

Gender Equality in Primary Education in Bangladesh

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Abstract: Women are almost half of the total world population and in order to attain sustainable development, it is no more possible to ignore the women. Various attempts are made to create an effective partnership between male and female in development activities. But before empowering women, it is necessary to make them able to empower themselves. To start the process, it is needed to eliminate all sorts of gender disparities from education, initially from primary education.

Key words: Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Gender Equality (GE), Gender Equality in Primary Education (GEPE), net enrollment rate, primary school completion rates, exclusion from primary schooling, quantitative and qualitative assessment

INTRODUCTION

In the millennium summit held in September 2000, world leaders agreed on an 8-goal ambitious agenda named Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are a set of numerical and time-bound targets related to key achievements in human development. These are to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, to achieve universal primary education, to promote gender equality and empower women, to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, to ensure environmental sustainability, to develop a global partnership for development. For each goal one or more targets have been set, most for 2015, using 1990 as a benchmark.

Assessment of the attainment of MDGs is updated by the respective governments, donors, NGOs, etc. Government of Bangladesh (GOB), like many other governments, sets the targets for 2015 to achieve these MDGs.

Bangladesh has pledged to meet two of the MDGs set by UN. The goals are attaining the Universal Primary Education (UPE) by the year 2015 and elimination of gender disparity within that timeframe. For the year 2005, it targets to eliminate all the gender disparities from primary education. Initially, the country has apparently achieved significant progress in terms of enrolment at the primary level. The school enrolment increased rapidly when the government since the early 1990's started doling out incentives to students and their secondary level later on. The school authorities show the current enrolment rate at the primary level at 97% with over 10% dropout. But, according to the survey carried by the PMED, the rate of completion at the primary level is only 67%. The UNDP report states that to achieve UPE, Bangladesh needs the school enrolment rate to grow by 1.50% points for boys and 1.25% points for girls.

The UNDP report on Bangladesh's attainment status of MDGs states that between 1994 and 2003 the primary school net enrolment rate has oscillated around 80% for 6-10 year old children (from various data sources). Rates have been slightly higher for females (83-84%) compared to males (81-82%). Improvement in the enrolment rates was due to increase in the Government's budgetary allocation for girls' education, free primary education, massive stipend programs at the primary level, and the Food for Education Program. But considering present demographic trends, the World Bank Report states that the net primary enrolment rate could increase to 86% by 2015. This would put the rate below the MDG level of 100% of children aged 6-10 being enrolled in primary school.

Gender disparity is a reflection of complex social, cultural and economic issues. While some improvement in gender equality has been achieved in sectors such as education, health and family welfare, labor & employment, and democratic participation, in Bangladesh true empowerment is still a distant goal. The WB report states that Bangladesh have successfully eliminated (or nearly eliminated) gender disparity in primary schooling opportunities. Also the school based administrative data suggests that Bangladesh has made impressive gains in reducing gender disparity in primary & secondary schooling. Female: Male ratio in 1991 was 83%, while it is 96% in 2001. Conditional cash transfer program like Female Secondary School Stipend (FSSS) induced households a lot to send their girls to school.

The objectives of the article are

- Quantitative assessment of the gender equality situation in primary education in Bangladesh.
- Qualitative assessment of the gender equality situation in primary education in Bangladesh.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The article is based on reviewing the annual progress reports on MDGs by the UNDP and GOB, and the World Bank. It uses secondary data about the primary schooling provided by PMED, DNFE, BANBEIS and BBS. For qualitative situation analysis, it considers the assessments by the World Bank, the UNDP and the Action Aid Bangladesh (AAB).

- Based on the assessment, attainment status of GEPE is identified and civil societies & communities are sensitized about the issues related to gender equality.
- Policy suggestions & advocacy agenda based on grassroots context are identified and stayed to ensure PE in Bangladesh.
- A suggestive and feasible guideline regarding the issues to be addressed to ensure GEPE within a specific timeframe.

Quantitative aspects of GEPE in Bangladesh: UNESCO sets the indicators for universal primary education as:

- Net enrolment ratio in the primary education (UNESCO).
- Proportion of Pupils starting grade 1 who reach grade 5 (UNESCO).
- Literacy rate of 15-24 year-olds (UNESCO).

Indicators for Gender Equality are (set by the UNESCO, ILO and IPU):

- Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education (UNESCO).
- Ratio of literate women to men, 15-24 years old (UNESCO).
- Share women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector (ILO).
- Proportion of seats held by women in the parliament (IPU).

These indicators are used to assess the quantitative attainment of a country's MDG status concerning UPE and GE.

Table 1 gives information about all possible type of recognized systems of primary education existed in Bangladesh. In the year 2000, a total of 176,67,985 children are receiving primary education from 76,809 schools. Of them, 51.10% are male students, while 48.90% are female students. Still boys' enrolment is higher, but steadily girls' enrolment rate is rising and it is 48.90% of total enrolled children in 2000, which was 44.72% in 1990. It is seen that the school enrolment of girls rises significantly over this period.

Table 2 gives information about the total school enrolments and the rates of enrolment of male & female. It is seen that the percentage of gross school enrolment rises from 75.6% in 1991 to 96.6% in 2000. A total of 17.67 million children are enrolled in primary schools, of which 9.03 million are boys and 8.64 million are girls (which were 7.08 and 5.78 millions in 1991 respectively). Besides, the UNDP report states that the net enrolment rate oscillates around 80% (81-82% for boys, 83-84% for boys) in the primary schools.

Table 3 below gives us the ratios of boys to girls in primary schools. Here a significant improvement is seen in girls' enrolment. In 1990, 55.28% of total school enrolled children were boys and 44.72% were girls. But in 2001, it was 50.91% boys and 49.09% girls. Thus girls are enrolling in higher numbers than before.

Above quantitative analysis confirms that the participation of girls in the primary education is gradually increasing. After governments' conditional cash transfer schemes like FSSS, it seems to attract people to send their girls at school in higher numbers. Also the gradual changes in socio-economic structures of the country induce people to send their girls to school in large numbers. Maybe small families in place of large joint families facilitate parents to send their children to school in larger numbers.

Table 4 gives information about the targets and successes of the Government of Bangladesh in achieving 100% school enrolment and completion rate. Gross enrolment rate rises from 75.6% in 1991 to 96.6% in 2001. Drop out rate was 33%, very high indeed, which causes the school completion rate to be in a lower number of 67% in 2001. It seems impossible to attain the goal of 100% enrolment & completion rate within 2005. The UNDP report states that Bangladesh needs the enrolment rate to grow by 1.50% points per annum for boys and 1.25% per annum for girls to attain this goal by 2015.

Qualitative aspects of GEPE in Bangladesh: It is required to check whether quantitative information about the primary school enrolment, completion, dropout and repetitions are enough to assess Bangladesh's status on attaining the GEPE. Numbers do not always reveal the true scenario. It requires considering qualitative aspects as well. By doing that, this article attempts to assess the true form of GEPE in Bangladesh.

Data sources and assessment reports show that children are going to school in larger numbers than before, but it is not sure that they are getting quality education. There are problems with class size and the student-to-teacher ratio. In the primary levels, there are around 70 students per teacher, which the government

Table 1: School enrolments in primary schools as stated for the year 2000 are as follows:

Types of Institution	No. of Institution	Percentage (%)	Total No. of Students	No. of Male Students	No. of Female Students
Government PS	37,677	49.05	10832476	5467784	5364692
PTI attached PS	53	0.06	11482	6085	5397
Non-government registered PS	19253	25.07	4170925	2189253	1981672
Non-government non-registered PS	2126	2.77	307867	160408	147459
PS attached with Higher secondary schools	1220	1.60	499353	249061	250292
Community schools	3061	3.98	454905	220158	234747
Satellite PS(Class 1and2)	3884	5.05	209238	100089	109149
NGO-run PS	92	0.11	15619	8198	7421
Ebtedayee Madrasha(EM)	3710	4.83	417411	224974	192437
EM attached with Higher secondary Madrasha	3437	4.47	403621	226095	177526
Kindergarten	2296	2.98	345088	180629	164495
Total	76809	-----	17667985	9032734	8635287
Percentage	-----	100	100	51.10	48.90

Source: DPE-2001. *PS= primary schools

Table 2: Total enrolment rate

Years	Total children	Total enrolment	% of enrolment	Male enrolment	%	Female enrolment	%
1991	17.02mill	12.86	75.6%	7.08	55.05%	5.78	44.95%
1995	18.25	17.30	94.79%	9.11	52.65%	8.19	47.35%
2000	18.30	17.67	96.6%	9.03	51.10%	8.64	48.90%

Source: PMED-2002

Table 3: Ratios of boys to girls

Year	Male	Female
1990	55.28	44.72
1991	54.69	45.31
1992	54.15	45.85
1993	53.50	46.50
1994	53.02	46.98
1995	52.62	47.38
1996	52.44	47.56
1997	51.94	48.06
1998	52.16	47.84
1999	51.44	48.56
2000	51.12	48.88
2001	50.91	49.09

Source: PMED-2002.

Table 4: Targets and Successes (NPA-1)

Topic	Situation in 1990 (%)	Target for 1995 (%)	Situation in 1995 (%)	Target for 2000 (%)	Situation in 2001 (%)
Gross enrolment rate	75.6	82	92	95	96.6
Drop outs	60	48	52	30	33
Completion	40	52	52	70	67
Old-age literacy rate	34.6	40	47	62	64

Source: DPE-2002 and DNFE-2002.

aims to reduce at 35 students per teacher in the National Plan of Actions-1 (NPA-1) that was designed in 1990s. But this target is not achieved so far and as a result, students are not getting quality education. As a result their competency levels are lower and incentives to be enrolled to primary school are also lower.

Separate seating arrangements and toilet facilities for girls are important factors behind girl's enrolment to primary schools. Sometimes it is enough to discourage people to send their girls to school, as there are possibilities of being abused (may be in the toilets or in

the empty class rooms either by fellow students, or even by teachers). Again, as schools cannot provide 1-seat for 1-student in most cases (especially in rural areas), so that students have to stay in an overcrowded unhealthy classroom. Sometimes guardians deny sending girls to this sort of overcrowded classrooms.

GEPE situation can broadly be analyzed in three sectors:

- At home: Are girls and boys getting same attention from family in terms of food intake, expenditures on their education, involvement in household works, involvement in other works, allocated time to study?
- At school: Are boys & girls getting same attention from teachers & school in terms of seating arrangements, toilet facilities, involvement in games & sports, extra-curricular activities, etc.
- On the road: Are children secured enough to travel? Are they disturbed with social restrictions, violence against children (acid attack, kidnapping, etc), possibility of being abused (rape, harassments, etc),etc. What about transportation facilities?
- It is very often found that boys are getting more attention from their family. They usually get more attention because their families believe that boys will be able to do something productive for the family. Also girls' involvement in household works doesn't allow them to allocate enough time to study. Poor families can't provide all of their children same facilities. Usually girls are deprived.

Besides, lots of families discourage their children in schooling. They are intended to send their children at works as early age as possible, so that they can start earning for the family. This is very frequent in the monga-victim (famine-victim) people of the North-Bengal.

World Banks' assessment of Bangladesh's attainment of gender equality in primary education specifies living standards, parental education, occupation and sex of the family heads, infrastructures, quality of school, government programs, etc to affect primary school enrolment, drop out, exclusion and completion rates of both boys & girls.

Usually gender parity and living standard are positively related. But the WB report states that the ratio of female to male is highest among the middle & higher-middle income classes, while it is almost similar for other income classes. But this is not a unique scenario. It can vary from place to place, even from family to family. Other factors like parental education, size of the family, etc can play significant role. It is usual for an educated mother (or father) to send her children to school irrespective of gender as they can realize the importance of education more than uneducated parents.

There are some unusual patterns of gender disparity across occupational groups. The WB report states that the gender disparity in schooling is greatest among large farmers (i.e., those operating 1 or more acre of land) and smallest among small farmers (i.e. those operating less than 1 acre). Agricultural laborer households also have relatively low gender disparity. Large farmers have more incentive to send their children to work so that they can continue family profession. Besides, small farmers do not have enough land property to meet all of their family members' need. So they felt for alternative ways and send children to school.

Gender disparity varies significantly by the sex of the household head. The WB report states that in households where the head is male, the ratio of females to males in primary and secondary is 96%, but in households with female head, the corresponding ratio is as high as 108%. This suggests that female-headed households are more likely than male-headed households to encourage girls to attend and stay in school.

The HIES 2000 data suggests that access to infrastructure is generally associated with higher ratios of females to males in primary and secondary school. In particular, access to tap water, electricity, and public transports are all associated with significantly lower gender disparity in schooling. The availability of tap water usually relieves girls in the household from time-consuming water-collection chores, which in turn makes time for them to attend & stay at school. Likewise, a bus

station in the village provides easier and safer access to secondary schools that are typically located outside most villages. Since parents are more likely to not send girls to far-away schools owing to safety concerns, the availability of bus transport helps girls proportionately more than it does boys.

School quality in terms of student-teacher ratios influence gender disparity. The ratio of females to males in primary and secondary schools is significantly greater in villages where the primary school has a student-teacher ratio of less than 50 than in villages where the ratio exceeds 50 (107% vs. 94%). This suggests that parents are less likely to send their daughters (relative to their sons) to overcrowded schools that have a large number of students relative to teachers. The reasons for this might be concern for their daughters' security or the perception that their daughters might not benefit much in such environments.

The two government programs that have the largest association with reduced gender disparity in schooling are the Food-for-Work program and the Vulnerable Group Development program. Since neither of these programs explicitly target girls' schooling, it is not clear why these programs are associated with significantly higher ratios of females to males in primary & secondary school. Again, it is probably the case that availability of these programs releases girls from having to perform time-consuming chores in household, and this is what results in their higher rates of school attendance.

Since there is almost 70:1 ratio of students to teachers, quality of education is questionable. By the same time, as teachers are paid too low, their willingness to teach students is must be very low. In the classrooms, teacher may be biased to one/some good students and due to the short length of class time, s/he cannot give each student equal attention. There might be some sort of gender-biased teachers, who might be biased to his/her own gender.

Due to problems with infrastructures, in most cases, there are no separate seating & toilet facilities for boys and girls. It seems to be problematic for many girls. Also it increases the possibility of girls being abused by their fellow students or even by their teachers.

Usually boys capture the school playgrounds. In some cases (in rural areas mainly), primary school boys and girls can share the playground for very few times. The usual scenario is that girls do stay at the classrooms even in the leisure periods.

In urban areas, students are involved more in extra-curriculum activities. Here the participation of boys and girls are almost equal.

When there is a possibility of being the victim of violence, parents don't like to send their children alone to school. But it seems to be problematic in some cases. In Bangladesh, there is frequent violence against children (especially against girls). This discourages many parents to send girls to schools. Possibility of being raped or kidnapped or being acid victim always discourages people to enroll their girls at school.

Transportation facilities play a vital role behind the school enrolment. If a student can use a safe and secured way to school, his/her parents may be tension free to send them to school. If they need to travel a long way to school, and the journey is time-consuming as well as exhausting, parents may not allow their girls to go to school.

Policy suggestions: After the analysis, this article attempts to make some policy suggestion to attain the GEPE in qualitative form:

- Quality of Education: To improve the quality of education, it is needed to increase the salary range of primary school teachers so that their willingness to teach students rises.
- School infrastructures: Provide separate seating and toilet facilities to boys and girls. This will induce guardians more to send their girls to school.
- Infrastructures: Better transportation facilities will help students to get better education by moving to distant schools. Also if there is a secondary school in the locality, people will be more interested to send their children (especially girls) to school.
- Social awareness: It is needed to stop early marriage of girls by increasing the social awareness. Consequently, school enrolment of girls will rise. Also the social restrictions on girls are needed to be reduced.
- Law and order situation: Law and order situation is needed to be improved so that children (as well as their parents) can feel safe on roads.
- Violence: Maximum punishment for any violence against girls or children will reduce the risk of children on the road. This will help them to be enrolled in larger numbers.
- Awareness of family: Induce families so that they provide equal opportunities to both boys and girls.
- Civil society: Increase the awareness of the civil society in favor of GEPE.

CONCLUSIONS

Millennium Development Goals are an ambitious agenda and for an over-populous country like Bangladesh, these goals are very tough to achieve within the given timeframe (year 2015). The Government of Bangladesh is trying best to achieve these goals, especially universal primary education and elimination gender disparity in primary education in collaboration with its development partners. GoB takes on National Plan of Actions-1 and 2 to attain these. But still Bangladesh has to go a long way to achieve Gender Equality in Primary Education. Although Bangladesh achieves Gender equality in terms of primary school enrolments, it will be very tough to attain it in qualitative terms. It was set to eliminate all the gender disparities in primary education by the year 2005, but Bangladesh still needs to go a long way to achieve GEPE in its qualitative form. Now it depends on time to see the achievements of Bangladesh by the year 2015.

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