

RESEARCH PAPER

Role of Education in Women Empowerment: A Study from Khulna District of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to assess the relationship between education and women empowerment through an empirical research work conducted in Khulna district of Bangladesh. A total of 243 women were surveyed through face-to-face interviews to conduct this study. Findings suggest that majority of the women had a low level of education with hardly any personal income. Results of regression analyses show that among the variables observed, educational status or year of schooling of the women was positively associated with women's overall empowerment score ($p < .01$). Findings also reveal that occupation and marital status of the respondents had significant positive impact on women empowerment. The study concludes that education has potential link with women empowerment and recommends for the promotion of women education to enhance their capacity.

Key words: Bangladesh, education, women empowerment

Introduction

Women empowerment is a global concern for many of the social reformers, government agencies and voluntary organizations now-a-days (Bhattacharjee, 2015; Dominic & Jothi, 2012). It is a process which enables women to have access and make productive contributions to their economic independence, political participation and social development (Shetty & Hans, 2015). Women empowerment can also be defined as women's autonomy, relative access to household resources and control over decision-making power (Kabeer, 1999; Marchand & Parpart, 1995; Young, 1993). Hadi (2001) suggested that an empowered woman would be the one who is self-confident, critically analyses her environment and exercises control over decisions that affect her life. Historically, women have always been underestimated and discriminated in almost all spheres of life in patriarchal societies (Nath and Dutta, 2017). As women are oppressed in all spheres of their life, they need to be empowered in all walks of life. In order to fight against the socially constructed gender biases, women have to swim against the system that requires more strength. Such strength comes from the process of empowerment which is related to education (Dighe, 2016). The prime motive of education is improving self reliance, decision making power and freedom (Murtaza, 2012) as the women who are dependent are not treated as empowered (Sharma & Afroz, 2014). Women empowerment is a complex and multi-dimensional

process covering economic, social, cultural and political dimensions (Mahmud *et al.*, 2012). Women's education as the prime source of women empowerment as it enables them to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life (Islam, 2014). Women become empowered when their social, economic, political, cultural, health and other forms of aspects are developed (Mehta & Mehta, 2011). As women are oppressed in all spheres of life, they need to be empowered in all walks of life. In order to fight against the socially constructed gender biases, women have to swim against the system that requires more strength. Such strength comes from the process of empowerment which is related to education (Dighe, 2016). The prime motive of education is improving self reliance, decision making power and freedom (Murtaza, 2012) as the women who are dependent are not treated as empowered (Sharma & Afroz, 2014).

Higher levels of education equip women with the skills and knowledge which help them to get an employment and income. Women's income helps themselves to contribute to the economy of the family as well as to the country (Sultana, 2015). Having control over one's own resources carries positive implications for improved ability and empower relations for the holder (Handapangoda, 2012). Besides contributing economically to the family, having freedom to spend it

as per her own wishes, remains a core indicator of a woman's empowerment (Sharma & Sanchita, 2017). Education makes women economically sound which is source of other all types of women empowerment i.e., social, psychological, technological, political (Shetty & Hans, 2015).

Kabeer (2005) lists decision making power as one of the elements required to enable one gain power, authority and influence over others, institutions or society. And education not only educates a woman but also enable her to take decisions and accept responsibilities at her home and outer world for their empowerment (Bhattacharjee, 2015). Handapangoda (2012) reported that greater monetary contribution to the household offers women an active agency to have a stronger voice in family decision making. Education serves as a predictor of better employment opportunities because educated women participate more in the labor force and earn higher incomes (Chung *et al.*, 2013). With increased education, women have greater access to resources, enhanced opportunity for employment, and improved abilities to make informed decisions about health, marriage, and parenting (Chung *et al.*, 2013). Education is also associated with freedom of mobility (Mahmud *et al.*, 2012) as well as education helps a woman to understand her rights to equal treatment like a man in the society (Bhattacharjee, 2015).

Bangladesh has made a significant progress in terms of adult literacy through the various initiatives taken by the government and non-government organizations in recent years. Though women lagged behind men in terms of attaining literacy, at present the scenario is changing and the female literacy rate is increasing day by day. With the increase of female literacy rate, their participation in the labor market is also increased at 43.1 percent in 2016 as well as 20 percent of parliamentary seats are held by women in Bangladesh (UNDP, 2016). Female literacy rate is comparatively low in rural areas of Bangladesh and so is their participation in income generating activities. As education is considered an important indicator of women empowerment, this study aims at assessing how the overall empowerment of women is affected by educational attainment of the women living in Khulna district of Bangladesh.

Materials and Methods

This study is exploratory in nature and followed quantitative approach. In this process, survey research design was used to collect quantitative data from purposively selected two villages namely Baruna and Dhamalia from Dumuria upazila in Khulna district of Bangladesh. A sample of 243 women (9% of the total study population) aged 18 years or above was selected using simple random sampling technique from a total of 2710 study population. A semi-structured interview schedule containing both open and close ended questions was used for primary data collection which was carried out during the month of June and July, 2017. The reliability of the interview schedule was measured using Cronbach's Alpha test ($\alpha=0.77$). After completing data collection, data were processed and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 20.

The variable, educational status was measured in year(s) of schooling and later categorized as non-literate (0), primary (1-5), secondary (6-10), higher secondary (11-12), and tertiary (≥ 13) for descriptive statistical analysis. In addition, occupation and marital status of the respondent were transferred into dummy variable e.g. housewives=0, employed =1 and ever married=1, unmarried=0 to conduct regression analysis. An index of women empowerment was developed following Anju Malhotra's (2002) six dimensions excluding the psychological dimension. The index consisted with total 27 indicators under five dimensions (economic, social, interpersonal or familial, legal and political empowerment to assess the overall level of women empowerment in the study area.

Under each dimension, there were different indicators such as economic empowerment (involvement in income generating activities, taking decision about own occupation, control over own income, financial contribution in family, ownership of property, decision about buying and selling of property and control over household resources), social empowerment (freedom of movement, participation in community and social activities), interpersonal or familial empowerment (decision about marriage, decision to use family planning methods, decision of giving birth to child, decision of the number of children, control over household activities, decision about household expenditure, participation in household decision making process, and free from domestic violence), legal empowerment (knowledge about human rights and women rights, knowledge on existing laws about violence against women, and getting family support for exercising rights), and political empowerment (exercise the right to vote, attain political meeting, involvement in political discussion, participation in political activities, and getting family support for political engagement). All the indicators were measured through dichotomous scale (yes=1, no=0). To construct the index, the scores of all the dimensions were added up (highest value 29 and lowest value 2) and divided into three intervals, e.g. low (≤ 11), medium (12-21) and high (≥ 22) for overall women empowerment. The score of different indicators under each dimension were also added up and divided into three equal intervals, e.g. low, medium and high for economic, social, interpersonal or familial, legal and political empowerment. Therefore, the highest score represented higher level of women empowerment and the lowest represented the lower.

Results

Background Information of the Respondents

Findings reveal that the age distribution of the respondents was normal and majority of the women (36.6%) had secondary level of education, followed by higher secondary and above (26.0%), primary level of education (24.3%) and non-literate (13.2%) (Table 1). Majority of the respondents (72%) were housewives and therefore, had no income (60.1%) at all. Most of the respondents were married (95.1%) and were living with their spouse and children. While two-thirds of the respondents' family was nuclear in nature (64.6%), husband was the head in most cases.

Table 1: Background Information of the Respondents

| Variables | No. of the Respondents (n=243) | Percent |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------|
| Age Group (in Year) | | |
| ≤30 | 57 | 23.5 |
| 31-40 | 65 | 26.7 |
| 41-50 | 54 | 22.2 |
| ≥50 | 67 | 27.6 |
| Year of Schooling | | |
| Nil (0) | 32 | 13.2 |
| Primary (1-5) | 59 | 24.3 |
| Secondary (6-10) | 89 | 36.5 |
| Higher Secondary and above (11-18) | 63 | 26.0 |
| Occupation | | |
| Housewives | 175 | 72.0 |
| Non-housewives | 68 | 28.0 |
| Monthly Income (in BDT) | | |
| Nil | 146 | 60.0 |
| ≤5000 | 74 | 30.5 |
| ≥5001 | 23 | 9.5 |
| Marital Status | | |
| Unmarried | 12 | 4.9 |
| Ever Married | 231 | 95.1 |
| Type of the Family | | |
| Nuclear Family | 157 | 64.6 |
| Extended Family | 86 | 35.4 |

Status of women empowerment

Based on our index mentioned earlier, we observed that majority of the women’s (46.5%) overall empowerment level was low, followed by, medium (43.2%) and high (10.3%) respectively in this study (Table 2). On the other hand, in specific cases, the highest of the women’s economic empowerment (55.6%), social empowerment (91.4%), familial empowerment (46.1%), legal

empowerment (51.4%), and political empowerment (94.2%) level were also low. It is interesting to see that high social empowerment was least observed in social empowerment index (0.4%) followed by political empowerment index (2.1%). However, one out of every five respondents fell into the category of high interpersonal or familial empowerment category making it the maximum in high empowerment index.

Table 2: Women Empowerment Status

| Variables ⁽ⁿ⁼²⁴³⁾ | Low (%) | Medium (%) | High (%) |
|---------------------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Women Empowerment (Overall) | 113 (46.5) | 105 (43.2) | 25 (10.3) |
| Economic Empowerment | 135 (55.6) | 69 (28.4) | 39 (16.0) |
| Social Empowerment | 222 (91.4) | 20 (8.2) | 1 (0.4) |
| Interpersonal or Familial Empowerment | 112 (46.1) | 77 (31.7) | 54 (22.2) |
| Legal Empowerment | 125 (51.4) | 95 (39.1) | 23 (9.5) |
| Political Empowerment | 229 (94.2) | 9 (3.7) | 5 (2.1) |

Women empowerment and its covariates

To model the relationship between educational status and other factors (age, occupation and marital status) with women empowerment, a multiple linear regression was used. Results show that there exists a significant positive correlation between educational status of women and their overall empowerment as every year of schooling would increase the women empowerment score by .91 (table 3). In addition, occupation and

marital status of the women also positively correlated with their empowerment. The empowerment level of employed women was 3.087 times higher than women who were housewives while the empowerment level of ever married women was 8.23 times higher than unmarried ones in the study area. However, age of the respondent did not have any significant impact on women’s overall empowerment in this study.

Table 3: Relationship between Women Empowerment and Its Covariates

| Independent Variables | Women Empowerment as Dependent Variable | | |
|------------------------|---|-------------------------------|---------|
| | B | Std. Error | p value |
| (Constant) | -1.787 | 1.476 | .227 |
| Age | -.017 | .018 | .349 |
| Year of Schooling | .916 | .059 | .000 |
| Occupation (Dummy) | 3.087 | .550 | .000 |
| Marital Status (Dummy) | 8.233 | 1.070 | .000 |
| R Square=.687 | | Adjusted R Square=.682 | |

Discussion

As women empowerment is a multidimensional process, the present study considered different dimensions including social, economic, political, Interpersonal and legal aspects in assessing the relation between educational status and women empowerment. Findings reveal that majority of the women had secondary level of education and three-fourth of them was housewives often with no income or very tiny personal income. Findings reveal that majority of the women's overall empowerment level was low in the study area. On the other hand, women empowerment level is high in developed countries *e.g.* Iceland (1st in global rankings) has fully closed to the educational gender gap and ranks first for political empowerment, having had a female head of state for 20 of the past 50 years (The Global Gender Gap Report 2015) as well as Netherlands, female employment rate was 70 percent in 2016 (The OECD Report, 2017).

The results of regression analysis indicate that there was a positive correlation between educational status of women and women's overall empowerment in this study. Sekar and Alagarsamy (2015) also found that educational qualification of women significantly influences women's overall empowerment and other types of related empowerment in their study. Findings of some previous studies showed that higher educational attainment increases women's labor force participation and earnings (Sultana, 2015; Syomwene & Kindiki, 2015; Aslam *et al.*, 2012). Robinson-Part (2004) stated that education can be a pathway to get better jobs and hence a better life. On the other hand, Kabeer (2011) observed that women with any education have considerably more control over their resources and their own lives as compared to those with no education. Existing literature also shows that women's year of schooling is significantly correlated with their freedom of mobility (Mahmud *et al.*, 2012).

Educational status of women was significantly associated with their interpersonal or familial empowerment in the present study. Similarly, Sen (1999) found that women who are educated more likely to participate in households decision making process. In addition, Raj and Ibrahim (2014) stated that women's autonomy is seen to have increased as the level of education increases. On the other hand, Syomwene and Kindiki (2015) reported that education increases women's chances of taking part in politics. Women's knowledge and awareness regarding their right is another important predictor of women empowerment. Noreen and Khalid (2012) emphasized on higher education which is very essential for increasing the status of women and raising confidence, decision making power and awareness of their rights.

Existing literature suggests that besides education, several other factors may contribute to women's empowerment all over the world. Findings of the present study also depict that occupation and marital status of the women have significant positive impact on their empowerment level. Empowerment level of employed and ever married women was higher than women who were housewives and unmarried. Some previous studies

(Nath *et al.*, 2015; Sultana and Hossen, 2013) found positive relationship between the occupational status (income-based) of women and their empowerment level. Employed women enjoy relatively higher level of empowerment than those of unemployed women. Jeckoniah *et al.* (2012) in their study also found a significant relationship between marital status and women empowerment. On the other hand, age of the women did not have any significant impact on women's empowerment in the present study and it is inconsistent with the results of previous studies (Amin *et al.*, 1995; Mostafa *et al.*, 2008) which revealed that women empowerment increased with women's age. The finding of the present study supports the existing literature to a large extent and shows how educational status of women plays a vital role for the empowerment of women in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Education is an important tool for promoting the status of women in family as well as in the society. Findings of this study show that educational status of women is positively associated with their overall empowerment level in Khulna district of Bangladesh. Hence, priority should be given to raise the level of education among the women through devising necessary strategies and interventions. In addition, social movement on strengthening the value of girl's education in the society and increasing incentives for completing secondary and higher education for women should be more focused. Further studies may be conducted on identifying the other covariates associated with women empowerment in Bangladesh to address the issue properly.

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