

# UNNAYAN ONNESHAN

## POLICY BRIEF

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### Gender Inequality in Bangladesh

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#### Introduction

Bringing women into the mainstream economic activities and ensuring equal opportunity is one of the major targets of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as pursued by the government of Bangladesh. However, women in Bangladesh are dominated by a patrilineal and patriarchal kinship system, which enforces the social and economic dependency of women on men, and prescribes the relative lower status of women. Although, there has been steady progress in reducing gender inequality in different sectors (education, health, employment etc.) but there exists a huge inequality in these sectors of Bangladesh and participation of women is very low compared to their male counterparts. Gender inequality has appeared as a major stumbling barrier in achieving the development targets.

#### Gender Inequality in Education

Numerous affirmative actions were also introduced to enhance female literacy. However, there remains a considerable gap in enrollment, literacy as well as the significantly higher proportion of female dropout from the system is still a major concern. The literacy of male children was 49.5 percent in 2000 at national level that has increased to 61.12 percent in 2010 with an annual average increase rate of 1.16 percent. Continuation of this rate indicates that, literacy rate of male children might be increased to 65.77 percent at national level by 2014, which is 34.23 percent lower than the National Education Policy (NEP, 2010) target of 100 percent. Whereas, literacy rate of female children at national level was 40.1 percent in 2000, which has increased to 54.8 percent in 2010 with an annual average increase rate of 1.47 percent. Under the business as usual scenario, literacy rate of female might be 60.68 percent at national level in 2014, which is 39.32 percent lower than the National Education Policy (NEP, 2010) target of 100 percent. There are also high rural-urban variations in case of literacy rate by sex where, rural women are far behind from their urban counterparts and male counterparts as well.

**Table 1: Current situation and future projection of literacy rate (<7 years of age) by sex**

Year	Female			Male		
	National	Rural	Urban	National	Rural	Urban
2000	40.1	36.1	55.3	49.5	45.5	64.9
2005	48.1	42.9	63.2	55.8	50.4	72.1
2010	54.8	50.21	67.67	61.12	56.67	73.1
2014*	60.68	55.85	72.61	65.77	61.14	76.38

Source: Authors' calculation based on BBS data of different years

Gender disparity is significantly high in higher education (university level). In 2001, among the total student at public universities, only 24.3 percent were female students whereas, male enrollment comprises almost 3 times higher (75.7 percent) than that of the female. It is also

observed that over the years, both male and female enrollment at university level is increasing with a slower rate. In the recent time, the rate at which female enrollment at primary level is increasing, the same pace is not found in case of the enrollment at higher education.

### Gender Inequality in Health Status

Bangladesh has achieved some progress in the health sector and has been successful in raising the average life expectation of its population. However, the situation of female health still remains poor. The difference of child mortality rate between male and female is very high, where female child mortality rate is higher than that of their male counterparts. The child mortality rate in case of male was 46.7 per thousand live births in 1993-94, which has decreased to 16 per thousand live births in 2007 with an annual average decrease rate of 2.19 per thousand live births. On the other hand, for female, it was 62.3 per thousand live births in 1993-94 and it has decreased to 20 per thousand live births in 2007 with the average decrease rate of 3.02 per thousand live births per year. Furthermore, the progress is occurring almost at the same pace as in the previous years for both male and female.

**Table 2: Child mortality per thousand live births by sex**

Year	Male	Rate of Decrease (%)	Female	Rate of Decrease (%)
1993-94	46.7	-	62.3	-
1996-97	36.9	7.00	47.0	8.19
1999-00	28.4	7.68	37.7	6.60
2004	24.0	3.10	29.0	4.62
2007	16	11.11	20.0	10.34

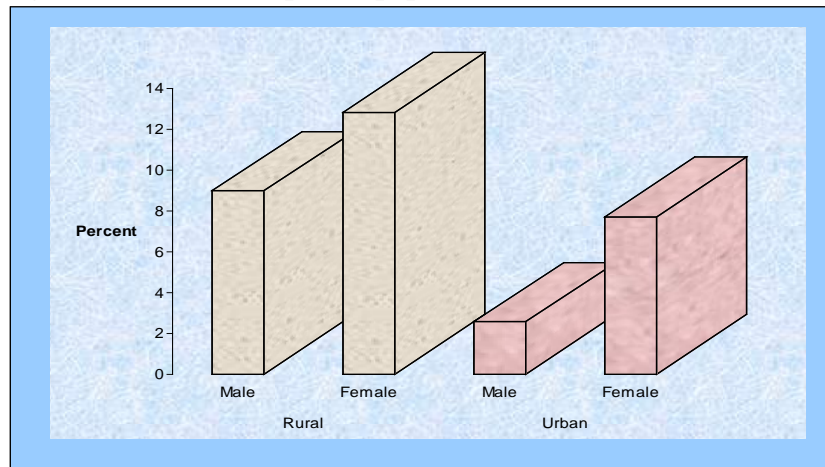
Source: Authors' calculation based on BDHS data of various years

Inequality prevails in the percentage of underweight children for both male and female. This percentage of underweight children has decreased from 58.8 percent in 1996-1997 to 42.1 percent in 2007 with an annual average rate of reduction of 1.45 percent per year for female children. At the same time, in case of the male children, this percentage has decreased from 54.6 percent to 39.3 percent with an annual average reduction rate of 1.34 percent. Furthermore, the reduction rate in the percentage of underweight children has occurred at a slower rate than the previous years both for male and female children.

### Gender Inequality in Employment

The existence of an immense inequality between the male and female in Bangladesh as far as employment status is concerned. However, some progresses in the recent years have been found but it is still lower than that of expected. In 1993-94, employed male population was 57.5 percent and it was 10.6 percent for female at the national level. The percentage of employed population for both male and female has decreased to 44.2 percent and 9.7 percent respectively in 1999-2000. Again, the percentage of employed male and female has increased to 68.3 percent and 22.9 percent in 2007 from 67.5 percent and 15.2 percent in 2004 respectively at the national level. Furthermore, it is also observed that the increase rate in the percentage of employed population has occurred with a higher rate for female than that of male. Although there is little progress in the percentage of economically active population, the number of unemployed people is still increasing. Unemployed population has increased from 1.3 million in 1995-96 to 2.7 million in 2009 with an average of 0.13 million per year. In case of male, it has increased with an annual average of 0.06 million and for female it was 0.05 million at the same period (1995-96 to 2009).

**Figure 4: Annual growth rate of unemployed population by sex and residence from 1995-96 to 2009**



Source: Authors' calculation based on BBS data of different years

### **Reasons of Gender Discrimination in Bangladesh**

There are some initiatives taken by the government to address the problems of gender inequality, yet due to several reasons the improvement of reducing gender inequality is not satisfactory

#### *Structural and Social Institutions*

Traditionally, women are often discouraged to participate in public life and mainly recognized only for their reproductive role. The social forces creating gender differentials are based on the age-old patriarchal traditions and values that still prevail in the most parts of Bangladesh. Traditional perceptions about the role of women as homemakers still exist.

#### *Lack of Explicit Policy Initiatives*

There are no effective policies to ensure women's security at home, educational institutions, road, organizations and the like. Increasing violence against women is now a grave concern. Under these circumstances, parents are more likely to keep their girls inside their home. Hence, they are not able to participate in education, health, employment or other sectors. Therefore, inequality is persisting.

#### *Preoccupied Mindset*

A preset perception like those that men are better off than women are in case of the working ability as well as looking after their parents is the matter of concern. That is why girls are subject to discrimination from the birth. In addition, preference to have boy child in the traditional Bangladeshi society creates gender discrimination. In case of employment, still the employers of Bangladesh give first priority to the men rather than women.

#### *Early Marriage*

Early marriage of the girls is a very common phenomenon in Bangladesh. It is one of the vital barriers to both women's and girls' education, health and employment. Early marriage has historically limited the young women's access to education and thereby their employment opportunities as well as creating a vulnerable situation to their health.

## Conclusion

Although some sporadic steps have been taken at the policy level to reduce gender inequality in different sectors but the fruitfulness have not yet been translated into reality for the lack of proper monitoring and implementation. Women consistently find themselves in low-status, low-paying jobs with less opportunities for advancement. The results of this study indicate not only the degree of gender inequality in different sectors (education, health and employment) but also its pattern, which should be considered in formulating effective policies. It is quite evident that without addressing gender inequality, the desired development may be unachievable. Traditional attitudes and gender-stereotyped roles towards women often prevent society as a whole to recognize women's equal rights in both private and public spheres. The underline structural factors include not only just poverty, but also a culture of acceptance, lack of effective community structures, harmful practices, inappropriate and ineffective allocation and utilization of resources in the context of a strong patriarchal society. While there are some progresses, challenges remain critical to achieve substantive equality between women and men. In order to achieve the target, the government needs to be creative in renewing and revising strategies and approaches.

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