

Engendering Education: Ensuring Equity

Ishrat Khan

University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Introduction:

Securing free, compulsory, quality public education for all is a need of time. Though 50% among 75 million children over the world are girl, unfortunately majority of them are deprived of their right to education. The gender equality goal of EFA (Education for All) 2005 was missed by a long shot and still there is long way to achieve the Millennium Development Goal by 2015.

Giving substance to gender equality also means tackling violence against girls and women as unremarked often, perpetuating non-participation in school. This ultimately hinders the continuation of girl's education.

Research on Gender based violence indicates a complex relationship associated with gender identities and access to power and esteem. In addition, these issues are often cloaked in shame and a process of silencing. It is usually quite difficult for children to raise their voices concerning sensitive issues like violence and sexual harassment. It often challenges the protection of girl child, impeding their access to education and school system. Therefore it is a matter of concern to explore strong policy framework, legislation to engender education system emphasizing on equality, development and social justice.

As education becomes an increasingly important process in social stratification, it is crucial to ensure not only equality to education but also equality in and through education. Expanding opportunities to girls and other marginalized children reveals how far South Asian governments have come in understanding and acting on all persons being equal and having a right to expect fair and equal chances. Still, there is a long way to go. The Charter on Rights Respecting School for students is much talked worldwide to ensure non-discrimination, safe and non-violent environment. It is thus education that can act as an agent of social change, minimizing violence against girls.

The focus up until now has been on improving access for girls by, for example, providing incentives to families, by employing more female teachers and by improving schools' infrastructure. Quality and equality of learning, however, go beyond equality of resources. Too many children now in school have not mastered basic competencies. Present investments in education will only pay off if a minimum quality is achieved. This will require employing sufficient teachers for lower student-teacher ratios, improving teacher education, revising curricula and text books.

How education can act as an agent of social change:

Education can act as an agent of social change through questioning the constructed, unequal power relation reinforced by establishing men's control over women. Therefore importance should be given in eliminating violence against girls for which millions of girls are deprived of their education rights. It is also quite difficult for children to raise their voices concerning sensitive issues like violence and sexual harassment.

➤ *Bringing social changes through modernization:*

Bringing social changes through modernization is one of the key factors of education. Though education generally means a formal training for knowledge management, it also denotes shaping of values and social production of personalities and cultures (Marshall in Barik, 2009). Thus it is commonly expected that education will help expanding the mental horizon of a child from the confined family relationship to diverse relationship of a larger society, rationality and equality (Jeffrey & Basu (1996) in Barik, 2009).

Though modernization has been considered as a process of differentiation through schooling, literacy and media exposure, but experiences of developing countries require rethinking of this unidirectional relationship between education and modernization (Ahmad, 1980: 108). Beside all these facts, in developing country's context, social, economic, political and cultural factors are also powerful intervening variables in changing individual attitude towards life.

Education is also a major determinant of the syndrome of attitudes, argued Inkeles (1974) in 'Education and individual modernity in developing countries.' Bourdieu (1977) emphasized on the contribution of education reproducing the dominant cultural capital through legitimizing certain forms of knowledge. This ultimately results reconstructing the social relationship of power, class, race and gender inequality.

Now the question arises, can education as an instrument of modernization really bring gender equality within society? Feminists have answered this question from diverse perspective considering children's access to schooling depending on the family structure, financial settings led by son preferences and resource constraints.

In analyzing the modernizing aspects of education, feminists have identified two major problems naming **male monopolization of culture, knowledge** and also **sexual politics of everyday life in school** (Acker, 1994).

What are the Feminist concerns for identifying inequalities in girls' education:

Feminists have long been advocating promoting better socialization of children removing sexual stereotypes, sex discrimination. Emphasizing on the principle of liberty and equality for both sexes, liberal feminists aimed at locating the barriers for girls' less access to education. Concerning socialization, sex roles and stereotyping, they also pointed out lack of rights, social justice and fairness that produce unequal treatment for girls.

Spender (1982) uncovered the role of schools in silencing women through the gate keeping process and also the role of language confining women into a segregated world. Spender like other radical feminists figured the sexual politics in educational institutions. Among the major issues, one is teacher's biased attention towards boys and also the potential benefits of single sex schooling. As Bryne (1978) argues, 'separate educational provisions for girls meant inferior facilities and restricted features' (Bryne in Barik, 2009). And mostly girls' presence outside their classroom is experienced with the verbal and non-verbal abuse or sexual harassment which is of a serious concern.

On the other hand, post modern feminists have focused on the cultural elements of education reconstructing the ideas on masculinity and femininity. Davies in his 'Discursive production of the Male/Female Dualism in School Settings' discussed, in learning discursive practices in school, children learn to position themselves as a male or female through the subject positioning which are available within those linguistic practices' (Davies, B. 1989a: p.229-241).

Post modern feminists therefore envisioned examining the equity implications for the Education policy. They also emphasized on multiple identity positions rather viewing gender as a core element of selfhood (Dillabough, 2001).

Mirza (1992) in her 'Young, Female and Black' outlined a different colonial narrative for women and girls' education. She showed how the marginal identity of women as 'other' is reproduced through education system and also how educational research fails to recognize the experiences of minority, ethnic girls.

Equality in Education: still gendered? Bangladesh context...

Like many other countries in Asia, equality in girls' education is still an under achieved issue in Bangladesh. The country with its intent to achieve equality in education have consented to ratify the international Conventions (CEDAW, CRC) and Declarations (Jomtein, Dakar),



but it has failed to consider education as a fundamental right in our constitution. Article 27-44 of the third section of the Constitution of Bangladesh has talked about 18 fundamental rights, of which education is not an element. This in return questions the accountability of state in ensuring education for all.

If we give an eye at our national statistics we will find a remarkable change in girls' enrolment in primary and secondary education. A published World Bank report (2010) identified that in Bangladesh, the ratio of girls to boys was 107.16 in 2009. Beside this quantitative change, still there are many girl child who fail to continue their education at certain point of time due to several socio-economic factors. Time has come to look at those issues, to bring equality in quality.

Friendly Education for Girls: Ensuring Equality in Quality

To ensure equality in quality of education, a massive change is required not only in the school setting but also in the perception, attitude and values of its every single beneficiary. Considering poverty, unequal social stratification and gender segregation, government should design an education system accelerating opportunities for girls and other socially excluded children. Beside gender sensitive teaching- learning

process, equality should be ensured in teacher's attitude and understanding of how children should learn.

Girls and boys have the same right to a quality education. But the 'gender gap' becomes painfully evident when looking at who is in the classroom. Quality is essential for closing the gender gap in basic education. Girls in particular face discrimination and challenging circumstances keeping them out of school or affecting their learning. To increase girls' enrolment rate and continuation of their study also requires institutionalization of non-discrimination and zero tolerance against violence against girls and such discriminatory attitude towards them (Rabindra, 2009).

Alike many countries in South Asia, Bangladesh is also not an exception of powerful patriarchal social structure. Disparities and gender gaps in access and retention are in many cases crowned with poverty. Despite national and international commitment, wider gender gaps within family and community widens the discrepancy between expectation and commitments. Lack of reliable data on such exclusion is also noteworthy. Besides, less value is attached to the inclusion of street children, working children, children of migrant workers, children with disabilities and other disadvantaged children's education (Heijnen, 2003).

Among multiple reasons, *gender sensitive curriculum* is the first thing to be mentioned. In most of the cases text books content, pictures reflect our socialization process where gendered roles are reconstructed through language. Even though Bangladesh National Curriculum and Text Book Board, NCTB has been working since few years to bring massive changes in it, it still requires inclusion of our excluded groups, minorities as well.

Teacher's education is also an important fact. Before joining this profession, each person should be given gender training to help them create a gender neutral teaching-learning environment. This bias free environment and literacy skill will bring more girls to school rather being scared of class room.

Safe environment and protection for girls is a necessity to ensure maximum number of girls' participation. Increasing number of female teachers can help girl children feel comfortable in the class room. It may also help parents of rigid social customs to feel safe that their daughters are under the guidance of female teacher. The Charter on Rights Respecting School for students is much talked worldwide to ensure non-discrimination, safe and non-violent environment.

And also there should be *a language of instruction* for the teachers how to teach and behave with the students avoiding gender sensitive words and activities like corporal punishment and so on.

A proper *monitoring of education* should be conducted as often. As education paves the way of social transformation, it needs to be monitored whether it succeeds to promote social changes. Also importance should be given to find whether it facilitates to mainstream the less participatory segment of society and bring them in the holistic development process.

Conclusion:

Quality education is a fundamental right for ensuring empowerment, development of every human being. It often challenges the protection of girl child, impeding their access to education and school system. Therefore it is a matter of concern to explore strong policy framework, legislation to engender education system emphasizing on equality, development and social justice. It is also a crucial target of Millennium Development Goal and Education for All. Intensive approaches should be taken for strengthening partnerships to facilitate the demands from the excluded groups. Beside service delivery mechanism, advocacy in the local and international level should be geared up to attain the international commitments. Most importantly, male bias in the institutions, curriculum designing and institutionalization of education should be minimized. More women and girls should be encouraged to access and achieve their educational rights for being an active citizen rather only being good mother and contributing for the socio-economic development of the nation.

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