

# Literacy: An Overview-II

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URBAN-rural differences are important especially for higher education (13 completed years of schooling and over) In the age group 25-34 years, 10% of the males in urban areas have reached the levels of higher education, compared to only 1.8% in the rural areas. The percentage of females in urban areas going for higher studies is increasing 3.7% of women in the age group 20-24 have completed 13 or more years of schooling compared to only 0.4% of the age groups 35 years and over.

**Distribution of Literacy:** There is noticeable spatial distribution of female literacy in Bangladesh. The distribution of literacy by districts indicates that female literacy is above the female national average of 13.7% in only seven districts. These are Khulna (18.1%), Bakerganj (22.3%), Patuakhali (18.4%), Dacca (17.5%), Comilla (14.8%), Noakhali (16.2%) and Chittagong (19.6). With the exception of Dacca, the districts are equally divided in both the Khulna and the Chittagong Divisions. With the exception of Bakerganj, all these districts had above average literacy in 1961. The least literate areas are Chittagong Hill Tracts Rangpur, Pabna, Tangail, Mymensingh and Kushtia.

It is interesting to point out that in 1974 none of the districts in the Rajshahi division crosses in national average of female literacy figure. These districts also had lower rates than the average in 1961.

There are not only significant regional imbalances in female literacy, the disparity in improvement in the intercensus period also can be viewed regionally with a minimum of 2% variation in the Rajshahi division as can be seen from the following:

Comparative Sex-Wise Literacy Rate in Different Divisions of Bangladesh in (in percentages)

Divisions	1961		1974		Inter-census variation (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Dacca	25.9	9.0	27.3	12.9	1.4	3.9
Rajshahi	27.5	7.7	26.3	10.2	1.1	2.5
Khulna	31.2	10.1	34.1	17.1	2.9	6.4
Chittagong	33.1	11.0	32.9	15.2	.02	4.2

(Sources: Based on Census Report 1961, 1974)

The improvement in female literacy rate between 1961 and 1974 varies from 2.5% to 6.4% in different divisions of Bangladesh.

An examination of the difference in literacy rates between 1961 and 1974 shows that the literacy rate has improved more in those districts where it was already high in 1961. The districts which had lower literacy rates in 1961 again failed to improve faster, thus widening the already existing gap between them. The minimum improvement of only 2% was recorded in four districts (equally) divided in Rajshahi and Dacca divisions. These are Rangpur, Pabna, Tangail and Mymensingh and a maximum of 9% in Bakerganj in the Khulna division. It is interesting to point out that an improvement varying from 6% to 9% was recorded in only one-third of the total districts three of which are located in the Khulna division, two in the Chittagong division and only one in the Dacca division. On the other hand an improvement upto 5% was made by the rest of the districts in Bangladesh. Thus if significant improvement is to be brought about in literacy levels, concerted efforts would have to be made in the more backward areas.

**Female Literacy: Determinants of Changes:**

An attempt was made to identify factors behind improvement of female literacy in the different districts of Bangladesh from the secondary sources of data. The variables identified were level of urbanization, proportional educational age-group budget allocated to the district existence of primary school and female enrolment ratio in the districts. Unfortunately, data regarding district positions in 1961 regarding educational budget could not be traced through any of the available secondary sources. This exercise revealed that the progress of literacy and urbanization have not been similar. The rate of change in the level of urbanization between 1961 and 1974 stands at 2% while corresponding figures for the rate of change in female literacy is only .37%. The association between the rate of urbanization and the rate of female literacy in 1974 is  $r=.32$  compared to the relation between the similar rate in 1961 at  $r=.12$ . It therefore suggests that urbanization has not significantly changed the female literacy situation in the districts of Bangladesh.

In another attempt to identify the relationship between the existence of primary school and female literacy rates in the district, the results proved to be negative  $r=-0.36$ . It is therefore clear that secondary sources of data do not show that if primary school is increased in the district the female literacy rate will automatically increase. Therefore, establishment of primary schools does not appear to be the solution for the reduction of the illiteracy rate among females of the country.

It appears that the association between female age-group enrolment and literacy is insignificant,  $r=.08$  suggesting

formed the block needing more attention in terms of female literacy.

In another instance (10) it was found that 15% of the females older than 5 years were literate; the education level did not extend beyond class V. This was felt to be an inflated figure because for social reasons women tended to exaggerate their level of education to the investigators. Women beyond the age of 30 were seldom literate. The majority of literate women (both unmarried and married) were concentrated in two Bari (houses) of the village. Apparently these two were economically better-off than the rest of the villages.

It is therefore clear that if the level of formal education upto class III is ignored as a literacy level, one can find many villages in Bangladesh where not a single woman is literate. This can be substantiated by the village data of the IRDP Benchmark survey. In 1972 28,736 people were surveyed in the villages around Savar, which is located near Dacca city. Using the ability to read a newspaper in the mother-tongue as a criterion for literacy the group found that only 8.4% of the men and 1.2% of the women were literate. It was also found that a minimum of five years of schooling is necessary for a person to maintain this skill (9).

These village realities, therefore point to an understanding of issues which were mostly ignored in the past but which have tremendous implications for programme planning.

**Conclusion:** The census does not answer all the questions regarding literacy, especially for rural females. The change of definition in different census reports made the task of research more difficult. The difficulty was increased because of non-adherence to a 5-year interval for age-wise tabulation in different census years definitional problem encountered among census reports, variation in definition of urban areas and lack of rural focus. Despite best intentions, variations of literacy rates among females could not be identified according to patterns of livelihood or by different socio-economic groups. It has however, felt that in order to identify strengths and weaknesses in different areas literacy rates should be studied, by regions districts, more accurately by rural-urban residence and especially by sex.

The other side of these imbalances discloses several disquieting features. Illiteracy rates are much higher among females (84%) compared to males (70%). Second, rural women in the 25 and above age group form a marginal group in terms of acquiring literacy. Third, significant differences not only exist among urban and rural dwellers; rural women have accrued few benefits compared to urban women. Fourth, regional imbalances not only exist among women improvement is minimum in the geographic areas where it was already low. The problems of female literacy in rural Bangladesh are complex and have been studied little. They require an integrated analysis at the micro level if policy prescriptions are to have any meaningful impact in the future. Moreover, educational budgets allocated to the district must be in line with district needs. Areas with low literacy levels will have to draw correspondingly larger shares of public funds for their total educational budget, specifically for primary and adult education. (Concluded)

that a high enrolment ratio may not necessarily dictate high female literacy rates in the districts. However the districts of Patuakhali, Bakerganj, Khulna, Noakhali and Chittagong have uniformity in demonstrating both high female literacy rates and higher proportion of age-group females participating in the school system.

**Female Literacy: What the Surveys Reveal:** Data on educational features of rural families as reflected by village surveys reveal some interesting features of the rural literacy situation in Bangladesh. In one of the major surveys conducted in nine thanas of Bangladesh (22) it was found that there was recognizable variation between regions, Mymensingh having the highest rate of illiterate families—88% did not have a single literate member. Families not having a single literate member were 65% of the total of all places. Among the families having some educated members those with primary education of males but no education of females were relatively common. Such families were eleven per cent of the total families of this study. Thus altogether 78% of the families had no female education. Mymensingh, Kushtia and Rangpur