

Risk and Resilience at Female Learners Transitions to ODL: A Study on Open School of Bangladesh Open University

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ABSTRACT

Open and distance learning (ODL) approach is considered as alternative approach of educational delivery; and education through this system is referred to as 'second chance education' in the educational literature. This system is very much accommodating for learners who don't able to attend the formal schools, where compulsory face-to-face (f2f) contact is the central to the system. On the other hand; ODL delivery is learner centric and provide the opportunity to pursue studies without attending the institute as it provides self-learning materials (SLMs) and ICT materials for completing the learning at learner's own pace and place, and optional f2f tutorial sessions at the study centers near to the learner's place. In spite of these flexibilities; there are always have dropouts especially of the female learners which is very expensive as it increases the marginal cost of the ODL program. The question of why some students successfully study through distance education (DE) and others do not is becoming increasingly important as ODL moves from a marginal to an integral role in the provision of basic education. This article explores the concepts of risk and resilience applied to the female learners in regard to their chances of successfully completing their Open School (OS) program of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) delivered through DE. The aim of the study is to develop a better understanding of the factors associated with academic success, withdrawal or failure and to attempt to identify female learners at risk of non-completion. The study focuses on their poor performance or lacking confidence in finishing the study. These influence resembling those found in studies of individual resilience in other domains.

Keywords: ODL, female learners, dropout, risk, resilience etc.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

"If we educate a boy, we educate one person. If we educate a girl, we educate a family and a whole nation."

~~An Old African Proverb (Randell and Gergel, 2009)

1.1 Background

Education is an important prerequisite for ensuring sustainable development, which has been considered as one of the basic requirements for human resources development. Though access to overall education has improved, but female access to education is excruciatingly slow (UNESCO, 2003). Recent United Nations (UN) statistics report that around 75 million girls in the developing world are not in school and that the transition to secondary and tertiary education among girls is limited. Similarly, 64 percent of the adult illiterate in the developing world are women affecting agriculture, health and formal/informal sectors. At this stage, the 'Education for All' (EFA) has the global recognition and commitment to the promotion of equality in education through quality education. As such it needs to be interpreted as education for all women and men.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system offers the promise of ushering in the knowledge society, especially in the context of the developing world (Dar and Yeasmin, 2010). ODL is a philosophy of constraint free learning situation, adopting a methodology of organizing learning experiences at a distance using multimedia and information and communication technology (ICT) as a means. ODL approach has been applied to school level education is termed as open schooling which is

increasingly recognized as a viable solution to the lack of qualified teachers and conventional schools in the developing world. This system is very much accommodating for learners who don't able to attend the formal schools, where compulsory face-to-face (f2f) contact is the central to the system. Because of its flexibility of programs and forms of delivery, ODL has been acknowledged to have greater potential for reducing various barriers.

The analysis of access to basic education in Bangladesh builds on the education policy of "free, compulsory and universal" basic education policy. There has been a remarkable development in education in the last 42 years in Bangladesh. The National Education Policy 2010 of the country recognizes the need to redress traditional gender imbalances in educational access and achievement. In this new policy emphasis has been placed on the importance of educating girls to face all the hardships in life and how education can help in empowering them in dealing with all the current problems. For instance, it is mentioned that the policy states as under:

"to remove socio-economic discrimination irrespective of race, religion and creed and to eradicate gender disparity; to develop non-communalism, friendliness, global fraternity, fellow-feeling and respect for human rights (MoE, 2010 p. 6)."

'The Education Policy of Bangladesh 2010' has identified ODL as a system that should expand the educational opportunities and provide access to individuals who would not have had the opportunity to study full time. Here ODL has been consistent growth during the last decade, which ODL got institutional status through establishing the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) and it received the autonomous status by the Parliament in 1992. BOU is the only distance teaching institution in this country which combines both university distance teaching with open schooling covering upper primary, secondary, and senior secondary courses; and that BOU Open School (OS) runs programs maintaining the curriculum at par to the national curriculum. Therefore, the objective of establishing BOU was to create educated and trained human resources by providing access to a wide range of educational and vocational training programs for all levels of people particularly for disadvantaged and rural masses including women who are generally deprived of formal education and training.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Women are most vulnerable and least empowered in many societies. Several challenges such as poverty, cultural and economic issues, hinder the regular participation of the girl-child in education. Hence women and girls who constitute over 50 percent of the country's population have been discriminated against and effectively denied education which is one of the fundamental human rights and a veritable tool for development and empowerment. Progress in closing the gender gap has been less than satisfactory and the nations of the world were urged to make more precise gender equality commitments during the Dakar Framework of Action 2000.

With a population of nearly 160 million, Bangladesh faces the challenges of creating human resources within the shortest possible time. Available educational facilities in the country are inadequate to meet this challenge. Population increase, resource scarcities and the abundance of readily available information are creating challenges in all phases of our national life. The future will be full of more new challenges but the current education system is not so effective at creating critical problem solvers. Nation can no longer afford to ignore half of their potential human resources and cannot effectively develop Bangladesh with the majority of its female population having no access to education. Therefore, basic education must be aimed for an overall improvement in the quality of life for all people including women.

2.0 APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM

2.1 Objective of the Study

The broad objective of this article is to critically explore the role of BOU in facilitating to ODL for ensuring educational equity to female learners. However, the specific objectives are to provide empirical evidence supporting the assumption that ODL will improve female access to quality basic

education; and to explore the problems associated with proper functioning of the ODL system of BOU for female learners and provides recommendations, thereby.

2.2 Literature Review

Gender-sensitivity in ODL is less presented in the literature than conventional education. The goal of universal basic education in developing countries has grown out of the recognition of its importance for equipping nations and individuals with the capacities and tools required responding to the demands of changing economic structures (Subrahmanian, 2002). Obeng-Denteh and Amedeker (2011) find negative parental attitude towards female education and socio-economic barriers are the main factors that contribute to the female school dropouts and to overcome the situation the government should seriously embark upon and intensify its mass education on female education.

The Open University model is designed to provide highly customized, individualized form of education, where this is a breakthrough to grab the chance and to pursue the objectives to enrich knowledge of people, especially in developing countries. The delivery of the ODL course content through a dynamic and interactive communication process as occurs at present seemed to have introduced it as a fairly recent innovation in education. The essence of ODL teaching and training is that girls can take advantage of learning opportunities anytime, anywhere and anyplace to implement positive change in their lives. The concept of ODL meets the Capability Approach Theory which stresses any form of learning in which the provider enables the recipient to exercise choice of what they learn, how and where they learn and how quickly they learn to have their learning assessed.

Over the last decade, most educational indicators have shown positive trends in Bangladesh. In particular, marked progress is seen in enrolment in primary education. The progress has also been largely pro-poor, with enrolment (and completion) rising faster amongst the poor than the non-poor, faster amongst girls than boys, and faster in rural areas than in urban areas. But still inequalities in education are significant (Mujeri, 2010). Historically, in Bangladesh, secondary education was to prepare students for higher studies which is known as 'elitist model' in the education literature; recently this has been transformed as country pursues policies of open access and universal coverage and establish programs offering broader curricular subjects, greater options and stronger ties to labor market demands. It is worth noting, elitist models of secondary education was dominant in Bangladesh before the issue of national education policy 2010.

2.3 Study Questions

After review of literature, the gap has been identified and accordingly few questions guided this study as follows:

- Will ODL have significant influence on female learners' access to basic education?
- Is there a significant difference between the characteristics and attributes of female adult learners who persist and succeed in accelerated programs and those who persist and succeed in traditional programs?
- Are there characteristics or attributes — such as demographics, prior experience or motivation — that distinguish the female adults to complete their degrees at bou from those who do not?

3.0 METHODOLOGY

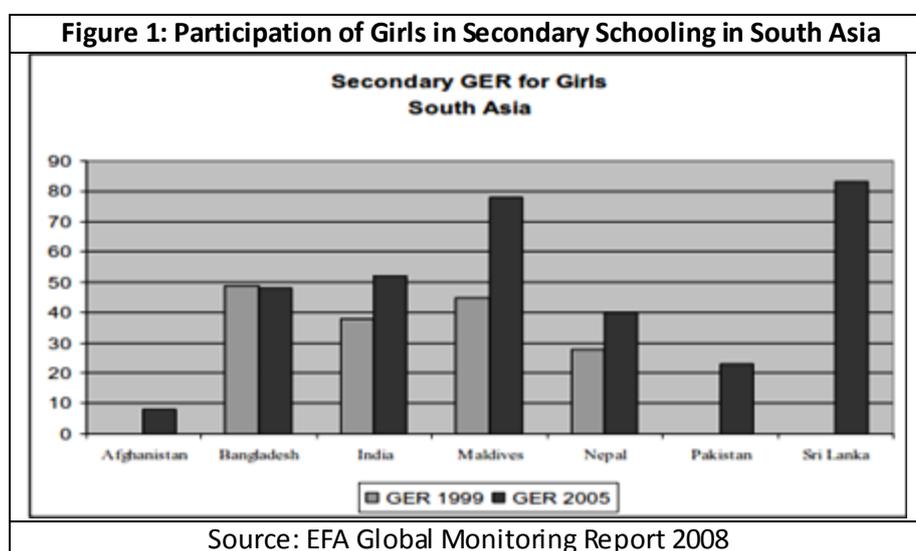
This is basically a qualitative study based on the critical analysis of secondary literature. In order to acquire the theoretical perspective about ODL, several bodies of literature of Western origin, research articles on referred journals, dissertations, grey articles and e-books have been studied. In the light of different scholarly debates of paradigms, relation between ODL and female learners' risks and resilience have been analyzed in this study. Several triangulation methods were used to enhance the study's validity and reliability, which enabled to examine the accuracy of the collected data, and reduce the possibility of researcher bias in drawing conclusions from these. Data collected for this

study have been processed in a scientific manner, then analyzed and summarized according to content and context of the study.

4.0 DISCUSSION

The overall development of a country depends to a great extent in the status of women. Empowering women aims at inspire them with the courage and confidence to break free from the chains of limiting belief patterns and societal or religious conditioning that have traditionally kept women suppressed and unable to see their true beauty and power. It encourages women to claim for their legitimate power and goodness within, inspire them to be the best they can be. Education is the cornerstone of women's empowerment because it enables them to respond to opportunities, to challenge their traditional roles and to change their lives. Educating women benefits the whole society. Women's education also has an effect on family size. The more years of education a woman has, the fewer children she tends to bear. Education can only bring women's economic emancipation, which is the key to empowerment, is a big challenge in the contemporary country situation.

Despite the impressive rise of enrolment levels in formal schooling, a significant number of hard-to-reach children especially girls in South Asia, more precisely in Bangladesh, continue to have no or limited access to basic education.



Education is constitutionally a state responsibility in many countries and Bangladesh is not exception to that. The Constitution of the country guarantees free and compulsory education as per Article 17. The educational system in Bangladesh is three-tiered and highly subsidized. The country confirms fully to the EFA objectives, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and international declarations. She is also a signatory to Convention to Eliminate All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and also committed to implement the Platform for Action and by Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing in 1995.

Table 1: MDG 3 and Bangladesh				
Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women				
Target 3A: Eliminate Gender Disparity in Primary and Secondary Education preferably by 2005, and to all levels of Education no later than 2015				
3.1a: Ratio of Girls to Boys in Primary Education (Gender Parity Index = Girls/Boys)	0.83	1.02 (BANBEIS, 2010)	1.0	Goal Met
3.1b: Ratio of Girls to Boys in Secondary Education (Gender Parity Index = Girls/Boys)	0.52	1.14 (BANBEIS, 2010)	1.0	Goal Met
Source: UNDP, 2012				

A key element in the BOU mission is to provide educational opportunity to the students those are excluded. The BOU-OS has 20 years history of providing second chance education for school dropouts through open schooling. It already has developed a countrywide network through establishing 12 well-equipped Regional Resource Centers (RRCs) and 80 Tutorial Centers (TCs) with in the country. BOU-OS provides both formal and non-formal programs following ODL approach, which uses SLMs as print, radio broadcast as audio, TV broadcast as visual, and tutorial sessions as human f2f as medium for the delivery of programs. Thereby, BOU-OS has become a true ODL institute.

4.1 Findings

The findings upholds the assumption that the objective of the program is to enhance the opportunities that support the EFA policy while at the same time providing avenues for the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills especially for women and girls (MDGs, 2000). As such, the findings are as follows:

- 'Education for All' will not be possible without effective provision for the education of women and girls.
- Better access to basic education through ODL can be a catalyst for female access to education, poverty reduction and a broader participation in the benefits of global economy integration.
- ODL should be seen as a positive strategy for meeting the demands for education, which is an instrument for poverty alleviation and economic empowerment. Hence it has become necessary for Government and Non Governmental Organizations to organize and manage ODL programs to meet the education for girls.
- Children in Bangladesh face a number of difficulties that prevent their attending in schools and become dropouts. Girls are more vulnerable than boys for religious and social believes that result in high female dropout rate in basic and secondary education. In addition, number of factors such as poverty, early marriage, migration for river erosion and child trafficking also contribute to increase the rate.
- The country faces many challenges; in spite of that the government has made a tremendous progress at the primary school level, but has yet attain this goal because of the inability to ensure the inclusion of a larger number of girls into junior and higher secondary level.
- The main reasons for girls not attending schools are poor economic conditions of the parents, cultural underdevelopment that discourages female education, in flexibility of the existing education system, and lower numbers of livelihood or skilled-based employment oriented courses in the existing programs.
- Promotion of ODL is a crying need especially in the context of Bangladesh where more than 60 percent of total population is illiterate and living below poverty line with more than half of the female population .
- The objective of ODL is to enhance the opportunities that support EFA and life-long learning and at the same time provide avenues for the acquisition of qualitative education for all categories of learners especially women. The application of ODL system in the field of education would create a great opportunity to reach the target of MDG and this has a significant effect on the education of Bangladesh with the establishment of BOU. The available literature show that most of the key positions at BOU are occupied by the persons come from conventional institutions. Therefore, a tendency toward conventionalization of the ODL system is being noticed sometimes.
- The findings in this study are important and informative but far from conclusive. They do tell us that previous learning experience at the post-secondary level is beneficial for female adults who enroled in BOU whether they are in accelerated or traditional programs — a finding that is highly consistent with conventional wisdom. We also know that the 'typical' learner who

persists and succeeds in either an accelerated program or a traditional program benefits from financial aid programs and higher grades.

- Though it has been found that women are benefitted mostly from BOU. However, the bottlenecks of BOU especially for female learners can be grouped into two broad categories - internal and external. Internal constraints basically related to BOU's capacity, human resources, technology, and operating system; meanwhile the external constraints include the shortcomings of BOU with the stakeholders.

5.0 CONCLUSION

5.1 Recommendations

With the limited spaces in the formal conventional education systems there is need to identify other educational programs which would enhance meeting the demand for basic education and subsequently eliminate gender disparities in education. Accordingly learning needs to be customized to meet individual female learner's needs. The recommendations are as follows:

- Setting the 'SMART' (Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic, and Timebound) logic model with indicators and means of verification;
- Building the 'RIGHT' (Rectified, Integrated, Goal-oriented, Human-capital and Technology-based) institutional capacity;
- Giving due importance to female learners as the target groups for each of the programs, and accordingly set objectives, strategies for delivering the lectures and materials and measuring criteria for achieving objectives;
- Emphasizing on Innovation;
- The concept of gender equality and balance needs to be stated explicitly and clearly by BOU;
- Full utilization and activating the BOU Media Center and establishing BOU's own broadcasting channels; and
- In a nutshell, the policy context is favorable and the stakeholders have some awareness and commitment but their perception of the concept of gender equality and equity needs to be refined in order to sensitize them for active engagement to ensure gender equality.

5.2 Concluding Remarks

The findings of this article suggest that coordination, institutional capacity, technological improvement, training, utilization of resources etc are the main forces that can drive the BOU to contribute for mass people especially female learners in the education, employment, and poverty alleviation. The study concludes that ODL will provide female learners a chance to increase enrolment and attendance and subsequently catch up academically with their male counterparts. It will significantly affect positively female access to basic education.

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