 and 21% to 25% in only 1 district.

It is also interesting to note that in districts with a higher overall literacy rate, the differences between male/female rates are greater. The districts of Chittagong, Khulna, Patuakhali and Bakerganj, which rank quite high in percentage of both male and female literacy rates, are examples of the greatest male/female rate dif-

ferences. Similarly, areas with low literacy rates for both male and female population show lower male-female gaps indicating that males are also disadvantaged in these areas.

males can be explained by their comparatively lower starting base. The marked imbalance in rural-urban literacy rates among females is a point of concern to educators but its true nature, magnitude and dimensions have not been appreciated. This is evident from a scrutiny of census data national plans and Education Commission Reports which mention very little about urban-rural imbalances by sex age-group and socio-economic level. The data that could be extracted show that although urban female constitute a small minority (only 7.95%) compared to rural dwellers, a wide difference persists between these two groups. Thus, the literacy rate among urban females was found to be about three times higher than rural women where only a 7.0% literacy rate can be observed. It is also evident that improvement of rural women is only slightly better than of urban women and if this trend continues it will take far longer for rural women to catch up with urban women.

The degree of relative backwardness of village women is again highlighted when considering the literacy rate by different age-group composition.

It is evident that although the literacy rate gradually declines as age advances, the urban literacy rate among females during 1974 in 5-14, 15-24 and above age-groups was 31.03%, 43.25% and 23.52% respectively, compared to 14.76%, 18.20% and 7.56% respectively among females in rural areas. These estimates give rise to some significant observations. First rural females of the 25 and above age-group are the most disadvantaged. Rural female literacy rate of this group is at the bottom of the scale that is 7.56% compared to 18.20% and 14.76% among ages 15-24 and 5-14 respectively. Among the same age group they stand way below their counterparts in urban areas where female literacy rate is found to be 23.52%. Among rural dwellers, men of the same age-group are in a far better position with a 28.09% literacy rate.

Thus, it is clear that rural women constitute the majority of illiterates in the country and their number is increasing. The number of female illiterates in rural areas has now reached approximately 23.9 million or 93.53% of the total female illiterates in the country. This is substantially more than in 1961 when women constituted 17 million illiterates. Moreover, if those who are taught with the meagre resources available for primary education but drop-out and relapse into illiteracy are

Table 3. a

Sex-wise literacy rate in different census years (in percentage)

	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1974
Male		10.0	13.9	15.3	15.4	18.8	33.3	29.9
Female		0.6	1.0	1.8	2.9	7.4	11.3	10.7

(Source: Census Reports 1951, 1961 and 1974.)

The comparatively steeper rates (3%) for females compared to .06% for males for 1961-74 reflects to some extent a recent growth phenomena and is the result of increased attention towards expansion of female education in the country.

It is again interesting to note that despite linear expansion of education and considerable sums spent on it over the decade, the sex differential gap in literacy rates has widened from 9.4 per cent in 1901 to 16.2 per cent in 1974 and it is estimated that if this trend continues, the gap will be reduced from 16.2 per cent to 9.7 per cent by the close of the century.

It is also evident that while it has taken 74 years for Bangladeshi women to achieve a 13.7 per cent literacy rate the rate attained by men by 1911, equality of status between sexes will not be achieved unless extra special measures are taken to counteract the current trend; accordingly, women will lag far behind men in achieving a literacy rate of 100 per cent.

**Literacy: Sex differential:** Despite the pronounced literacy sex differential existing in the country which pulls down the figure for the general population, female literacy is disconcertingly low i.e. only

13.7 per cent against 29.9 per cent for males thus keeping literacy sex-differential for Bangladesh at 16.2 per cent. The range of literacy significantly varies between men and women. For men, it varies from 21 per cent to 39 per cent against 8 per cent to 23 per cent for women.

Sex-wise Literacy Rates in Urban and Rural Areas in Bangladesh (in percentage)

SEX	Literacy Rates (%) with respect to Total Population		Intercensal percentage increase in literacy rate per annum
	1974	1961	
<b>BANGLADESH—All Areas</b>			
Both Sexes	20.2	16.3	+ 0.29
Male	27.6	24.2	+ 0.25
Females	12.2	7.8	+ 0.33
<b>Bangladesh—Urban</b>			
Both Sexes	37.7	37.5	+ 0.01
Male	43.3	48.4	- 0.08
Female	27.9	24.8	+ 0.23
<b>Bangladesh—Rural</b>			
Both Sexes	13.5	16.1	+ 0.25
Male	25.7	22.8	+ 0.22
Female	10.9	7.0	+ 0.29

(Source: Based on census 1961 and 1974.)

In 1974 only 10.9% of rural women were found to be literate, thus leaving rural women in much worse position than rural men whose literacy rate was much higher (25.7%). Greater improvement of rural women taken into account the number of rural females who need to receive some sort of education assumes a frightful magnitude. It is also apparent that

future literacy drive, if not directed with an eye to the magnitude of the existing need will meet with only partial success in the years ahead.

**Literates: Educational Level:** According to the Census Report of 1974, 68.7% of the males and 93% of the females in the age group 35 and over have not completed a single year of formal education. Some progress in education has been made however, and the percentages of persons with 0 completed years of education for the age group 15-19 years is found to be 83.0% for males and 74.7% for females. Further a greater proportion attain secondary levels of education (6-10 completed years) in this age group (15-19) as compared to the age group "35 years and over." In all the age groups, males have received more formal education than females.