

Reaching the unreached through ODL
– How it contributes to female empowerment in Bangladesh?

Theme: Social Justice
Sub-theme: Access to Justice

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INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is predominantly rural. Although females constitute about half of the total population, their social status especially in rural areas are backward. About 80 percent of the population live in the country's 68,000 villages and half of them are female. So, one of the major groups for poverty alleviation is rural female. This group is considered most disadvantaged, particularly with respect of education, labor, nutrition, health etc. Recently, government undertook several schemes for enhancing female education. For example, free education for the female students up to higher secondary level, stipend for the female students up to secondary level, etc. These initiatives certainly had significant impacts on female education and thus widely appreciated for generating tremendous enthusiasm for female education and boosting the enrolment of girls in secondary schools. For example, the female enrolment rate in secondary education programmes have been increased from 42% in 1999 to 48% in 2003 and the percentage of females among total enrolment in secondary level was 53.43% for all over the country and 53.80% for the rural areas in 2002 (BANBEIS, 2003). Unfortunately, the increase in female enrolment is confined only in the girls of 10-15 years age range; most of the previously dropped out/unreached adult females couldn't yet be brought into the orbit of on-campus education due to the socio-cultural and institutional constraints. But, without education, sustained advancement of an individual or a community is very difficult. The empowerment of women is an essential precondition for the elimination of world poverty and the upholding of human rights (DFID, 2000: 8). In particular, female education helps building a base for social change. H.G. Wells mentioned in his *Outline of History*, "human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." According to Professor Amartya Sen (2003), "if we continue to leave vast sections of the people of the world outside the orbit of education, we make the world not only less just, but also less secure". Realising the fact that keeping this vast majority of people in the society outside the orbit of education it is impossible for the society to move forward, Bangladesh Government has initiated open and distance education (ODL) extensively to

help them access to education without hurting their socio-cultural norms and other engagements. In ODL system, they can study at their own places in their own time without hampering their usual work schedule. Age difference with fellow learners is not a barrier here too. BOU has launched a variety of programmes starting from secondary to graduate level. The Secondary School Certificate Programme of BOU especially designed targeting the unreached people (females, in particular) in rural areas.

This paper aims at identifying the impacts of ODL programmes (especially, secondary school certificate programme) of BOU on the socio-economic status of the females in Bangladesh. The paper explains how BOU's collaboration with GOs and NGOs may promote the socio-economic benefits for the rural females from the ODL programmes of BOU.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to:

- Describe the important components of empowerment of a human being;
- Explain the importance female education for overall socio-economic advancement of a society;
- Explain the effects of the BOU's secondary education programme on the empowerment of the females in Bangladesh; and
- Propose some steps to be undertaken to enhance the efficacy of female education through ODL.

METHODOLOGY

In the analysis, both primary and secondary information have been used. As secondary information, data bases of Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), UNESCO, World Bank, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), Dhaka Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board (DSHEB) and Student Support Division of BOU have been used. For primary data, we interviewed a group of learners who completed BOU's SSC programmes. They have been asked to respond orally to some set questions relating to their empowerment enhancement. A sample of 20 students has been chosen randomly from the long list of students both in the capital city (10) and outside the capital city (10).

EMPOWERMENT OF A HUMAN BEING: THE IMPORTANT COMPONENTS

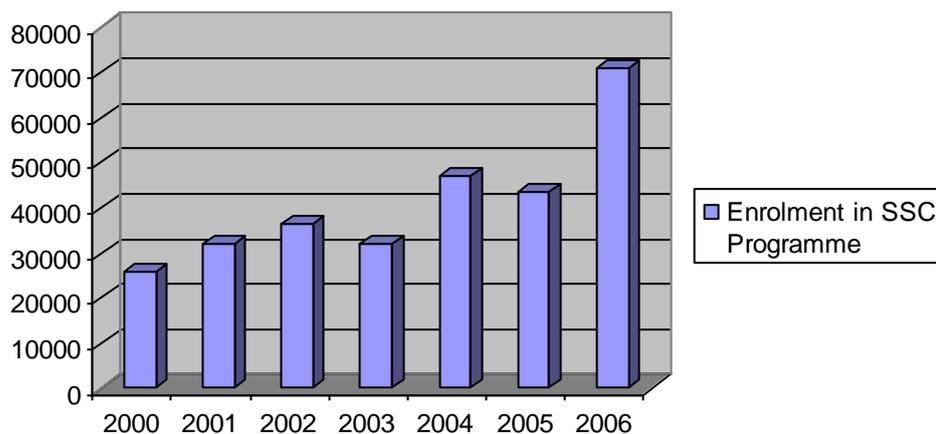
To define empowerment, we used the term 'freedom' coined by Professor Amartya Sen in his famous book *Development as Freedom*. In our definition, a person will be empowered if he/she achieves both 'freedoms of existence' and 'freedoms of spirit'. Following table shows the indicators which reflects whether a person have freedoms categorically:

	Freedom s	Indicators
FREEDOMS OF EXISTENCE	Freedom from hunger	The person have control over necessities. The person is enable to change his/her life.
	Freedom from disease	The person can realize what to do when a health problem is felt. The person can take precautions against some deadly disease. The person know better how to avoid diseases.
	Freedom from living in a polluted environment	The person motivates the community to avoid hazardous actions. The person knows how to keep the environment clean.
	Freedom from discrimination	The person can protest against gender inequity. The person can protest against violation against females. The person can challenge the traditional rules in the society.
	Freedom from illiteracy	The person can correspondence with family members and business people. The person can read the accounts and newspapers.
FREEDOMS OF	Freedom to listen	The person has access to information.
	Freedom to express oneself	The person can vote without any influence. The person can identify the right person to vote.
	Freedom to choose how one is governed	The person can protest if not treated fairly by police or court. The person participates in the community movement against any injustice.

ODL PROGRAMMES TO REACH THE MISSING FEMALE STUDENTS

Bangladesh Open University (BOU) undertook the great responsibility to offer the missing female students a *second chance* to have education and training as well. BOU launched two formal education programmes at secondary and higher secondary levels (Secondary School Certificate, SSC, in 1995 and Higher secondary Certificate, HSC, in 1998) and several non-formal trainings, which benefits all sections of people, females in particular, in different ways. The Chart-1 below show the enrolment of the students in ODL programmes at secondary level. We can see in the chart that the enrollments in SSC programme of BOU are increasing. The enrolment trend is still upward. The average female participation in the programme is around 40%. Female participation in SSC Programme is significantly high in both at urban and rural areas.

Chart-1: Enrolment in SSC Programme of BOU



Source: Student Support Services (SSS) Division, BOU.

HOW ODL PROGRAMME HELPS THE RURAL FEMALES ENHANCE EMPOWERMENT?

We found BOU's SSC Programme yields important returns in women empowerment. Attendance in the SSC programme benefited them personally, their family and the society as a whole. Below are the respondents' opinions regarding the influences of the BOU's secondary education programme (SSC) on the empowerment indicators:

- **Self-confidence:** Ninety percent (85%) of the respondents reported that attending the BOU's SSC programme enhanced their confidence level greatly, 10% told that the programme enhanced their confidence level fairly and 5% told they didn't feel any significant changes in their confidence level.
- **Business skill:** In this category, the respondents are asked to tell whether they found any improvement in handling their businesses, whether they now feel more comfort dealing with the banks and customers, etc. Seventy percent (70%) of the respondents reported that their overall business skill has been greatly enhanced, 20% told their skill has been enhanced fairly and 10% don't see any significant change in their business skill after completion of the SSC programme of BOU.
- **Awareness against deadly diseases:** In this category, the respondents was asked to tell whether they got improved knowledge about the precautions for the deadly viruses like HIV, SARS, Dengu, etc., whether they learnt to identify the symptom of these diseases, etc. 80% of the respondents reported that they learnt about these diseases and their precautions from the general science course of the SSC programme and thus their awareness have been enhanced greatly, 15% of the respondents reported their awarness have been influenced by the SSC programme fairly, 5% reported they knew about these diseases from BOU's non-formal programmes as well as some NGO campaigns. They didn't find any influence of BOU's SSC programme on their awarness.
- **Maternal health:** In this category, we asked the respondents whether they are now more aware of the maternal health problems, whether they know the measures to be taken immediately after they face any problem, etc. They mentioned, after the completion of the SSC programme, they can read the health magazine and follow the TV programmes relating to maternal health. Females with secondary education tend to have better knowledge about health care practices, are less likely to become pregnant at a very young age, tend to have fewer, better-spaced pregnancies, and seek pre- and post-natal care. 95% of the

responded reported that they found themselves more aware of their health than before. 5% of the respondents thought that secondary education enhance their awareness about health fairly.

- **Employment opportunities:** In this category, the respondents were asked whether their education from BOU helped them get job easily and increased their earnings. 75% of the respondent said that the certificate from BOU has greatly enhanced their job opportunity and thus increased their earning. 15% of the respondents told that completion of SSC programme from BOU had fairly helped them to get a job. 5% thought that there was no effect of their education on getting a job.
- **Intergenerational education benefits:** Mothers' education is a significant variable affecting children's education attainment and opportunities. A mother with a few years of education is considerably more likely to send her children to school. All of the respondents admitted that their education greatly effected the desire to send their children to school.
- **Voting right:** In this category, they have been asked whether they found any improvement in understanding about their voting right after completion of the secondary education from BOU. 85% of the respondent opined that this education influenced greatly their awareness about voting. They are now more confident and cautious in electing their leader. 12% of the respondents mentioned the programme helped them
- **Awareness about drinking water and sanitation:** The respondents didn't find that much influence of education in this case. However, the non-formal programmes of BOU as well as the NGO campaigns worked well.
- **Awareness against environment pollution:** Education created a sense of humor in them. 90% of the respondents are now conscious about the environmental pollution. They participate in the movements against environmental pollution actively. They found themselves much more aware after the completion of the education from BOU. 7% of the respondents thought that both education and NGO campaign enhanced their awareness against environment pollution. 3% of the respondents don't think that BOU programme had any effect on their awareness against environment pollution.
- **Awareness about government service delivery:** 95% of the respondents thought that BOU secondary education programme enhanced their awareness about government service delivery greatly. They now don't hesitate to protest if any anomalies are seen in the government service delivery process. 5% of the respondents thought that BOU programme didn't have any significant influence in their awareness about government service delivery.
- **Protesting against any violence at family or community level:** 91% of the respondents mentioned that education enhanced their confidence level and earning sources. So, they can now play a significant role within the family as well as in the community. Their power to protest against any kind of violence has been enhanced greatly after they graduated from BOU. 5% of the respondents found a mild influence of education on their role against violence at family and community levels. 4% of the respondents didn't find any significant role of education in their role against social violences.
- **Access to information:** Education makes people smart enough to have easy access to information. Through proper education, they become familiar with the channels of accessing education. 94% respondents reported that education increased their access to information greatly. 6% of the respondents thought that education influenced their access to information just fairly.

- **Protesting against the traditional rules:** Education made the females more organized and aware about the traditional oppressive and unethical rules (dowry, for example) of the society. All respondeents told that education enhanced their ability to protest against the traditional rules of the society.
- **Higher education:** Completion of the SSC program opened a scope for them to enter into the more advanced programmes (like, HSC, BA/BSS, MA, etc.). Most of the respondents mentioned that completion of SSC programme encouraged them to continue their education toward the advanced levels. 60% of the respondents entered into BOU's Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) programme after the completion of their SSC programme.

The above mentioned discussion explains that the SSC programme of BOU has attracted lots of female students who were missing anyway from the stream of education. They got a new hope and their empowerment level has been enhanced significantly after the completion of the SSC programme.

CHALLENGES WITH BOU'S SECONDARY EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Although ODL programmes help the rural females have education with sufficient flexibility, there are still some challenges to be overcome for better access to ODL courses at BOU. After talking to the tutors and the selective learners at BOU tutorial centers, we found the following issues required be addressed soon for ensuring the quality and better access to the programmes:

Heavy dependency on printed materials: Students has to depend on the printed materials heavily as other media are not readily available to them. The students ask for more tutorial session to discuss their problems with the tutors and the fellow students. Presently, BOU offers 2 tutorial sessions in a month, which seems insufficient, the students and the tutors reported.

Low access to technology: The availability of educational technologies relatively low in the rural areas. The access to the technologies is even more limited for the rural females, which barriers the rural women in having real time interaction with tutors and fellow students.

Lack of perfections in information transmission: Sometimes the information regarding the course registration, exam schedules, etc. aren't transmitted to the rural female learners perfectly and timely, which creates dissatisfaction among them.

Lower scope of analyzing real life examples/problems: The modules contain more abstract theories and less real life cases and examples, which sometimes bore the busy learners. Because of this, the learners dependence on the tutorial sessions rockets high.

Low upstream education level: Formal ODL courses at BOU are not accessible for all the rural learners, as most of them don't have sufficient up-front education that is required to enter into the concerned formal ODL courses.

Very limited support media: The supports like TV broadcasts, Radio broadcasts, audio-video narrowcast, etc. are very limited in the case of courses at secondary levels. On the other hand, the broadcast time of TV and radio programmes are not convenient for the rural women.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

ODL programmes of BOU certainly serve the purpose of enhancing the general level of education for the the people who can not continue their study in on-campus education system. The significant role of ODL programmes is that they brought the missing rural women back to education and thereby, enhanced their empowerment levels significantly. They now truly enjoy 'freedoms' in different cases, which was just a dream to them even 1 decade ago. Although ODL programmes have lots of success stories in female empowerment in Bangladesh, there are a number of limitations with BOU programmes. To make the ODL programmes more effective the following steps should be taken in near future:

- Encouraging and facilitating group discussions at local level
- Inclusion of more real life cases in the course materials
- Motivating the participants to use information technologies that available nearby
- Encouraging systematic meetings among the fellow learners/participants
- Involving the local community leaders in the delivery process
- Making partnerships with local NGOs and GOs
- Adopting more and more distance education media to reduce dependency on print materials.

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