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Familial and social level inequalities in educational attainment: A qualitative study on Khulna University students

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Ethical Statement

- ✓ The authors declare that their work is not subject to ethics committee approval.
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1. Author's contribution: Wrote the article, collected data, and analyzed/reported results (70%).
2. Author's contribution: Supervise and write the article, proofreading the reported results (30%).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no possible conflict of interest in this study.

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This study was scanned using the iThenticate program. The final similarity rate is 7%.

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Abstract

This study explores familial and social-level inequalities in educational attainment at the tertiary level. The study employed a qualitative approach with a sample size of 14 by following in-depth interviews (IDIs) and key informant interviews (KII). Purposive sampling was used in this research. Primary data were collected from February to April 2024 using an IDI semi-structured interview guide and a KII checklist. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the qualitative data. The results revealed that most participants' parental socio-economic status was unsatisfactory. The findings of this present study disclosed that both male and female students faced different inequalities regarding educational attainment. However, female participants faced different familial and social-level inequalities compared to males. This study disclosed some familial-level inequalities, such as disparities in expectations, educational assistance distribution, emotional support, and family involvement in schooling.

Additionally, they faced some social-level inequalities like socio-economic status, race, sex, societal perceptions, and community stereotypes. The findings have implications for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders. Providing financial aid and scholarships to students from disadvantaged backgrounds and increasing awareness of the importance of girls' education can help minimize these inequalities.

Keywords: Education; Social inequality; Familial inequality.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction: Education directly transmits a society's knowledge foundation, norms, and values. In Bangladesh, there is inequality in elementary education across various dimensions, including division, geography, gender, sex, and socio-economic status. In the past 20 years, Bangladesh has made impressive strides in expanding access to education. Even though educational fairness is a primary goal of the government, there are still significant gaps in educational achievement (Samer et al., 2008). Due to the nation's rapid development, Bangladesh desperately needs quality education. Sadly, for the past few years, the budget for the education sector has remained unchanged at roughly 2% of the GDP (Khatun, 2022).

Parental education and occupation are the most relevant circumstances in the great majority of the countries considered. An essential underlying relationship exists between the availability of non-financial and financial resources and opportunity equality in higher Education (Palmisano et al., 2022). Jæger & Holm (2007) showed that parental economic, cultural, and social capital are the key predictors of educational attainment. Additionally, these three capitals considerably influence children's choice of secondary Education in Denmark. They also showed that cultural and social capital are the primary determinants of educational success. When the three categories of capital are considered, researchers can explain a significant portion of the effect of social class on educational attainment. Livelihood possibilities and educational attainment are strongly correlated; these growing educational inconsistencies will likely exacerbate existing disparities (Al-Samarrai, 2009). Leathwood and Archer (2004) demonstrated that social class disparities exist locally, nationally, internationally, and even globally. It is known that there are connections between poverty, educational attainment, and access to educational resources. Van de Werfhorst (2019) examined socio-economic disparities in educational performance among cohorts born between 1925 and 1989 in 21 European nations and showed that student performance differences exist. Hadjar

and Buchmann (2016) have shown that gender inequalities in educational attainment are of central concern in both public and scientific discourses today. Gender inequalities in education are differences between genders in various aspects, and at different stages of the educational career. McDaniel and Buchmann (2015) have addressed that women completed far less schooling than men in the past. However, women now outpace men in education globally because of academic, social, structural, and economic factors. It is not only about school performance but also about the interplay of family background effects, labor market structures, and changing gender norms. Girls continually outperform boys in school, earning higher grades in all subjects, taking more challenging courses, displaying fewer behavioral problems, and holding stronger educational expectations.

Furthermore, they have assessed the potential consequences of the female advantage in educational attainment and the challenges of conducting cross-national educational research. In these circumstances, it is essential to know Bangladesh's familial and social level inequalities. For this reason, this study poses the following research question: What types of familial and social-level inequalities did the participants encounter in tertiary-level education? Investigating familial and social level inequalities, this study can contribute to achieving the SDG 4, SDG 5, and SDG 10 goals by 2030.

Method

The study was conducted using a qualitative and exploratory research design. Following in-depth interviews (IDI) and key informant interviews (KII) methods, data were collected using an interview guide for IDI and a checklist for KII. The participants were the ongoing students of Khulna University who were in the 2nd, 3rd, or 4th Year of their studies. In this study, the IDI participants consisted of 12 students. The KII were the teachers of Khulna University who were experts in education-related research. Participants were purposively selected, and the total sample size was 14. The fieldwork was done from February to April 2024. The researchers thematically analyzed the data using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis model.

Findings and Discussion

The results demonstrate how systemic obstacles, familial dynamics, parental socio-economic status, and cultural norms influence students' educational prospects and results closely. The findings revealed that most participants' parental socio-economic status was unsatisfactory. Parental socio-economic status has a significant impact on every student's life. By analyzing the data, researchers have identified two themes: 1. Familial-level inequalities, and 2. Social-level inequalities. The first theme comprises four categories regarding the gender inequalities in educational attainment. There are a) inequalities in family engagement with education, b) inequalities in the allocation of educational support, c) emotional encouragement, and d) the family's expectations. The second theme consists of three categories. These are: a) disparities based on social dimensions like socio-economic status, race, and sex; b) societal perceptions; and c) community stereotypes. The present study disclosed that female participants faced different familial and social-level inequalities compared to males. Cultural norms and expectations frequently prioritized domestic duties for females, and in rural or conservative areas, worries about safety and mobility further restricted female access to educational institutions.

Conclusion and recommendation

Since the parental socio-economic condition of a significant portion of the participants was poor, students faced familial and social-level inequalities. Based on the data, recommendations are identified for mitigating this situation: The government should implement policies to provide financial aid, scholarships, and subsidies for



students from low-income families. Additionally, it is essential to raise awareness campaigns and community outreach programs to challenge regressive gender norms and promote the importance of educating girls. Furthermore, the concerned authority can arrange gender-sensitivity training and curricula in schools to foster an environment of equality and respect.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is the primary means for transmitting a society's knowledge, norms, and values. In Bangladesh, however, systemic inequalities have impeded the universal attainment of education, with disparities persisting across regional, socio-economic, and gender lines. Over the past two decades, the country has made notable progress in improving access to education. Weaknesses in the education sector governance, particularly biases in budget allocation and failures in targeted programs, which provide support to the poor and underprivileged female students, contribute significantly to these inequalities. However, significant gaps in educational equality and outcomes remain, despite institutional commitments to fairness (Al-Samarrai, 2009). Research indicates that educational disparity functions via two synergistic dynamics in this region. On the one hand, socio-economic background accentuates the disparities experienced.

On the other hand, gender is another critical determinant of educational inequality. Disparities in educational access, retention, and learning outcomes disproportionately affect girls from rural and low-income households.. The far-reaching changes in female Education in Bangladesh have significantly affected the perceived value of education for girls compared to that for boys (Blunch & Das, 2015). Due to the nation's rapid development, Bangladesh desperately needs quality education. Sadly, most firms in the nation have a shortage of qualified human resources despite the country's young population. The education industry in our country needs enough resources to overcome the obstacles. Sadly, for the past few years, the budget for the education sector has remained unchanged at roughly 2% of the GDP (Khatun, 2022).

Educational competencies and achievements are strongly determined by access and life chances in several spheres (Zapfe & Gross, 2021). Based on parental characteristics such as family income, race, and ethnic background, educational access and attainment differ (Maldonado, 2022). An essential underlying relationship exists between the availability of non-financial and financial resources and opportunity for equality in higher Education (Palmisano et al., 2022). A variety of disparities in educational opportunities exist in all pertinent life stages of a student. In the global context, enrollment gaps in education have shrunk, but they still exist, and efforts to improve equality in educational degree attainment have advanced slowly (Agrawal, 2014). From the early 20th century, disparities in educational opportunities between students from

different social and economic strata have remained more pronounced in underdeveloped countries (Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993).

Additionally, digital exposure, parental occupation, wealth quintile, and household size significantly influence educational attainment (Garg et al., 2022). Social status significantly shapes students' academic careers, while social class strongly influences their educational attainment (Crane, 1969; Jæger & Holm, 2007). Various characteristics influence educational preferences, and different personal, social, and environmental factors were associated with educational inequality (Ball et al., 2007). Though various research has been carried out in Bangladesh's national context, qualitative studies on familial and social inequalities in tertiary-level educational attainment regarding gender perspective, especially in the Khulna region, are rare. In this study, due to time and budget constraints, only one university was selected as the study area. Therefore, it is not easy to generalize the findings to the broader population. Despite these limitations, this study can contribute to formulating national policies to reduce familial and social inequalities in tertiary-level education. The study aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by addressing barriers to equitable learning opportunities. It also addresses SDG 4 by analyzing how familial and social disparities prevent quality education, SDG 5 by exploring gendered dimensions of inequality, and SDG 10 by disclosing how systemic social and economic disparities sustain unequal outcomes. By 2030, this research will inform evidence-based actions for inclusive education, gender equality, and reduced inequalities (Guterres, 2020).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies showed that parental social condition significantly influences academic success. Students from financially unstable families fail to achieve favorable educational outcomes (Soharwardi et al., 2020). Pensiero & Schoon (2019) indicated that social class, social status, education, and income each independently influence educational attainment, often displaying distinct patterns of stability or change over time. Furthermore, evidence shows that the transition to upper secondary education is critical for understanding the persistence and expansion of inequalities in educational progression and attainment. Leathwood and Archer(2004) demonstrated that social class disparities affect education locally, nationally, internationally, and globally. It is known that there are connections between poverty, educational attainment, and access to educational resources. Van de Werfhorst (2019) examined socio-economic disparities in educational performance for cohorts born between 1925 and 1989 in 21 European nations and showed differences in educational performance among the students.



Hadjar and Buchmann (2016) have shown that gender inequalities in educational attainment are of central concern in both public and scientific discourses today. Gender inequalities in education are differences in a broad aspect of education, including access, participation, achievement, subject choice, learning environment, and progression to secondary or higher levels. McDaniel and Buchmann (2015) have shown that women outpace men in education due to strong motivation, higher school engagement, and endless academic effort. They also highlight that social changes and expanding opportunities for women contribute to this trend globally. However, cross-national research faces challenges due to varying cultural, economic, and policy contexts affecting gender based educational outcomes.

3. METHOD

The study was conducted by applying a qualitative research approach. The nature of this study was exploratory. In-depth interviews (IDI) and key informant interviews (KII) were used in this study. An interview guide for IDI and a checklist for KII were used to collect data. The study's guiding philosophical viewpoint is social constructivism. The study's research area was the Khulna University campus in Khulna district, Bangladesh. This study's respondents were purposively selected, and the total sample size was 14. A total of 12 participants for IDI and 2 participants for KII were interviewed. The fieldwork was done after preparing a semi-structured interview guide within the suggested duration. For the IDI, data were collected from students at Khulna University, and for the KII, data were collected from teachers at Khulna University who were experts in education-related research. Ethical clearance has been taken from the Research and Innovation Centre (RIC) of Khulna University. The reference number is KUECC-2024-05-36. Each interview lasted approximately 30-40 minutes, and consent was obtained before the interview. After conducting 12 IDIs, data saturation was achieved. When data saturation is reached, the researcher has sufficiently investigated the topic under study and can stop gathering data without running the danger of missing important information. This idea is crucial for establishing sample size and boosting the legitimacy and validity of qualitative research (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Johnson et al., 2020). The researchers thematically analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis model.

4. FINDINGS

Researchers have collected data about the participants' socio-demographic profiles, which is crucial for conducting research.

Table 1 shows the demographic profiles of 12 students of Khulna University from various disciplines who participated in in-depth interviews. Respondents ranged from 19 to 24 years old and were enrolled in different academic years. Both male and female students were included, allowing the study to compare gendered experiences and viewpoints, especially on topics such as education, social norms, or family dynamics. Every participant carried their own religious identity. Participants came from disciplines like sociology, economics, pharmacy, law, and statistics. Abrami et al. (2008) demonstrated that courses emphasizing liberal arts and social sciences foster greater gains in critical thinking skills compared to other disciplines. Moreover, a study by Bray (2006) found that majors focusing on social issues encourage more complex reasoning and interpretation of societal challenges.

This academic variety can influence their critical thinking and interpretation of social issues. Based on Sirin's (2005) meta-analysis, family income and socio-economic status significantly affect students' educational outcomes by determining the availability of the quantity and quality of resources. Higher family income often means better access to educational materials, extracurricular opportunities, and favourable learning environments. This table also shows that the participants' family income varied from 8,000 to 25,000 BDT, indicating socio-economic diversity.



Table 1 Socio-demographic Profile of the Respondents

IDI No.	Age	Sex	Discipline	Academic Year of Education	Marital Status	Monthly household income	Place of Birth	Religious Identity
IDI 1	22	Male	Sociology	Third Year	Unmarried	12000	Satkhira	Muslim
IDI 2	22	Male	Economics	Third Year	Unmarried	25000	Jessore	Muslim
IDI 3	22	Male	Economics	Third Year	Unmarried	10000	Rangamati	Hindu
IDI 4	24	female	Pharmacy	Fourth Year	Married	15000	Khulna	Muslim
IDI 5	21	Male	Pharmacy	Second Year	Unmarried	12000	Khulna	Muslim
IDI 6	21	female	Sociology	Second Year	Unmarried	10000	Khulna	Muslim
IDI 7	22	Male	Sociology	Third Year	Unmarried	8000	Sirajgon	Hindu
IDI 8	23	Male	Statistics	Fourth Year	Unmarried	10000	Khulna	Muslim
IDI 9	24	Male	Statistics	Fourth Year	Unmarried	15000	Chittagong	Muslim
IDI 10	22	female	Law	Third Year	Unmarried	12000	Khulna	Hindu
IDI 11	19	female	Law	Second Year	Unmarried	15000	Rangamati	Muslim
IDI 12	22	Femal e	Sociology	Third Year	Married	25000	Satkhira	Muslim

Source: Field data, 2024.

Table 2. Demographic Information of the KII Respondents

Participants	Profession	Designation	Workplace
KII 1	Education-related researcher & teacher	Professor	Khulna University
KII 2	Education-related researcher & teacher	Associate Professor	Khulna University

Source: Field data, 2024.

Table 2 features two academic professionals from Khulna University: a professor and an associate professor with expertise in education-related research. Their roles in academic positions helped them to comment on broader perspectives among students, institutional challenges, and policy implications. Their experience and deep knowledge lend credibility and

depth to the findings. While the IDI participants provide personal experiences, the KII respondents offer macro-level, reflective analysis or challenging individual narratives.

Researchers have identified two themes by analyzing the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis model. It is a systematic approach designed to identify meaningful patterns within qualitative data. The theme development process involves six phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

1. **Familiarization:** Reading and rereading the dataset and transcribing it allowed the researchers to get to know it during the first phase of thematic analysis. As a first step in assigning initial codes, researchers wrote their preliminary ideas about the possible themes they saw in the data.
2. **Coding** – After familiarizing themselves with the data, researchers use coding to identify the ideas and topics in their data and refer to them quickly and easily.
3. **Identifying theme** – By following the coding system, the researchers identified two themes, namely 1. Familial-level inequalities; and 2. Social-level inequalities.
4. **Reviewing themes:** After defining them, the researchers revisit them to determine how well they align with the coded data extracts.
5. **Defining and identifying themes:** As researchers examine the themes more thoroughly, they give them names and provide a more precise definition. Since themes identify patterns in the data rather than just topics, they differ from codes.
6. **Writing up:** At this point, researchers started working on the final report, which includes a thorough synopsis of the codes and themes, original data excerpts that highlight the conclusions, and any other information pertinent to the investigation

Theme 1: Familial Level Inequalities

This theme consists of four categories regarding the inequalities in educational attainment. There are a) inequalities in family engagement with education, b) inequalities in the allocation of educational support, c) emotional encouragement, and d) the family's expectations.

1.1: Inequalities in family engagement with education

Family engagement in education refers to the active involvement of parents, guardians, and other family members in their child's learning and school activities. This engagement is crucial



for the child's academic success and overall development. However, the parents were unaware of their child's education due to their lack of education.

One of the participants highlighted that—

"My parents' ability to actively engage in my educational journey is quite limited due to their illiteracy, having never received any formal schooling themselves. This lack of education makes it challenging for them to provide academic guidance or assistance to me with homework and assignments. I heavily rely on my teachers and the school to support my learning needs."

Participant 6 (Female, Sociology, 2nd year)

Additionally, since some of the respondents' parents were not educated, a patriarchal mentality easily affected their parents. Some participants' parents did not provide them equal opportunity compared to their brothers. A female participant stated that—

"The patriarchal mentality and outdated gender standards that are pervasive in our community have had a significant impact on my parents' involvement in my education. This mindset often manifested in my parents' reluctance to allocate funds for my educational expenses, prioritizing my brothers' education over mine. Moreover, the prevalence of gender-based violence and harassment within our community instilled a sense of fear and insecurity in my parents. While my mother tried discreetly encouraging my academic pursuits, she often faced opposition from my father and other male household members."

Participant 12 (Female, Sociology, 3rd year)

1.2: Disparities based on the allocation of educational support

Disparities in the allocation of educational support can impact individual academic opportunities. Children with siblings might receive less financial and academic attention compared to only children, leading to unequal access to resources, extracurricular activities, and personalized guidance.

A participant expressed her feelings—

"I have two younger brothers. Unfortunately, growing up in an impoverished household, the allocation of educational support has been heavily skewed, with my brothers receiving far more opportunities and resources, such as books, stationery, and tuition, than I. From an early age, my parents' mindset reflected the patriarchal norms prevalent in our community, which prioritize sons' education over daughters'. My brothers received priority access to whatever educational materials, such as books and stationery, our parents could afford."

- Participant 6 (Female, Sociology, 2nd year)

On the other hand, male students received more educational support compared to females. Moreover, they can earn extra money by tutoring, whereas parents did not permit female students to earn money due to the lack of safety. One of the male participants said that—

"My family's socio-economic condition was not satisfactory. However, my parents tried to fulfill my educational expenses. To reduce the stress of my parents, I started tutoring and managed my study expenses. Because of financial constraints, even if my family wanted to, they could not provide me with enough educational materials. It is a challenge for every student from a low-income family."

- *Participant 2 (Male, Economics, 3rd Year)*

1.3: Emotional Encouragement

Here, most of the respondents, especially male respondents, shared positive experiences from their families. At the same time, data showed some astonishing information from the female participants.

One of them asserted that—

"My parents have been a constant source of emotional encouragement throughout my educational journey, providing unwavering support and guidance every step of the way. Their unwavering belief in my potential is a constant source of motivation, empowering me to strive for excellence in my educational endeavors."

-Participant 1 (Male, Sociology, 3rd year)

Most of the female participants shared opposite perceptions and real-life experiences. One of them shared her views in this way:

"As a female student, I have faced constant discouragement from our families, society, and sometimes from our schoolteachers. They asked me, 'Why study so much when marriage is your future?' and my parents worry about 'wasting money' on my education. Even our school teachers pushed boys to lead class activities while advising me to 'choose easier subjects.' "

- Participant 12 (Female, Sociology, 3rd year)

1.4: Family's expectations regarding your educational achievements

Family expectations regarding educational achievements often involve aspirations for high academic performance, the pursuit of advanced degrees, and successful career outcomes. These expectations can provide motivation and support but may also add pressure to meet perceived standards of success. Understanding and balancing these expectations is important for personal and academic well-being.



"My family has always placed a high value on education and has set expectations for me to excel academically. Despite our socio-economic challenges, they have emphasized the importance of obtaining a quality education to secure a better future. They expect me to complete my studies and strive for excellence in my academic pursuits. They see education as a pathway to success and getting a job."

- **Participant 4 (Female, Pharmacy, 4th Year)**

On the other hand, some of our female participants claimed that,

"My brother's education was treated like an investment in my family. Every exam result is celebrated, and every career dream is supported. However, even scoring higher marks was met with less enthusiasm; they told me it is 'Good, but do not forget your real responsibilities.' While they saved money for their boys' postgraduate studies, I heard, 'Why pay more? You will get married soon anyway. I fought to prove I deserved the same faith, but their pride still shines brighter for my brother's ordinary achievements than my hardest-won successes."

- **Participant 6 (Female, Sociology, 2nd year)**

Familial socio-economic status, parental education levels, and household resources play a pivotal role in perpetuating inequalities in educational access and attainment, creating a vicious cycle of disadvantage that transcends generations.

THEME 2: SOCIAL LEVEL INEQUALITIES

After analyzing the qualitative data, researchers have identified three categories. These are a) disparities based on social dimensions like socio-economic status, race, and sex; b) societal perceptions; and c) stereotypes of the community people.

2.1: Disparities based on social dimensions like socio-economic status, race, and sex

Through extensive in-depth interviews with students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, researchers have found that participants who belong to financially unstable families often face significant challenges in accessing quality educational resources and opportunities. Participants frequently reported inadequate funding for admission into highly reputed private schools, creating limited access to extracurricular activities, which can contribute to achievement gaps and perpetuate cycles of disadvantage. Some low-income participants mentioned that their lower economic status hinders their admission to the mainstream educational system.

One of the participants stated that—

"I have observed significant disparities in educational opportunities based on socio-economic status. Students from affluent backgrounds have access to high-quality education resources, facilities, and support systems, while those from underprivileged and marginalized communities, like myself, face numerous barriers and limitations. I lack access to basic learning resources like textbooks, stationery, and even proper nutrition, which is adversely impacting my academic achievements. So, lacking these supportive learning resources made performing better in my academic career difficult."

- Participant 8 (Male, Statistics, 4th Year)

In the same way, another participant stated that—

"Social inequalities in educational attainment are a pressing concern, as they perpetuate cycles of disadvantage and limit the potential of individuals and communities. Education is a fundamental human right and a catalyst for social mobility. However, racial inequality, which is created by society, creates barriers to access to higher education for all male and female students."

- KII:1, Male

"As a student from a low-income family, I often faced the harsh reality of inequality when I could not afford essential textbooks or lab equipment on time. While wealthier classmates progressed without interruption, I had to rely on borrowed materials and outdated resources, which left me struggling to keep pace and feeling excluded from equal learning opportunities."

- Participant 5 (Male, Pharmacy, 2nd year)

2.2: Societal Perception about Education

Community-level perceptions about education can vary significantly based on experiences of educational inequality. In communities facing educational disparities, there may be a pervasive disillusionment or skepticism towards the education system, often stemming from inadequate resources, substandard facilities, and limited access to quality teaching. Conversely, communities with equitable educational opportunities value and prioritize education highly, recognizing it as a key driver of social and economic mobility. Analyzing these perceptions can provide insights into how educational inequalities shape community attitudes and engagement with the educational system.

"In my community, the value placed on education is deeply intertwined with socio-economic status and cultural norms. While some groups prioritize education as a means for upward mobility, others face systemic barriers that diminish its perceived importance. However, education is viewed as a burden and a costly event for families like mine. Here, the perception of getting involved in any job rather than getting higher education is more suitable to lead a better life."

- Participant 1 (Male, Sociology, 3rd year)



Similarly, another two participants asserted that—

“Gender norms also play a significant role in shaping these perceptions. In many households with traditional mindsets, the education of sons is prioritized over that of daughters. Girls are frequently discouraged from pursuing higher studies, as their primary roles are perceived to be centered on domestic responsibilities and eventual marriage. Moreover, access to quality educational institutions and resources is heavily influenced by social stratification.”

- **Participant 8 (Male, Statistics, 4th Year)**

A KII participant opined that-

Gender disparities contribute significantly to social inequalities in educational attainment. In many communities, cultural and societal norms prioritize boys' education over girls', leading to lower enrollment and higher dropout rates for female students. Additionally, early marriages, household responsibilities, and safety concerns can impede girls' ability to attend school and achieve their educational goals.”

- *KII: 1, Male*

2.3: Stereotypes of the community people

Personal experiences related to social inequalities in education often highlight the challenges faced by students from marginalized backgrounds. Some people still believe certain groups are less capable of higher learning. These biases discourage students and families from even trying. They create an unfair barrier that holds back potential and deepens inequality. Community stereotypes often suggest that girls do not need higher education. Many still believe a girl's primary role is in the household, not the classroom. This mindset discourages families from supporting girls' education.

Different participants shared different experiences with these issues.

One of them shared that—

“Growing up in an impoverished neighborhood, I have been acutely aware of the stark inequalities that exist in accessing quality education. Gender-based discrimination was another harsh reality I witnessed within my community. Many families prioritized their sons over daughters, perceiving the latter's role confined to domestic responsibilities. I have seen countless bright, ambitious girls being forced to abandon their dreams and drop out of school, trapped by regressive societal norms. These experiences have taught me how deeply entrenched social inequalities can shape an individual's educational trajectory.”

- **Participant 4 (Female, Pharmacy, 4th Year)**

"I have personally experienced numerous instances of social inequalities in education, facing discrimination, bias, and a lack of opportunities due to my underprivileged background. I have been looked down upon, excluded from academic opportunities, and faced prejudice from teachers, peers, and even members of the community who perceive my socio-economic status as a barrier to educational success."

- **Participant 12 (Female, Sociology, 3rd year)**

"In my village, higher education is sometimes considered unnecessary for boys unless it directly leads to a government job. This mindset sometimes made me question my ambitions, as neighbors would tell me I was 'wasting time' studying sociology instead of learning a trade. I have seen many friends drop out of school because of this stereotype."

- **Participant 7 (Male, Sociology, 3rd year)**

2.4: Gender Norms Limiting Educational Ambitions

Gender norms are a common issue in our society. People often believe women should focus on household duties instead of pursuing higher education.

"As a girl, I have been facing continuous hindrance from my community. In my community, education or any professional degrees are unsuitable for women. Relatives often remind me that marriage is more appropriate, and pursuing a professional degree is seen as excessive for a girl. These remarks sometimes hinder my motivation."

- **Participant 11 (Female, Law, 2nd Year)**

Additionally, higher education is needed only for getting a good job, not personal development. A male participant disclosed that-

"My parents live in a remote area where educational guidance is nearly absent. They rarely check on my academic progress, not because they do not care, but because they feel unqualified to help. I think- sometimes this happens because of societal preferences for education and parental level of schooling. In my society, where I belong, people are more concerned about earning money than graduating."

- **Participant 3 (Male, Economics, 3rd Year)**

5. DISCUSSION

Examining the social disparities in educational attainment that students have been facing in Bangladesh is the primary goal of this study. The study highlighted the complicated relationship between cultural norms, systemic impediments, familial dynamics, and parental financial status that contribute to these disparities. The results of the study showed that parents' economic situation had a significant impact on their children's educational chances and achievements.



These results resemble other studies (Soharwardi et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2018). This shows how parental socio-economic status affects their children's academic achievement. This study showed that parental socio-economic status was a well-documented factor influencing educational outcomes. In Bangladesh, poverty and income inequality are prevalent, and families with lower socio-economic status may face significant challenges in providing their children with adequate educational resources, such as quality schooling, study materials, and tutoring. This lack of resources can hinder academic performance and educational attainment. Lahtinen et al. (2020) and Pensiero and Schoon (2019) found similar components: social class, social status, education, and income all have independent effects on educational attainment and can show different patterns of stability or variability over time. The findings of this study are consistent with those of other studies, notably Ahmad et al. (2005), which highlighted that students from lower socio-economic strata often face multiple challenges that hinder their academic performance, including limited access to educational resources, lower parental support due to financial constraints, and societal expectations. These students also face cultural barriers, such as reduced exposure to cultural capital like language skills and academic norms, which affect their educational preferences and opportunities. The present study discovered that another important problem in the Bangladeshi context is social level inequality, which includes gender-based inequality in schooling. Cultural norms and expectations frequently gave girls' home duties priority, and in rural or conservative areas, worries about safety and mobility further restricted their access to educational institutions.

From a structural inequality perspective, disparities reflect how ingrained institutional systems such as school funding, urban-rural infrastructure gaps, and class-based social hierarchies ensure advantages for certain groups while limiting opportunities for others. Such inequalities are not merely incidental but are structurally embedded within policy, governance, and economic systems. The study revealed that another significant issue in the Bangladeshi context is social level inequality, which encompasses gender-based disparities in education. Cultural norms and expectations frequently prioritized home duties for women, and in rural or conservative areas, worries about safety and mobility further restricted their access to educational institutions. Applying feminist theory here helps to unpack how patriarchal structures and gender ideologies not only limit girls' educational access but also normalize these restrictions as "cultural norms." This aligns with gender theories that emphasize the intersection of gender with socio-economic class and patriarchal constraints as Pollert (1996) examined the concept of patriarchy through the lens of social class and patriarchy as the sole determinants of women's subordination, as well as gave a clear theoretical explanation of how class and

patriarchy connected, which is helpful to understand how and why some groups, like women, are left out of education. Moreover, the research demonstrates how closely systemic obstacles, familial dynamics, parental socio-economic status, and cultural norms influence students' educational prospects and results. By placing these findings within structural inequality and feminist frameworks, the study moves beyond describing disparities to explaining how they are produced, sustained, and potentially denuded through targeted interventions and policy reforms.

6. CONCLUSION

This study expands our knowledge of socio-economic disparities in educational attainment. Parental financial standing and emotional support are crucial in shaping students' educational opportunities. Additionally, marginalized communities, particularly female students, face significant barriers due to societal norms. This qualitative study provides insights into the complex interplay of socio-economic factors, cultural norms, and systemic barriers that contribute to inequalities in educational attainment among students at Khulna University in Bangladesh. These findings corroborate previous research on the detrimental effects of socio-economic disparities, cultural norms, and institutional barriers on educational attainment.

Addressing these multifaceted inequalities requires a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach. Policymakers, educators, and stakeholders must prioritize interventions that tackle socio-economic disparities, such as providing subsidies, financial aid, and scholarships to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They should enhance awareness of the importance of girls' higher education.

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