

GIRLS STEP TOWARDS EMPOWERMENT: Bangladesh Open University Ladder to Hope through Gender Lens

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ABSTRACT

Women's access to education must be treated as their fundamental right. And it is only through education that they would get the chance to prepare themselves in order to play their roles in nation's social, economic and political spheres as equal members of society. In Bangladesh, very few women can enjoy such rights and live a healthy and prestigious life. At present due to government initiatives, girl's enrolment in primary and secondary education is little bit higher than the boys. Despite of such encouraging scenario, there is a dark side behind this. Due to prejudice, mistaken education from family and society, lack of security, gender biased curriculum, dropout rate of girls is higher and their retention rate is low. Though there are facilities with free education till secondary education, lack of social motivation, mistaken education and increasing rate of violence against in different form, refrain them from education and encourage them in child marriage. Marriage is considered as the alternative to education, which ultimately leads to violence against women due to unpaid dowry.

The article will analyse the issues of some social problem with special emphasis on mistaken family education. Curricula and textbooks are gender biased and classroom environment are more gender biased. Bangladesh Open University has all the freedom, access and opportunity to overcome the problems with their unlimited innovations to refrain the girls from education. Some textbooks of BOU will be reviewed from gender perspective and will put some alternative approaches. The article will emphasis on the uniform gender code, gender sensitivity and gender balance in among all the Open and Distance Learning Institution of the developing countries

Keywords: Women, Education, Empowerment, Distance Learning, flexibility

INTRODUCTION

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. Article-28 states "women should have equal rights with men in all spheres of state and public life". But, practically, very few women and girls can enjoy such rights and live a healthy and prestigious life. Young girls are curtailed from education, which is their basic right due to social evil. Parents are afraid of their daughter's honor, family and social prestige, so ensure the safety of the daughters; sometimes they take the decision to withdraw their daughters from schools and colleges.

Most of the time this type of occurrence like eve teasing happen when girls were in the way to educational institutions. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*' a revolutionary book; Mary Wollstonecraft that says women are always judged first as women and second as human beings.

On the other hand, men are judged individually on their own merits. Wollstonecraft says that that through proper education, women could acquire self-respect. Knowledge is

power and knowledge imparted through education is more powerful. In our country most of the people especially women are devoid of their basic rights and they are considered as the disadvantaged class. The fruits of technology and modernity are the subject of enjoyment of the privileged class of the society. So the Open University is the bridge of information among the disadvantaged people based on their needs, culture, environment and economic status.

Societies often impose physical restrictions on women's mobility. Studies from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan have clearly shown that parents refrain from sending their daughters to school not so much because they fear for their daughter's safety, but because they are worried of upsetting traditional gender roles which give girls little choice in matters of education (Kanwar and Taplin, 1999). Distance education overcomes many of the obstacles faced by the girls and women in the mainstreaming education of Bangladesh because, in distance education time, needs and places of the students are regulated according to their convenience. It becomes the second chance to the disadvantaged group of Bangladesh.

WHAT IS ODL CULTURE

Distance learning as a process that is sensitive to social, cultural, and contextual factors (Warschauer, 1998; Wegerif, 1998). Considering the cultural dimension as a crucial element in the effectiveness of women education towards empowerment, the paper supports and elaborates on the idea that successful ODL is not only dependent on optimal uses of available technologies, teachers' pedagogical-content knowledge, and students' motivation level, it is also dependent on the cultural (mental) representations learners and teachers bring to the learning situation and the content and approach in textbooks.

Culture is a complex term to define precisely. As such, it has a long and complicated history. In most disciplines, the historical tendency has been to connect culture to nationality and ethnic origin. Grounded in the influential work of Hofstede (1980), the inclination has been to assume national groups as having the same patterns of thought, action, and values.

More recently, however, culture has been seen as an entity that transcends ethnic and national boundaries. Viewed from this perspective, culture encompasses "the patterns shaped by ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, geography, profession, ideology, gender, and lifestyle" (Branch, 1993, p. 7). This more recent definition of culture embraces the idea that every person and human group is both cultural and multicultural. This paper is consider culture as acquired behaviours, perspectives, values and characteristics of a particular group or community. Gender Sensitivity from Different Perspective

- Gender discriminated practice prevailing in the family
- women's and child's human rights
- Gender discrimination in the educational intuitions
- Examples from the textbooks of NCTB
- Examples from the Textbooks of BOU
- Determine the ODL culture from gender perspective
- Recommendations for making ODL, more gender sensitive Family and Gender Issue

Family is original and historical shelter for the people. We know that all types of education originate from the family. When a child born then he or she started gradually to understand everything by following their parents. The reflection of the behavioural attitude between the parents integrated in the children.

Family is the strongest driving force for moulding the children into the right direction. If the family's impact is negative on this regard, justice could not expect from society. If a father brings a big fish from market, generally, mother will give the head of the fish either to father or any male child. This is other male member of the family.

WOMEN'S AND CHILD'S HUMAN RIGHTS

UN charter and later on in 1948, 10 December in the Universal Declaration has been known as human rights bill. Its objective was two:

- To flourish the basic rights and possible talents
- and to implement it through international process.

In 1979, 18 December the general assembly of UN has declared this convention or bill considering the issue of discrimination against women. Let's now we look into the matter, why CEDAW is so important? Before this there were many convention but those did not get priority because those were not based on human rights.

The Importance of CEDAW

- CEDAW is the only bill or contract which speaks about women issue
- By equality in CEDAW means equality of law and practical equality
- It determines the international standard regarding women rights.
- CEDAW gives the complete definition about the discrimination against women.
- It put equal importance to remove the discrimination on the private and public of women.
- The supporting countries of CEDAW are legally bound to implement the CEDAW

GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

The goals of education for All (EFA) are currently concerned with equality. If children are excluded from access to education, they are denied of their human rights and prevented from developing their talents and interest in different dimensions.

Bangladesh is committed to EFA and Dakar Framework and UN Millennium Goals for 2015. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girl's full and equal access to basic education of good quality is one of the major goals of Dakar framework.

A significant achievement of the last decade was to attain gender parity in primary school enrolment. Other components are improvement in gross and net enrolment in primary education and reduction in dropout and improvement in completion of the cycle, encouraged by provision of free textbooks to all students, food for education and lately stipends for stipends for poor children.

Apparently many positive changes have been achieved but in reality some gender discrimination still remains in the different educational areas in Bangladesh which we much addressed to the students so that they could identify the problem themselves.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN NATIONAL TEXT BOOK BOARD

National Curriculum and textbook Board (NCTB) had already made some progress towards gender-balanced curriculum and textbooks. They have adopted policy to change

the textbooks in order to make it more gender-sensitive. Some issues should be considered.

- Truth should not be hiding regarding the role of women, example, freedom fighter, breadwinner, scientists, pilot etc.
- No functionally defined role of men and women should be depicted in the textbooks
- No degrading language should be used which expose the inferior position of the women
- Social mobilization of women should be depicted
- Biological differences should not be portrayed
- Religion should be expressed as a morality not to restrict women from empowerment
- Textbooks should be the symbol of truth, prosperity, progress. Workable and free from dogmatism and superstition
- Textbooks should be the agent of changing world to a positive direction.
- No description regarding girl's beauty and boy's strength should be emphasized.

ROLE OF BANGLADESH OPEN UNIVERSITY (BOU)

The Bangladesh Open University is the only open and distance Learning University in Bangladesh. It is turning to a positive goal towards empowerment of the disadvantaged class; especially women. The Open School of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) is presently imparting two educational programs, namely Secondary School certificate and Higher Secondary School Certificate programs.

These programs are basically providing an excellent opportunity of continuing education to those, who were either dropped out from basic education program, both in formal and non-formal education sectors or were unable to avail further educational opportunities due to various reasons.

The Open School is one of the faculty of BOU providing two vital programs, SSC and HSC, for last couple of years to the students of secondary and higher secondary level who have not the privilege to complete it through the national system. Open School is supplementing the initiative of the govt. to achieve the goal of EFA and MDG. While secondary age group students are definitely demands the environment of the school as support for their learning, the opportunity should be given to the students to complete their education with competence, fairness and justice, gender sensitivity in curriculum, textbooks, class environment, audio-visual program is needed. Reformation should not come if the mind-set of the authority changes.

CURRICULUM OF BANGLADESH OPEN UNIVERSITY

Bangladesh Open University is following National curriculum, in its act it is written that BOU should follow NCTB curriculum but it could add something more but not less. So BOU has an unlimited scope to make its curriculum according to its desire and ambition. The textbook of BOU are written in a self-learning system with many examples and illustrations.

The students of BOU are deprived to be in direct contact with the teacher. Most of the students are from disadvantaged class, so they are not getting educated parents and surroundings, books are the only medium for them to learn new something and mould their opinion. Practically secondary students are most vulnerable considering their age and environment. What they learn, they apply in future.

They are very sensitive in receiving knowledge. Bangladesh Open University is bearing strong responsibilities to mould the mind-set of the students with modern concepts, gender sensitive and concept towards justice. It should play a role of a teacher, reformer and guide.

Review of the Selected Textbooks Gender Perspective

- In this book it is defined, how the children help their parents in the household activities. In this book division of labour is very stereotyping and prominent from gender perspective. It is mentioned that a boy of agriculture based family can help father and on the other hand girl has to manage whole household work with mother when mother is in post natal stage. The boy of the urban educated society goes to bank; give electric bill and telephone bill. Sometimes they go to grocery shop instead of father. In lower middle class family, a boy work in factory, industry, on the other hand a girl takes care of the younger siblings, cook, entertain the guests actually she is taking the whole responsibilities of mother inside the house. Boy can go for fishing and girl has to make a bed, breakfast etc. As a result boys and girls are receiving the idea about their stereotyping responsibilities. If an accident occur in the road, a boy can help, if any younger siblings get slapped by other friends, they go to their elder brother for justice as if only brother are the person to judge what is right or wrong. If younger sibling torn their clothes, they go to their elder sister for sewing. From above discussion, it is established that the role of boys and girls are very stereotyping and functionally defined role. It is not acceptable. Boys and girls should work according to their desire, capability and merit. There are many problems in the family, sometimes it arises suddenly, e.g.' unhealthy relation between parents, father loses job, sudden death of breadwinner, marriage problem of sister, quarrel with the neighbor, any type of problems an adolescent boy can manage. In this textbook, it is written in this textbook that boy's muscles are wider compare to girls. As a result boy become stronger and feels superior. This is also one of the main cause of violence against women, torture by stronger upon weaker sex.
- All the participants are boys. Girls are totally excluded from this tour. It is again established that public field is allocated for the boys and private field for the girls. Both boys and girls should be depicted in the picture, so that the girl students will get interest to see the picture and read the story.
- Only boys go to outside to visit friend's house, for shopping etc. ---where are the girls? It is established that girls have no friend only kinship and household burden. Truth is always hidden.
- There is a story and picture of a writer who is a male person—no female writer? In Bangladesh many famous writer and poet are female. If they are not portraying the textbooks, how could the students know about this, how could they overcome the misconception that women have no talent?
- In a science fair only male students are taking part, no girl students are there. We know that practically many girl students are taking interest in this issue. Our government is trying to make Bangladesh a digital country, how it will be possible, by excluding 50% population from science and IT. Sewing a new dress, cooking, taking care, mopping –all are functionally defined role are presented in the textbooks. The entire example tall taller, better are male--- completely male based book
- In maths books, it is mentioned that Anu has 6 dolls, mother gives another 4 dolls, Anwar has 17 marbles, this type of stereotyping example should be avoided in the textbook, as if girls are born to play with doll and boys with marble. There should be choice of selecting their role.

- There is a picture in which all the male persons are in a decision making committee, which is formed for the welfare of the village. Why the female community is excluded from this decision making body. They are also the member of same species so they should be involved in this decision making body. They have the right to know what is going on in any development issues. Actually, things have changed, many women are taking part in the decision making body but truth is hidden in the textbooks.
- There are pictures of eight different professions among which only one profession belong to the female that is nursing profession. Here presenting nursing profession for the female is reinforcing the stereotyping role of the women. Why not any female in other profession like judge, lawyer, teacher, journalist, doctor, engineer and agriculturalist. Actually large number of females are working in the non-stereotyping profession which are not reflected in the textbooks, if women is shown as a doctor, they are portrayed as a gynecologist, why not cancer Specialist or cardio specialist or surgeon. It is reserved for the male doctor in the mindset of the society.
- In a picture of the textbook, it is shown that three boys are writing in the blackboard and one boy is reading loudly in the classroom for other students. Why not any girls are in the blackboard. Generally the girls of Bangladesh are shy and do not feel comfortable to raise their voice and to speak or do something in front of public. They should be encouraged to take active part in the classroom and develop their leadership quality.
- In a poem a girl is compared to the calmness of a river and a boy is explained as a dushtoo (naughty, clever) Here the stereotyping mindset is exposed in defining the nature of boys and girls. It is expected in our society that the girls should be submissive and the boys should be aggressive. The textbooks has a mandate to reinforce this nature of men and women which ultimately creating violence against women considering that the women has a high level of tolerance power
- It is defined that Elina's complexion is very good and hair is black. Again it is mentioned, she likes banana and she is as sweet as banana. This type of description is creating sex appealing image of the girls.
- In a Nabbanna occasion (paddy cutting season in winter) women are cooking payesh sweet with milk and rice and jiggery and rice cake. Here women are not shown as a farmer though they do most of the work in farming. Still they are not recognized as a farmer they are called the helper of their farmer husband.
- It is shown that the boy is operating computer and in the monitor it is shown that a girl is mopping the floor. Practically most of the girls are using commuter equally to the boys.

Text Analysis through a Gender Lens

Narrative Presentation

- Action-productive? Reproductive activities?
- Technology -who has the skills?
- Whose work is recognized? Who "leads" and who "helps"?
- Location -who is seen where?
- Power -who has it?
- Language -who is named? Who is not?
- Language -nouns and pronouns?
- Language-how are people described?

GUIDELINE FOR REVISING

SECONDARY EDUCATION CURRICULUM AND TEXTBOOK OF BOU

- Gender-specific training should be provided to the authors, illustrators and editors, who will develop the textbooks and materials to address gender.
- Ensure widespread consultation in drawing up a curriculum to facilitate participation by group who may be marginalized because of gender-neutral and ethnic-minority sensitive language or social practices.
- Conduct a subject based gender training for the writer, illustrator with a view to make the textbook more gender-balanced.
- Initially, good numbers of the female editors, authors and illustrators for the development of textbooks and materials in support of the curriculum is expected. Materials should be presented in such a way as to eliminate damaging feelings of superiority based on patriarchy in the male person.
- Role of women in the development of society and nation should be portrayed. Subject matter is the case study on the role of woman from historical perspective are more. Why not more women from present age from different dimensions.
- One chapter should be included on gender issues in social science book mentioning different perspective---education, family, society, and workplace. It was already included in the junior secondary program, social science book of Bangladesh Open University in collaboration with NGO and facilitated by Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, Canada.
- Audio-visual program should be more gender sensitive
- There should be a balanced number of male and female experts in different committee
- Expression should be selected which will not use as demeaning expressions to describe women.
- Expressions should be avoided, which portray women as a home maker only not as a breadwinner.
- The three most important issues to be considered from gender perspective: content, language and illustrations.
- Tutor should get training on gender sensitive issue to keep the learning environment healthy.
- The material, language and expressions should not feed into and perpetuate the sexist myths, which have been developed about women in our society, such as women are too emotional rather than rational, they like to nag etc.
- Women should be shown as a decision maker concerning the important issues that affects their lives
- Gender sensitive media training is needed.
- Administrator and the member of important committees should be gender sensitive
- Equal number of participation in the decision making body
- Counselling centre in each regional centre should be introduced.

CONCLUSION

The review and recommendations will help to guide the curriculum specialists in designing a new curriculum and textbooks. The expected outcome is a gender balanced presentation throughout the curriculum that will eventually result in changing attitudes for a more equitable society. Bangladesh Open University and National Curriculum Textbook and Madrasah Board could achieve a gender sensitive and gender balanced textbooks and curriculum which will help the students in becoming gender aware. A uniform gender sensitive curriculum and textbooks will be a subject to trust and mould their attitude to make violence free gender balanced society.

EXPECTATION FROM THE PLATFORM OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

- There should be an international network or forum including the expert on gender issues and distance education from the commonwealth countries.
- It will create a standard guideline to make the textbooks and curriculum gender friendly.
- It will set code of conduct towards justice to gender issues
- Regional and international meeting at least once in a year should be arranged to review the progress with revision
- Research opportunity and grant should be included.
- Sharing of knowledge regarding gender issues between commonwealth countries should be encouraged
- Effective guideline should be introduced for gender sensitive words and language. Committee with a one member from each country could be formed. Finally, women empower and gender issues should not be separated from specific perspective.

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responsible for developing learning materials, evaluation and monitoring and research. Prior to this she worked in a Government University-College (Eden Girls College, Dhaka, Bangladesh) as a Lecturer and Assistant Professor from 1988-1998. She is also engaged in teaching through audio-visual media; she has to conduct research, seminar and conference. Dr. Akhter also worked as Social and Gender Development Specialist (National Consultant) for Public Awareness Campaign of Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women in Bangladesh (MSP-VAW), Ministry of Women and Children Affairs; as Female Education Specialist for Female Secondary School Assistance Project (FSSAP-II), Ministry of Education and as Gender and Development Specialist for Second Primary Education Program (PEDP-II), Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, Government of Bangladesh, Secondary Education Sector Development Program (SESDP-11).

She has many articles in National and International journals, her most of the writings on gender issues. She always gives emphasis on socio-cultural impact on women against any mal practice. Dr. Akhter presented papers in many International Conference on Gender issues towards women empowerment. In international platform, she always takes the opportunity to raise the voice on behalf of women in Bangladesh. She is also a member of "Women for Women" which is one of the largest research organization of Bangladesh.

Dr. Zobaida Akhter did her Ph.D. in "Women and Equality: The Context of Bangladesh" from the University of Dhaka and completed Post-Graduation course on Gender and Body Language from the University of Hannover, Germany. In Ph.D. dissertation she explained how education and culture affects women's lives. She established in her thesis that mistaken education are the real cause behind women disempowerment. She did research based on case study on women empowerment in collaboration with International Research Foundation of Open Learning (Cambridge). She loves to teach, to build awareness and do research. She believes that research is the most essential and important vehicle for any educationist to enrich one's own knowledge and she strongly believes that sharing that knowledge in international platform could enhance the experience of the researcher in a maximum level

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