

## WOMEN, HIGHER EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY IN BANGLADESH

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*The constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh emphasizes that women needs to be adequately represented in all walks of life, including higher education. It is obviously crucial for democracy that women are able to express their views and opinions in the discourses which shape public policy. The question is to what extent the higher educational institutions in Bangladesh have facilitated the participation of women in the higher educational public sphere. Closer inspection however reveals that the socio-cultural norms of Bangladeshi society have prevented women from fully participating in the public sphere of higher educational institutions. The case of Bangladesh illustrates that there is a pertinent need for cultural transformation which facilitates change in the attitude towards women. And there is a compelling need to carry out a democratic restructuring of the educational institutions of Bangladesh.*

### Introduction

A vibrant public sphere is essential for strengthening and nourishing deliberative democracy, and higher educational institutions can have a crucial role in instilling a democratic ethos. The function of higher educational institutions as a “core public sphere” is “to formulate, develop, and openly debate issues of importance to the public, and to do so intelligently and with reference to the best information available.”<sup>1</sup> Women need to be adequately represented in the public sphere, but representation is a “necessary (but not sufficient) condition for them to feel and be recognized as fellow claim makers.”<sup>2</sup> There is also a pertinent need for cultural transformation, with changes in the attitudes towards women.

Scholarly opinion is divided on the role of education

in the process of democratization. On the one hand, there are functionalists who argue that education provides an opportunity for mobility and social equity. Also, education is held to further the process of modernization and democratization and by doing so helping to promote social equity.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, others, like conflict theorists, argue that society comprises of competing social groups with different and sometimes conflicting interests that have unequal access to resources and life chances. In this perspective, the education system is seen as an agent of social and cultural reproduction of inequality in society.<sup>4</sup> While higher educational institutions may indeed further the process of modernization and democratization by nurturing a public sphere that is representative of all sections of society; there is on the other hand also merit to the assumption that society comprises of social groups with differential access to

resources and life chances and that education can also entrench inequality. Indeed, Bangladesh is a case in point.

## Status of Women in Bangladesh: A Chequered History

In the pre-independence period, when Bangladesh was part of the province of Bengal, the upper class as well as upper caste women faced restriction of movement and the “purdah” system was prevalent. Moreover, many other regressive social norms, child marriage, restriction on widow remarriage and polygamy prevailed. Needless to say, the entrenched, subordinate status of women significantly limited their chances of getting access to higher education. As the partition of India in 1947 was carried out on the basis of religion and consequently, the role of religion in society was further bolstered, and women’s lives in what after 1971 became Bangladesh, East Pakistan, was shaped by it.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the chances of women attaining a higher education were significantly reduced during the era (1947-1971) of East Pakistan.

***“The traditional “purdah” is not just a way of clothing; it is an embodiment of a cultural belief that confines women to the duties of the household.***

After Bangladesh gained its independence in 1971, concerted efforts were made to empower women. The preamble of the constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh emphatically asserted that “it shall be a fundamental aim of the state to realize through democratic process a socialist society, free from exploitation in which...equality and justice-political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens.”<sup>6</sup> Further, under Article 19, the Bangladeshi constitution mandates that, “The State shall endeavor to ensure equality of opportunity and participation of women in all spheres of national life”<sup>7</sup>; and under

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Article 28, it prohibits any discrimination on the basis of sex with regard to access to any educational institution and suggests for “making special provision in favor of women” for their advancement.<sup>8</sup> However, these initial, liberal constitutional aims of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh did not survive the military coups in 1975 and 1988. After the first coup, a concerted and deliberate effort was made to “de-secularize the state in 1977 by deleting the principle of secularism and replacing it by absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah”.<sup>9</sup> After the 1988 coup, Islam was declared as state religion, and since then Islamic fundamentalism has become entrenched in Bangladesh.

A close examination of the legal status of women and their rights in Bangladesh reveals a paradox: on the one hand, the constitution still promises women equal rights and protection against discrimination, while on the other hand the religious overtones of civil law tend to restrict those rights significantly. According to Pew Research Centre’s report in 2010, Muslims comprised 90.4 percent of the population of Bangladesh.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is natural that Islam plays a decisive role in shaping culture and societal outlook in the country, and some have argued that “the ideology of Islam is reinforced by the cultural context and manifested in the institution of women’s seclusion through purdah.”<sup>11</sup>

The traditional “purdah” is not just a way of clothing; it is an embodiment of a cultural belief

that confines women to the duties of the household.<sup>12</sup> However, the condition of women in Bangladesh and legal measures to safeguard their rights has improved since Bangladesh ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>13</sup> Under international obligation and with the evolution of the democratic process in Bangladesh, steps have been taken to empower women and to provide them with adequate representation in the educational space. Still, on global indicators, such as in terms of the Gender Development Index 2018, Bangladesh stands at 135th position out of 189 countries; meanwhile, in terms of the Gender Inequality Index, Bangladesh holds the 129th position out of 189 countries.<sup>14</sup>

### Women's Representation in Higher Education in Bangladesh

The enrolment of female students in Bangladesh is 64.3 percent at primary level, 33.3 percent at secondary level and 11.4 percent at tertiary level. The Bangladeshi government's commitment to education in general and in particular higher education is not up to the mark. This is reflected in the percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP) that is allocated for education: In 2012, Bangladesh spent 2.2 percent of its GDP on education and reduced it to 1.5 percent of GDP in 2016. In contrast, India spent 3.8 percent of GDP on education in 2013; Nepal spent 5.1 percent of GDP in 2017; and Bhutan spent 7.1 percent of GDP in 2015 out of which 24.1 percent was allocated to higher education.<sup>15</sup>

As per the 2011 census, the female literacy rate stood at 41.9 percent.<sup>16</sup> Bangladesh is far from unique in Asia: "The large majority of women in Asia, ranging from 75 to 98 percent in different countries, do not have access to higher education."<sup>17</sup> Only 18 percent of the academics teaching in public universities in Bangladesh are female.<sup>18</sup> The public universities total 37, of which 284,322 students are enrolled. Of these, 33 percent (95,826) are female. There are 14,322 teachers in these 37 public universities out of which 25 percent are female.<sup>19</sup>

An important factor that prevents many women

from accessing higher education in Bangladesh is the fact that the majority of the higher educational institutions are located in urban areas. The economic and social cost involved in pursuing higher education can only be borne by the middle and elite classes. And even in this class context, higher education of women is not seen as an instrument of empowerment, but instead tends to be valued merely in terms of status: "In the perceptions of elite families, higher education is valued for status achievement and improved matrimonial prospects, rather than for employment or economic independence."<sup>20</sup>

**Traditional gender norms and values in Bangladeshi society tend to restrict and stereotype gender roles according to patriarchal norms.**

Educational spaces are not homogenous in Bangladesh; they are internally structured and subdivided by processes of social closure. Social closure denotes a process through which the participation of certain individuals is excluded, limited, or subjected to conditions.<sup>21</sup> Traditional gender norms and values in Bangladeshi society tend to restrict and stereotype gender roles according to patriarchal norms.<sup>22</sup> These significantly reduce the opportunities of women, as not much value is attached to their education given the expectation of their path to the traditional role of housewife.

In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh investment in imparting higher education to a young girl is effectively seen as waste because ultimately women are expected to join their husband's home. In this context, in which women's futures are regulated and regimented, the steps that have been taken to set up women's college and universities to encourage the emancipation and societal participation of women are of particular significance.

However, there are research findings that cast doubt on the presumed efficacy of these women's only higher education institutions in Bangladesh. According to one scholar, these institutions have in fact reinforced the traditional mindset and in long run been detrimental to and "impeded the progress of women in higher education."<sup>23</sup> But it has also been argued by another scholar that women's colleges have had a positive impact.<sup>24</sup>

Also, it has been noted that there is a gendering of disciplines that entrenches the split between the genders further still. Not surprisingly, the Bangladeshi women who do get access to higher education are clustered in soft disciplines like humanities and social sciences. Female representation is extremely low in hard disciplines like engineering and natural sciences. The dominant pedagogy is "banking model of education" which suffers from "narration sickness" and authoritarianism, and such pedagogy tends to refuse to acknowledge women's agency. The relatively few Bangladeshi women who get access to higher education are not able to freely air their views and opinion in the public sphere because of the "hidden curriculum" which ensures conformity to the patriarchal norms and that coerce women to fit into the caricature of a "descent woman".

## Conclusion

Higher education in Bangladesh needs to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of women. For the effective participation of women in the public sphere of higher education, there needs to be a critical mass of women on campuses. A proportional representation of women in higher education is necessary, but still not a sufficient precondition for the creation of a vibrant public sphere.

The women of Bangladesh, who have traditionally been relegated to maintaining the social status quo, are indispensable for the social and democratic transformation of their country. In order to achieve this, besides ensuring their proportional representation in higher education, there is also a pressing need of "libertarian education" and "critical pedagogy" to raise the critical consciousness of

female students. In the larger interest of society and in order to sustain a democratic ethos not only in letter but also in spirit, there is a compelling need to carry out a democratic restructuring of the educational institutions of Bangladesh. ■

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