

Ensuring Quality in Open and Distance Education for Women Empowerment in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The issue of women empowerment attracts global attention, which is especially true since after the 4th UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. Access to quality education has been at the root of women empowerment. But the increasing cost of education coupled with widespread poverty has narrowed down the opportunity for their access to education. Again achieving quality in education has increasingly become crucial in strategic improvement plans of developing countries, which is also viewed as an influential factor in implementing plans for empowering them. This paper explores the role of ODL as a tool for women empowerment in Bangladesh. It shows ODL as a tool for promoting gender equality and empowering the women, a strategy for achieving the goal numbers two of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The paper will also focus on improving the competitiveness through enhancing organizational capacity by adopting the appropriate tools for its survival and growth.

Keywords: Quality, ODL, Women, Empowerment, MDGs etc.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

“Educate a boy, educate a human being; educate a girl, educate several generations.”

1.1 Background

As such education is universally acknowledged to benefit individuals and promote national development. But the uneven spread of education among women and men has caught the attention of the concerned all over the world, which has been a matter of even greater concern in the developing nations. The low level of education among women as compared to men has been attributed to several factors. One of them is education per se which is found to perpetuate inequality between the two sexes in terms of access, participation and performance (Ushadevi, 1995).

Empowerment is the enhancement of the political, social, economic or spiritual strength of individuals and communities, which envelops developing and building capacities of individuals, communities to make them part of the main stream society. Education is the backbone of human development and a powerful tool for empowerment of any individual, which helps in developing confidence in individual and community about their capacities and inherent strengths to shape their lives, and thus enhance the inner strength against oppression, exclusion and discrimination. It is the means by which societies have been known in history, to grow out of oppression and to democratic participation and involvement; and last but not the least, a powerful tool for empowerment of individual.

With education, women can realize the real potentiality hidden inside them and thus can explore them for the ultimate development of the country. So, women empowerment is not just a word now. It's a very powerful, extraordinary and useful tool for the society for achieving the development target. Women empowerment is an essential ingredient for achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Education is seen as an indispensable agent to bring about a qualitative change between what we

are and what we want to be. In this context, the role of distance education (DE) is not an option, but an unavoidable imperative for many of the people (Dhanaranjan, 1996). 'Open Learning' is a rallying cry – a slogan that implies commitment to shared educational beliefs. The most widely agreed beliefs are about opening up learning opportunities to a wider range of people and enabling them to learn more congenially and productively (Rowntree, 1992).

The Constitution of Bangladesh assures every child of the country shall have a right to equal educational opportunities. In the newly adopted 'Education Policy' of Bangladesh (2010), the country as a nation has adopted education as an instrument for social and economic transformation and thereby addresses not only the issues of access but also gender equity in the schooling process. Though the efforts of the government in education have yielded some positive results on girls and women education, but their educational attainment in the country is still low. There lies the importance of alternative methods of quality learning and teaching.

2.0 APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM

2.1 Objective of the Study

The objective of this paper is to explore how to ensure the quality in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) for women empowerment in Bangladesh.

2.2 The Concept of 'Empowerment'

Literally, 'empowerment' is seen to relate to the user's power. It involves undoing negative social constructions, so that the people affected can perceive themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and have influence (Rowlands, 1995:102). Rao and Kelleher (1995:70) define women's empowerment as "the capacity of women to be economically self-sufficient and self-reliant with control over decisions affecting their life options and freedom from violence."

Women empowerment is a very important catch word now in developmental jargon globally for last few years. It has been over used in 1980s and as a goal of development it has been gaining wider acceptance in 1990s. It entails a wide range of aspects including education, financial and decision making capacities of women. It is absolutely necessary for the overall development of a country. Again, the political empowerment of women has been enhanced by the level of education. Leaving a large portion of population away from the executive and decision-making process it is not possible to go ahead. An educated mother is absolutely necessary to form an educated nation. Today in Bangladesh, women are gradually occupying their rightful positions. Both the prime minister and leader of the opposition including number of cabinet ministers are women. However, they are discriminated again in occupying many positions in comparison with their numerical strength.

The issue of women empowerment is a global concern and the United Nations (UN) has included gender equality and women empowerment in its development goals. The first step for the women empowerment is to enhance their literacy level and uplift their economic solvency. Lazo (1995) thinks that women's powerlessness arises from their illiteracy, lack of awareness, poor knowledge and skills and also from their lack of self esteem and confidence. It is the development of mental and physical capacity, power or skills in women for them to operate meaningfully in their social milieu, thereby experiencing a more favorably level of social recognition and subsequently enhance their economic status. Education is the bedrock of their empowerment, be it formal or informal education. Their empowerment goes a long way; if they are empowered their children will receive more care and education.

The issue of the status of women in society has been debated much since the observance of the 'International Decade for Women' (1975-1980). Even after so many years the real situation of women all around the world is yet to be improved. Of the 1.3 billion people who live in absolute poverty around the globe, 70 percent are women. They work two-thirds of world's working hours, but earn only 10 percent of the world's income and own less than 1 percent of the world's property (Mahtab, 2007).

Although the concept of the status of women has undergone a great deal of change over the last few decades, unfortunately women all over the world are yet far from realizing their status. It is often agreed that equal participation of women in the development effort is necessary for socio-economic development of a country.

2.3 Importance of Education

Education reduces inequalities in society and leads to equalization of status between individuals. Based on this, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948 included education as the basic human rights of every human being. 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).

Fafunwa (1971) viewed education as the aggregate of all the process in which a child or young adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behavior which are of positive value to the society in which he lives. A Chinese proverb regarding education goes thus "If you want to think one year ahead, plant rice; if you want to think ten years ahead, plant trees; but if you want to think hundred years ahead give education to people."

Althusser (1971) sees the role of education as ideological. According to him, capitalist values are promoted via the hidden curriculum. He argues that the main role of education in capitalist society is the reproduction of an efficient and obedient workforce, which is achieved through schools. He believes that the education system has taken over from the church as the main agent of ideological transition essential to the maintenance of the capitalist economic system.

Although huge advances have been made in education attainment globally, there are enormous regional and intraregional differences in achievement, particularly by the yardstick of universal basic education attainment. More recently, the World Education Forum (Dakar, 2000) emphasizes that despite the priority given to the education for women and girls, real progress has been much slower than expected. Out of 6 Education for All (EFA) goals, goal 5 is titled as 'Gender Parity and Equality', where it is said to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and further achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.'

2.4 Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

The DE system is a new concept in the rapidly developing world of education and it is to reach out and serve learners who are separated by time or distance, or who are disadvantaged socially and economically. DE has infinite possibilities, especially in the uplifting and empowerment of women. Belawati (2010) sees the open university model is designed to provide highly customized, individualized form of education.

ODL is an instrument to achieve the educational goal. Its goal is to provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied. ODL is a source of progress and development for women. Many women from all walks of life have continued to seize the opportunities of ODL programs to improve on their education, get better job, and improve on their standard of living.

ODL creates opportunities for women education today to learn throughout their life time. It has brought succour to the women education and subsequent empowerment. They can now aspire to reach any level in their education through ODL programs. Some of the women see it as a chance to catch up one of life's missed opportunities (EFA, 2000).

Access to education has always been a problem because of inadequate funding and facilities to meet the admission demands. ODL is cost effective because government could now spend less in providing education for a large number of prospective candidates. ODL is inclusive and its flexibility in learning helps in equity and equal opportunities in education among the diverse social groups including women.

3.0 Methodology

This study has been prepared based on secondary literature, where various information and data are collected from books, journals, newspaper reports etc.

4.0 DISCUSSION

4.1 Bangladesh Case:

Bangladesh is a developing country and its population is one of the most important resources, with

very evenly distributed male and female population (BBS, 2007). From the very beginning of its journey as an independent country it has been cherishing the harmonized growth of both male and female population.

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights for men and women, prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and strives to promote social and economic equality. Some of the features include participation of women in national life (Article 10), equality in opportunity (Article 19), equality before law (Article 27) and equality of opportunity in public employment (Article 29). Article 28 states “women should have equal rights with men in all spheres of state and public life.” But practically very few women can enjoy such rights and live a healthy and prestigious life (Akhter, 2009).

Though various steps have been taken to bring about equality, right for women still have a long way to go in the country though the country is a signatory to Nairobi Forward Looking Strategy (NFLS) for advancement of women, adopted in Third World Conference on Women, and Convention to Eliminate All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Though women and men are by constitution equal, but in reality they are not (Islam 2000). The UNDP Gender-related development index (GDI) ranks Bangladesh at 123rd position out of 174 countries (UNDP 1999). This poor ranking is the result of the relatively low index value arising from the low literacy rates and the low share of earned income of women compared to men. Nation can no longer afford to ignore half of their potential human resources. Therefore, basic education must be aimed for an overall improvement in the quality of life for all people.

In a culture that places greater value on boys than on girls, women experience discrimination and relative deprivation at every stage of their life cycle. Despite some progress made in recent years, women in Bangladesh continue to suffer severe forms of discrimination. Most on-going discussions and research related to women’s development and women’s rights in Bangladesh indicate that there are at least four mutually interdependent factors influencing the macro societal system. These include economic setting, political organization, legal system and ideology and religion. Epstein (1986) views these factors often cocoon women in the social system. There is a gross disparity between women and men in every sphere of life, especially in economic aspects. Traditionally, men are the breadwinners and economic dependence make women socially backward and are considered to be a burden on the family. However, Naved (2000) sees the subordination of women in Bangladesh is a consequence of the existing patriarchal social system which determines power relations within households and the bargaining power of household members through the organization of the family, kinship and marriage, inheritance.

Bangladesh conforms fully to the EFA objectives and is one of the pioneering countries of the developing world which found in the system of DE a suitable answer to fast-growing educational needs of the country, though DE in its modern sense is of recent origin in Bangladesh. Bangladesh Open University (BOU) was established in 1992 by an Act of the Parliament as one of the world's 20 largest mega universities with the objective of transforming the vast resources into an educated and trained workforce. A key element in the BOU mission is to provide educational opportunity to the students those are excluded. BOU has done a commendable job by bringing education to the doorsteps of those who would otherwise have not been able to study. BOU runs both formal and non-formal programs through ODL mode where self-learning materials (SLMs) such as print, radio-TV broadcasts and face to face (f2f) tutorial services at the weekend near to the learners’ place are used.

4.2 Challenges in Women Education in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, access to educational opportunities for girls or women is more or less limited. Financial constraints and cultural resistance to education are major obstacles to schooling for girls, when parents have the means to send their children to school then preference has been given to their sons. Again marriage had always been a terminal point for women education. Women rarely leave their homes for further studies after marriage especially in rural areas and thereby dropped out from the conventional education system.

In the history of Bangladesh, education was never in reach of its entire people. Unequal access to education has been rampant in the country. Moreover, globalization has given rise to many dichotomies in the education system. Socially backward segments including women are further likely to be marginalized in the growth based neo liberal economy. The private and foreign institutions may

provide better quality of education, but with high cost, which is not affordable to majority. No doubt, this will be an advantageous to few 'elite' in the society who comes from upper strata, who can meet the financial cost of such education, at the same time the poor and marginalized minority groups are deprived from this benefit.

Educating girls produces many additional socioeconomic gains that benefit entire societies. These benefits include increased economic productivity, higher family incomes, delayed marriages, reduced fertility rates and improved health and survival rates for infants and children. But poverty has been a great hindrance to women education. Low education coupled with cultural discrimination against women is a constraint to women empowerment.

4.3 Way Forward

The National Education Policy 2010 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. It stresses the need of the liberalization of education to liberate marginalized sections of the society and recommends for the use of diverse modes to reach those un-reached.

Education is a very powerful agent of social change. The opportunities and accessibility created by ODL have generated a lot of enthusiasm in Bangladesh. The prospects of ODL for women are noteworthy. Government should translate the goal and objectives of ODL stated in 'National Education Policy' (2010) into reality and should encourage, initiate and promote ODL programs. Women should be encouraged through relevant ODL programs that are designed to meet their needs. Technological mediated learning should be intensified so as to get more dividend of ODL in the country.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In the existing socio-cultural milieu of Bangladesh, embodied within the phrase of 'empowerment' is the concept of change. Here although nearly half of the population is female, the majority of them are excluded from the core development process. No significant change can take place in the society without the active involvement of them.

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. From empirical study, it has been found that women are benefitted mostly from BOU. By ensuring proper quality, various programs of BOU certainly serve the purpose of enhancing literacy as well as the general level of education for women.

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