

Socio Cultural Barriers of Girls' Educational Attainment Experiences From Rural Bangladesh

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Abstract: *Girls' education is known as an essential component to skilled human resource development and for enhancing their socio-economic status in all societies across the world. It has been recognized as panacea to sustainable social development. Using qualitative research methodology, this research was aimed at exploring socio-cultural barriers of girls' education in northern rural Bangladesh. Using a qualitative research guideline, total forty five participants including five key informants were interviewed singly. Findings revealed that traditional gendered norms hinder girls' educational attainment. Specifically, it was found that girls were less emphasized in their families while it comes to educational attainment because of patriarchal norm. It was also found that economic insolvency, religious misinterpretation, child marriage and gender insensitive education system limit girls' education in rural Bangladesh. Program addressing men attitudes toward women is needed to be launched. For ensuring girls education of marginal households, effective awareness program is also suggested.*

Background

Girls' Education has been recognized as panacea to sustainable social development across the globe. In fact, girls' education is considered to be a pivotal element of empowering them (Hill & Elizabeth, 1995). In the literature of gender and development, girls' education is identified as the precondition of balanced and equitable socio-economic development (Kelly, et al., 1982; Chowdhury, 1994; Adcock, 2013; Abraham, 1989; Odili, et al., 2003; Ojobo, 2008). Like all developing countries in the world, in Bangladesh, the issue of gender and education deserves a great attention (Chowdhury, et al., 2001). Some documents indicate that there is an increase in girls' access to education in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, et al., 2001; Ahmad & Haque, 2011; BBS, 2002; Chowdhury, et al., 2002). Although, increasing access to education does not signify girls' equitable educational attainment. Large number of literature that focused on gender and education in Bangladesh suggests that there exist varieties of discrepancy while it comes to completion of girls' education in the context of rural social setting (BEPS, 2000; Chowdhury, et al., 2002; Kabeer, 2003; Khandker, et al., 2003; Fuwa, 2001). Apart from the achievement in the enrollment phase of primary education, girls' educational accomplishment scenario in secondary, higher secondary and also in higher education level, lags far behind compared to their counterparts (UNDP, 1999;

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UNDP, 1996; BBS, 2001, BBS, 2005; BBS, 2008).

Over two decades, it had been seen that several international conferences and summits were held on education and related issues including the World Conference on Education for All (1990), the International Conference on Population and Development (1995), the International Conference on Women (1994), the World Social Summit (1995) and the World Summit for Children (1990). On the basis of aforesaid conferences and summits, one universal message that came out was to ensure education for all children (Chowdhury, et al., 2002). It was also notable that international conferences and summits on education were highly emphasized on the amputation of discriminatory situation in education regardless of age, gender, race etc. (UNDP, 1999) Documented evidences indicate that in effect of varieties of initiatives, over the decade, some positive changes and progress have been made in making education accessible to all (UNDP, 1996). But in reality the picture of access as well as completion of girls' education in secondary level is very much awful, especially in the context of patriarchal social setting where traditional gendered norm is maintained strictly. For example, in a *Purda* bound society like rural Bangladesh, girls' education has never been equally accessible, specifically, for disadvantaged part in the population (Chowdhury, et al. 2002; BBS, 2001; BBS, 2002; BBS, 2005; BBS, 2008). Gendered socio-cultural norms represent a major barrier to girls' participation in educational activities (NIPORT, 2005). Girls' education is still inaccessible for many marginalized families across the countryside (NIPORT, 2005; Amin, et al., 2006). In a highly conservative social setting like rural Bangladesh, girls are considered to be burden and boys are treated to be resource of family (Cain, et al., 1979; Hashmi, 2001; Jahan, 1994; Karim, 2006a; Karim, 2006b; Karim, et al. 2012). Economic factors have a large influence on girls' enrolment in education and prevention from girls dropping out after a short while (Ali, 2008). In rural Bangladesh, there are discrepancies existed in educational attainment between the poor and rich households (BBS, 2001; BBS, 2002; BBS, 2005; BBS, 2008; NIPORT, 2005). Girls of marginalized families are mostly deprived of education [54] and their parents rather pay more attention to marry off their daughters as early as possible because of varieties of factors linked to socio-cultural gendered norms (NIPORT, 2005; Baden, et al., 1994; Baden, 1996). Girls are also considered too valuable as household workers to be able to fulfill household responsibilities (Hashmi, 2000; Jahan, 1994; Karim, 2006a) . Thus parents are rarely sought to pay for girls' education and are rather willing to invest for boys' education. Although thousands of NGO working in rural Bangladesh implementing various education programs in the name of women development, avoided marginalized girls' education. Hence, present research attempts to explore the traditional social and gendered norm affecting girls' education among the marginalized households in northern rural Bangladesh.

Present State of Girls' Education in Bangladesh

The table depicted the picture of girls' enrollment rate, study completion rate and the dropout rate at the stage of secondary level. Statistics show that gross enrollment status was higher for girls compared to boys. Specifically, the enrollment for girls was 48.16% in 2002, 48.48% in 2003, 48.21 in 204 and 47.17% in 2005 for girls while 41.28% in 2002, 41.96% in 2003, 39.58% in 2004 and 38.52% in 2005 for boys (BBS, 2009). Data also

shows that the completion rate for boys was 30.87% in 2002, 19.53% in 2003, 20.12% in 2004 and 23.46% in 2005. At the same time, the completion rate for girls was 19.23% in 2002, 13.74% in 2003, 13.79% in 2003 and 16.71% in 2005 significantly indicating a declining picture of girls' secondary education over the period. Furthermore, evidence suggests that girls' dropout rate was higher in comparison to boys. For example, table shows that, the dropout rate for girls was 80.77% in 2002 and 83.29% in 2005 while this rate for boys was 69.13% in 2002 and 76.54% in 2005 (BBS, 2009). Overall, it is clear that gender variation in the completion as well as in the dropout status is in respect of secondary education is increasing which also has greater effect on their participation in economic sectors and level of earnings as well.

Enrollment, Completion and Dropout Rate

Year	Gross Enrolment (%)		Completion Rate		Dropout Rate (%)	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
2002	48.16	41.28	19.23	30.87	80.77	69.13
2003	48.48	41.96	13.74	19.53	86.26	80.47
2004	48.21	39.58	13.79	20.12	86.21	79.88
2005	47.17	38.52	16.71	23.46	83.29	76.54

Source: BBS 2009.

Patriarchal Family Structure and Girls' Education in Rural Bangladesh

Patriarchal gender ideology is often considered to be the influential factor toward patriarchal family structure in the rural social setting (Baden, et al., 1994; Baden, 1996). Researchers who focused on gender ideology and women's participation in development activities also recognized that patriarchal gender ideology constrains Bangladeshi women's lives in many ways (Karim, 2006a; Karim, 2006b; Karim, et al., 2012; Khattak, et al., 2008). Traditional conservative gender ideology expects that women's movement should be restricted within the households (Baden, et al., 1994; Baden, 1996; Cain et al., 1979; Hashmi, 2000; Jahan, 1994). In the rural Bangladesh, specifically in the marginalized poor families, female children are usually engaged in household responsibilities that plausibly limit their chances to be attached with educational institutions. Therefore, children's contribution to household activities such as tending livestock, raring and caring for siblings, while the mother goes for income earning activities, can make significant differences in the household economy (UNICEF, 1992). It has been a traditional fact for the rural poor households that the older the girl gets, the more responsibility she will have to take in helping the house keeping tasks (Ali, 2008). Since the society of rural Bangladesh is highly male dominated and gender stratified, the birth of a daughter is viewed as a burden as women's socio-economic and educational status is lower than that of men's in every sphere of life (Chowdhury, 1994; Ojobo, 2008; Chowdhury et al., 2001; Khattak, et al., 2008; Mcwhirter, 1997; Sarker, 1997). Now a days, at primary level, girls' enrollment rate has been increased. But small number of them continues their education up to the tertiary level (BBS, 2001). Patriarchal social structure and subordinated position of women are highly responsible for this vulnerable situation (Odili et al., 2003; Ojobo, 2008; Akmam, 2002; Hashmi, 2000; Karim, 2006a; Karim, 2006b; Karim, et al., 2012; Khan, 2001; Khattak, et al., 2008). The socio-economic indicators of female status also reveal

that women bear a disproportionately high share of the country's underdevelopment compared to men (Bhattacharya, 1994).

Study Objective

The main objective of this study is- to explore the socio-cultural hindrances regarding girls' educational attainment in rural Bangladesh. Specifically, the objectives of this study are: a) To find out the socio-economic and cultural obstacles of girls' educational attainment in rural Bangladesh; b) To know the situation that influencing girls' educational attainment in the family, institution and societal level in northern rural Bangladesh.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

In the present research, an explorative qualitative research design was employed as its aim was to develop concepts which help us to understand social phenomena in natural settings and giving due emphasis to the views of all the participants (Mays & Pope, 1995).

Study Area and Participants

The study was conducted in an agrarian setting of Paba *Thana* (a sub-district) under Rajshahi district, Bangladesh. This study locale has all rural characteristics as required. In this research, convenience sampling technique was used for selecting study participant as required. Female students who are currently studying in Secondary School Certificate (SSC) level and living with their parents were selected purposively from three high schools located in Paba Thana (a sub district) under Rajshahi district. At first, fifty female students of SSC level were selected as study participant from high schools and were addressed to the interview sessions. Five of the participants were disagreed to participate in the interview session because of their personal limitations. Finally total forty five participants including five key informants were selected purposefully for the present research. Five key informants including school teachers, parents and local leader were selected purposefully to attain the study objective. Due to personal limitation five of the respondents were disagreed to participate and were excluded from the interview session finally.

Data Collection

To attain the research objective, field work was conducted from January, 2013 to January, 2014. Using a qualitative study guideline, forty five participants including five key informants were interviewed one by one. The questionnaire used in the present research was made in Bengali language version, as participants of rural communities did not understand English. Finally, participants' opinions, responses and comments were transcribed carefully. In the present research, the first author was engaged as principal investigator (PI). Researchers as well as a trained female interviewers was also employed to conduct interview sessions.

Data Reliability

In the present research, reliability of collected data was ensured in many ways. For example, the researchers were able to build up rapport with the study participants in which interpersonal trust was developed between the participants and the researchers (Uddin, 2008). Moreover, all interview sessions with the respondents were held

in familial settings where participants' privacy was maintained as it should be. In the present research, data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

Data Analysis

To carry out the data analysis properly, the researchers identified the meaning units from the interviews, and then examined the core meanings by assigning codes. Finally, the researchers developed the theme based on categories generated from assigned codes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Ethical Consideration

At first, parents of female students were briefed about the present research. We ensured them that all things will be maintained in a confidential manner. Moreover, before the interview sessions, purpose of the research was described clearly and verbal consent was taken from the subjects as participation in the interview sessions was done voluntarily. We were also informed the participants' parents about their girls' participation in the interview sessions. It is worth mentioning that five of the respondents were disagreed to participate and were excluded from the interview sessions finally.

Results

Socio-demographic of Participants. In the present research, it was found that the majority of the participants belonged to the teenage group. Their age group was varying from 13-16 years. Very few participants included in this study were under the teenage group. On the basis of parents' occupation, it was found that most of them were landless and engaged in day laboring activities. Parents of the majority participants were illiterate and belonged to the low income group. A good number of participants of this study had eight years of education and currently studying at SSC level. It was found that a significant number of respondents had an experience of study gap due to socio-economic and cultural obligations. It is worth mentioning that participants' involvement with socio-cultural organizations was not common. At the same time, it was also found that a good number of parents are involved with socio-economic development programs.

Stereotyped Gender Roles and Girls' Education

In Bangladesh, patriarchy is highly predominant at all stages of the society (Akmam, 2002; Khan, 2001). Within this system, the father, or in his absence, the next senior male member is considered as the head of the household (Hashmi, 2000; Jahan, 1994). As a result, decision-making about girls' participation in education and other activities are mostly controlled by household head within the family relationships (Karim, 2006a; Karim, 2006b; Karim, et al., 2012). Majority of the participants of this study reported that a father or a senior male member was the most influential person in their families and thus the decision about their education was also depended on him (father). One participant reported:

All decisions about our family are taken by father. My mother has no minimum say about my education or any aspect of my life as father controlled our family as a whole. Sometimes mother gives her opinion about my schooling but father denies without any consideration, although mother is a member of a credit group and she (mother) contributes in many ways.

(Source: Field survey, 2013-14)

It was found that in a male controlled social setting, women were mostly deprived of decision making aspect like girls' educational attainments because of traditional patriarchal gendered norms that always disfavored women's movement outside the home for any purposes. One respondent expressed:

When I got admitted into a high school (class six), my grandfather was alive at that time. Due to involvement with educational institution, he was not really happy ... rather he was upset. He (grandfather) expected that as a girl child I was only for the house keeping tasks and ... thus I should not be continued my education outside the homestead boundaries. At that time my father was also convinced of my grandfather's opinion ... as he (father) was also against of girls' education.

(Source: Field survey, 2013-14)

In the present research it was also found that societal conservative attitudes towards women were one of the important factors that restricted their achievement education and movement outside the home. One female teacher narrated:

It is a common concept embedded in our society that women's roles are mostly limited within the homestead (?) but we think (women) are capable enough to perform all the jobs compared to men. It is common perception of our male dominated society that education is not needed for us (women) as they (men) believed that we (women) are for only household responsibilities. As a consequence, boys and girls are socialized into different roles within the family and social relationships.

(Source: Field survey, 2013-14)

Economic Vulnerability and Girls' Education

In rural Bangladesh, a large number of people live under poverty line that also has an influence on girls' educational attainment. The present research found that for economic reasons, a good number of parents were considered girls education as a waste of funds. It was found that girls are treated only for reproductive and household tasks within the family boundaries. A good number of participants from socio-economically backwards families expressed that poor social status and traditional culture were the important factors to girls' educational attainment. One study participant noted:

When I told to my parents to engage in coaching education for two hundred Taka per month, they replied that 'money spent on a girl's education' is an unproductive investment and as my parents expect that, I will soon be married off and be to my husband's family'.

(Source: Field survey, 2013-14)

Religious Misinterpretation and Girls' Education

Conservative religious leaders of traditional rural society believe that when women become educated they become disrespectful and no longer adhere to male dominance. During the in depth interview sessions, majority of the key informant reported that conservative religious groups never believe in the concept of *Girls' Education* as well as *Women Empowerment*' (Hashmi, 2000). One of the participants narrated:

No doubt, we respect our own religion. But there are some people in our area always engaged in misinterpretation about religious sentiment...and position of women in Islam. Actually, in the name of religion their motive is to confine women within the homestead. They also blamed that NGO's functions deteriorate religious harmony. When my mother was participated into credit group ... senior influential persons of our village threatened us ... they also whispered that NGOs are opposite to the religious sentiment.

(Source: Field survey, 2013-14)

Child Marriage and Girls' Education

In Bangladesh, 78.4 percent of women aged 20-49 percent living in rural areas are married before they turned 18 compared to 65.2 percent in urban areas (BBS, 2008). A good number of respondent also expressed that girls' education is considered as burden. Therefore, majority of the parents in the rural Bangladesh try marry off their daughters as early as it possible. One key informant stated:

In our conservative rural society, women are treated as burden in terms economic returns and output. Thus, parents are usually prioritized to marry off their un-aged girls. They (parents) think that boys are the future earner of the family so attention should be paid on them (boys).

(Source: Field survey, 2013-14)

Gender Insensitive Educational Environment and Girls' Education

During the interview sessions it was noted by many that there were insufficient of privacy for girls' student in the school compound. For example, majority of the participant reported that separate toilet facilities were unavailable. This may because girls are faced variety of problems that limits their participation in education on an average. One participant stated:

In the village area we face varieties problems while we look at the environment of schools and colleges. We haven't separate common room, bath room and leisure place ... that is why we feel hesitated to continue our education. We also face insecurity when we stay at school ... for example, eve teasing has been a serious problem for us ... no prevention measure is seen yet. Sometimes our parents also threatened by the teasers. Our class room environment and teaching interaction patterns are not fair that creates problems for us as well.

(Source: Field survey, 2013-14)

It was also found that majority parents are illiterate that made them unaware about their girls' education. Specifically, parents, who have no education, having a tendency of withdrawing their daughters from school. It was also found that sexual harassment was the common phenomenon in the study area.

Discussion

Present study was aimed at exploring the socio-cultural hindrances faced by girls regarding educational attainment. Findings revealed that decisions about girls' education were strictly controlled by men. For example, a father or senior male member was the most influential person in their families and thus the decision about their education was also depended on him (father). In a conservative social setting like rural Bangladesh, social and legal rights of women are often determined on the basis of their stereotyped roles (Baden et al., 1994; Baden, 1994; Hashmi, 2000; Jahan, 1994; Karim, 2006a; Karim, 2006b; Karim, et al., 2012; Khan, 2001). In the present research it was revealed that societal conservative attitudes towards women were one of the important factors that slowed down their (girls') participation in education and movement outside the home. Parents of school going children consider girls' education as a waste of funds as most parents have the stereotyped idea that girls are only for reproductive and household tasks within the family boundaries (Baden et al. 1994; Baden, 1994). Misinterpretation of religion was identified as an important factor influences girls' education. Majority of the key informants reported that conservative religious groups never believe in the concept of *girls' education* as well as

'*women empowerment*'. In a traditional culture of rural Bangladesh early marriage or child marriage is spread out widely. Evidence also shows that in Bangladesh, 78.4 percent of women aged 20-49 percent living in rural areas are married before they turned 18 compared to 65.2 percent in urban areas (BBS, 2008). In the present research, it was found that a good number of participants having an experience of early marriage that made a study gap for them. It was also unfolded that sufficient privacy for girl students was not available in the school compound which also hampered girls' education in particular. Participants also noted that faulty socialization as well as learning process widening gender differences in many ways.

Strengths and Limitations

In the present research, due to time and budgetary constraints, fifty participants were selected purposively which may not seem to be sufficient. Female students who participated in the interview sessions, majority of them were at the teenage stage that might affect the research outcomes. Despite varieties of limitations, our research findings have some implications for gender sensitive education policy and interventions in the context of rural Bangladesh.

Conclusions

It is universal that participation of women in education is imperative for balanced socio-economic development as well as empowerment of women. Present study findings indicate that socio-cultural prejudices concerning girls' educational attainment are highly prevalent in the study area. In traditional rural Bangladesh, subordinated position of women made them vulnerable within the family and everywhere because it is well known that a large number of them (women) are less educated or having no education. Therefore, program addressing men's attitudes toward women is needed to be introduced. Similarly, present research findings also suggest that there are some basic socio-cultural problems embedded in social system which is detrimental for girls' educational achievement. Thus, effective consciousness programs (e.g. gender neutral teaching environment, interaction patterns between teacher and female student, gender role education) are also needed to improve the situation (Good et al., 1973; Delamont, 1980; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Faulty socialization process leads gender differences in learning ability between boys and girls (Kelly, 1981). At the same time, social learning process is an important factor that leads differences in learning behaviors of boys and girls, because children learn all new behaviors by imitating both adults and other children (Bandura, 1971). Hence, for ensuring girls' education of marginal households, door to door awareness program on children's proper socialization and learning behaviors is required widely.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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