Achieving Universal Primary Education and Eliminating Gender Disparity

Bangladesh has achieved remarkable success in expanding primary education, especially for girls, despite continuing prevalence of widespread poverty and social devaluation of women and girls. This paper argues that underlining this success is a confluence of both demand- and supply-side factors involved in bringing about a profound social change. It explores the changing structure of economic opportunities and gender relations affecting parents' perception of the value of female education. The challenge now is to improve the quality of education that may prove more difficult than the expansion of access.

NAOMI HOSSAIN, NAILA KABEER

I
Introduction

> The little girls learn to help very early with the housework, brushing the floors, cleaning the pots and dishes ... They gossip a great deal and play a few simple games, but they are very ignorant and learn very early to be women. The village school is not for them, and it will be long before they are allowed into its precincts ...
> [Jack 1916: 51-2].

Writing about early 20th century rural East Bengal, Jack describes how children typically spent their time helping their parents in what was then a subsistence-oriented agricultural economy. It helps explain why he considered education, in particular for girls, an extremely remote prospect. What changed in the course of subsequent decades? Figures 1 and 2 chart the changes.

Figure 1 shows that primary enrolment rates have risen, gradually and with considerable fluctuations until the 1980s, and then rapidly and consistently. By the end of the century, gross enrolment rates were over one hundred per cent. Figure 2 shows that girls' education rose along with that of boys, but at a much lower level for much of the century. While gender disparities in education are not unique to south Asia, they are particularly large within this region. However, the figure also shows that girls' enrolments began to catch up by the early 1980s, and by the end of the century, the gender gap in education at primary had been eliminated, including among the poor. Progress had also been made in reducing gender inequalities at secondary level.

Gross enrolment rates do not tell us everything we need to know about educational achievements – they ignore repetitions, dropouts, absenteeism, quality – but they do tell us something important. Despite continuing concerns about pockets of exclusion, poor quality and remaining systemic gender disparities, they suggest that Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in bringing education within the reach of all: gender and urban-rural parity are comparable to those in Sri Lanka, and levels of primary and secondary gross enrolment similar to those in countries with higher per capita incomes such as Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia. In a region characterised by the profound social devaluation of women and girls and restrictions on their public mobility, the physical presence of large numbers of girls in schools is a remarkable achievement.

This paper explores some of the factors which explain why Bangladesh has been relatively successful in education. Attempts to explain social change of this magnitude cannot be reduced to a single cause and effect. Such change usually represents interaction between different forces whose effects may modify, reinforce or neutralise each other. For ease of exposition, we use the language of economists to classify these forces into those acting on the 'demand' for education and those acting on its 'supply'. This language is not entirely appropriate here. The supply of education in Bangladesh is only partly governed by market forces; much is provided by the state, NGOs and religious institutions, on grounds that have little to do with commercial motivations. Furthermore, there may be greater interdependence between the forces of 'demand' and 'supply' in the field of education than typically allowed for in economic models: the availability of schools, the gender of its staff, the quality of education are all 'supply' factors that have been found to induce greater demand [Duraisamy 1992; Dreze and Kingdon 2001; Khan 1993; Lloyd et al 2002].

Bearing these caveats in mind, the demand side of our explanation relates to the changing structure of economic opportunities and gender relations in bringing about changes in the value of education from the perspective of parents; to evidence of elite support for mass education which provides a hospitable environment for its promotion; and to the stake that political parties appear to have in the content of the educational curriculum which has helped to give it prominence in the national agenda. What we call 'supply-side' explanations relate to how this wide-based interest in education translated into provision, and more importantly, into effective provision. The state has played an important role in the funding and provision of education, along with a range of civil society organisations such as NGOs and religious bodies, as well as the private sector. The international development community has been another importance player on the supply side of education, providing symbolic support through global meetings on the importance of education as well as practical support through aid.

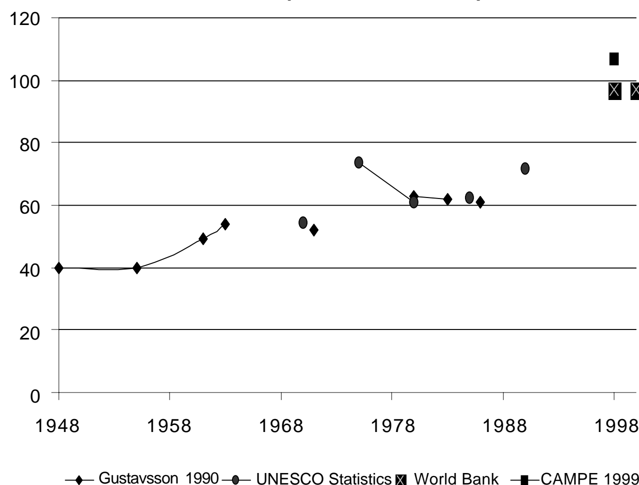


Figure 1: Gross Enrolment Rates at Primary Level: 1948-2000 (Various Estimates)

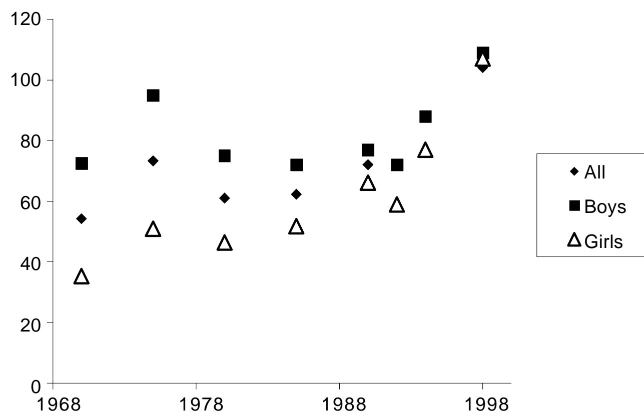


Figure 2: Gross Enrolment Ratios at Primary Level by Sex: 1970-1998

Sources: 1970-1990 from UNESCO Statistics; 1992 and 1994 from Alam et al 1996; 1998 figure from CAMPE 1999

II
Demand for Education: Parental Perspectives

The demand for education was clearly very low at the start of the century when J C Jack carried out his study of rural Bengal. By the middle of the century, the starting point for which estimates are available, GERs had risen to around 40 per cent. As Figure 1 indicates, the primary enrolment rate rose slowly for the next two decades, the period during which Bangladesh formed the eastern wing of Pakistan. Access to public sector employment, an important incentive for educating sons, particularly in the urban areas, was unevenly distributed during this period and tended to be monopolised by elite families from west Pakistan, although the sons of wealthy Bengali families also benefited. The majority of the rest of the population relied on agriculture as sharecroppers or agricultural labourers, and had little incentive to invest scarce resources in children's education. Jack's description of children's roles in the household economy probably held for much of the population for much of this period.

Independence from Pakistan in 1971 ushered in considerable social change, including in the structure of economic opportunities. Some of these changes reflected the country's newly independent status: the role of the state in administration, industry and banking expanded, and there was a corresponding increase in public sector employment opportunities. However, the labour force was also expanding rapidly, and such opportunities were limited to the more affluent groups, mainly in the cities, but also increasingly in the rural areas.

Other changes were less positive. Demographers noted that the high and constant rates of fertility (birth rates of 50 per 1,000 per year between 1900 and the 1960s) combined with declining death rates (from 46 per 1,000 per year to around 19 over the same period) led to an acceleration in the rate of population growth from 0.82 per cent in 1,900 to around 3 per cent in the 1960s. The pressure of population on land led to declining farm size and rising rates of landlessness. These trends were intensified during the 1970s, a decade marked by crisis: cyclone, war, mass death and rape, famine, displacement, and extreme political instability. The agricultural sector could no longer support the population, and migration from high to low density districts and from rural to urban areas increased. The share of agriculture in the total labour force fell from 85 per cent in 1961 to 58 per cent in 1984. Not all sections of the population were equally adversely affected by these changes. Those families able to access salaried employment in the formal sector benefited from a regular and lucrative source of income, while the spread of the new HYV technology had led to increasing yields for those farming households able to take advantage of it [Hossain 1988].

The combination of a growing population, declining farm size, increasing landlessness, an increasingly strained labour market and the growing commercialisations of agriculture gradually transformed the economy from one based on small-scale peasant ownership, patron-client relations and localised labour markets into a monetised economy based on more impersonal wage labour relationships. Wealthy farmers no longer invested their surplus in strengthening their patronage networks, the traditional source of power and prestige in rural society: instead they channelled it according to the new values and opportunities which came with technological change and increased urban contact: non-agricultural enterprise, education, consumer goods and so on [Arthur and McNicoll 1978; Adnan1990].

Micro-level studies from the late 1970s and early 1980s documented the skewed distribution of education, with school attendance largely associated with boys from affluent urban families. However, they also suggested that aspirations to education were more widespread than enrolment figures suggested. While the onset of fertility decline – one of the most rapid in history – that started in the late 1970s has been attributed to the expansion of family planning programmes [Cleland et al 1994], it is also likely that fertility decline reflected an emerging preference for investing in the 'quality' of children over the preference for 'quantity' which had characterised earlier eras [Kabeer 1986]. The growing awareness of the costs of family size were expressed in a popular saying: 'The mother of seven sons wears rags while the mother of one son wears golden earrings' [Aziz and Maloney 1982: 153]. A qualitative study, based on interviews with rural parents, found that the costs of children were gaining in prominence in the fertility calculus:

> ...was there so much of scarcity before that people would starve? The whole age has become upside down now. People are learning these methods out of distress, out of starvation ... We cannot feed the children, there is no farm...and farming cannot provide children

with education. What else can we do ... It is out of compulsion that people want fewer children. Everyone understands this ... [Nag et al 1988:39].

The direct and indirect costs of education surfaced as a major consideration and Nag et al point to evidence among all classes of rising parental aspirations for children's education. While the children of the poor continued to participate in economic activities rather than attending school, this was explained as a decision of necessity rather than choice:

education is progressing, compared to the past...We would certainly like to educate the children. No doubt, raising them well would be good for us. But what can we do? For lack of money, we cannot provide them education (ibid:45).

One respondent explained the decision to reduce family size explicitly in terms of a trade-off between 'quantity' and 'quality':

What is the use of having many (children) if they cannot be raised properly? If there are many, they would get no food, no education...I can raise few children well...It is good to have few. I can feed, educate, raise well....(ibid:45).

While reduced returns to unskilled labour may explain the growing willingness to educate boys, gender-segmented labour markets combined with the constraints on women's employment meant that the changing structure of economic opportunities did not impact on the demand for girls' education as it did for boys. Instead, gradual changes in attitudes to girls' education may have reflected the changing nature of patriarchal relations in this strained economy [see Sattar 1974]. The dislocations associated with the crisis-ridden 1970s, the desperate poverty and uncertainty during this chaotic period in Bangladeshi history, were difficult to reconcile with traditional gender relations. It became particularly difficult to reconcile the old 'patriarchal bargain', by which women relinquished control of their mobility, assets, and earning potential in return for male protection and provision, with these tougher, more uncertain circumstances [see Cain et al 1979; Kabeer 1991]. The famine of 1974 appears to have been a turning point, when new patterns of behaviour began to emerge among poorer women, who ventured into the public domain in search of employment [Chen and Ghuznavi 1977].

Other factors also undermined women's faith in the partriarchal contract. The emergence of dowry appeared to spearhead an increase in multiple marriages and divorces/desertions by men who used marriage as a form of unearned income, or to set themselves up in business [Alam 1985]. Research since the 1970s has documented the increasing fragility of the marriage bond, particularly among the very poor [Rozario 1992]. Women appeared to be losing faith in marriage as a means of security; for many, the education of daughters was seen as a source of security which their own lack of education had denied them.

Subsequent changes in the opportunities available to women appear to have reinforced their willingness to educate daughters, and allowed them to act in accordance with their preferences. The micro-credit revolution, the practice of targeting loans to women on the basis of group-based guarantees of repayment, was one important change for poorer women. Studies have shown that such loans have had an impact on educational decision-making. Not only were women loanees more likely than men to remove their children from the labour market and send them to school, but they were also more likely to include girls along with boys [Kabeer 2001]. The other major change in women's economic opportunities was the emergence of a new export-oriented garment industry in the early 1980s. Currently employing 1.5 million women, the garment industry has drawn women into the urban areas, often migrating on their own, on a historically unprecedented scale. The need for at least primary education to take advantage of new forms of employment opportunities is likely to have added an extra fillip to the incentive to educate girls [see Kabeer 1997; Kibria 1995].

III
Demand for Education: Elite Attitudes

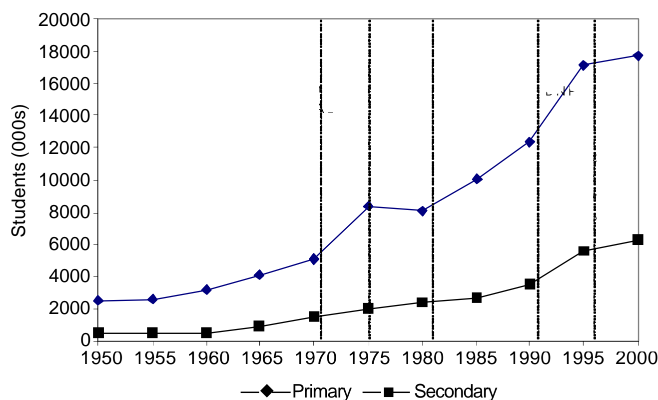
A further 'demand'-related factor behind the expansion of education relates to elite attitudes to education. While elite families in Bangladesh clearly value education for their own children, recent research suggests they also strongly support the idea of mass education as a prerequisite for tackling poverty [Hossain 2003]. In part, support for this comes from the role of education in the development success in east and south-east Asia, which the Bangladeshi elite seeks to emulate: that a country with abundant human but limited natural resources must, as one member of the elite put it, 'turn a burden into wealth'. This can be achieved by educating its population into a productive workforce. Support for mass education is partly instrumental, viewed as in the wider national interest (because, for example, women's education is understood to reduce fertility). And the experience of schooling – regular daily attendance in a rule-bound formal institution – as opposed to the intellectual learning implied by 'education', may itself be disciplining and modernising.[1]

In Bangladesh, however, the dominant elite vision of an educated society seems less focused on discipline and more on humanistic and cultural learning, a rounded 'awareness' rather than specialised technical competence. This emphasis on liberal education has been deplored as evidence of the much-cited Bengali antipathy to manual and technical work [see Gustavsson 1990]. A simpler explanation is that science education is more expensive. The positive elite attitude to liberal humanistic education was linked to their dominant perception that the lack of 'awareness' among the masses was a major cause of poverty. 'Awareness' or 'consciousness' ('chetona', 'shocheton') seemed to symbolise a kind of modernity in attitudes and behaviour (which most of the middle classes have acquired through education) in opposition to the anachronistic traditionalism of the village. 'Superstition' is used to gloss the somewhat broader and more prevalent notion of 'kushongshkar', which connotes the lack of improvement – a kind of rawness of perception and intellect. Lack of awareness thus impinges on the ability of the poor to control their fertility (religious beliefs prohibiting contraception use), to invest in the education of their children, or to plan for their futures. Lack of awareness means passivity, acceptance of 'kopal' (fate), and 'indiscipline':

Will economic growth take care of poverty in time?
No. The attitude of the people needs to be changed. This fatalistic attitude, 'we are poor because god made us so', this has got to go (Member of the social elite, charity worker).

It is possible that Bangladeshi elites alight on educational achievement as a solution to the problem of poverty because it is perceived as the main difference between themselves and the rest of the population. Education is certainly one of the most important social markers in this otherwise comparatively

Figure 3: Total Enrolments at Primary and Secondary by Political Regime, 1950-2000



Note: 'Primary' excludes unregistered non-formal non-government schools.
Sources: BBS 1985; 1995; 1999; Government of Bangladesh 2001.

unsegmented society. That many current members of the national elite enjoyed rapid social mobility as a result of education may convince them that formal schooling could do for the poor masses what it did for them. One politician fondly recalled that '[i]n our day, bright boys could come out of remote villages', as though this might be a basis on which to judge the present prospects of the poor.

IV
Demand for Education: Political Will

The priority given to education in Bangladesh also relates to 'political will', to some extent reinforced by donor influence. This dates back to the Liberation era, when education was given considerable prominence in the nationalist agenda, in part because of the active role played by the student movement in the political struggle for independence. In Bangladesh, as in other nations in the post-colonial era, economic developmental goals of education were early on coupled with other political projects: justifying social and economic inequality (on grounds of equal opportunity), promoting social integration and/or linguistic harmony, or to win elections. These political projects for education have been helped by characteristics of Bangladeshi society which make the education system particularly suitable for achieving such goals: a shared language and the possibility of centralised control enabled by small territory and high population density.

Political support for educational expansion also appears to derive from inter-party competition over the definition of national identity, which can be so effectively transmitted through the school curriculum. Alam et al comment thus on the first official National Education Policy, produced by the Awami League administration of the 1990s:

> The twin driving forces of the policy come across as fulfilling and reinforcing the national identity forged in 1971, and laying the groundwork for socio-economic development for the future. In these respects there is a strong resonance with the introductory paragraphs of almost every research report published within Bangladesh. Education is directed explicitly towards national identity building, and in particular the emotive rhetoric of the liberation struggle is evolved for the present generation into a call to convert Bangladesh's enormous human resources into economic and democratic assets. Understandably, this is in turn linked closely to linguistic identity, a powerful unifying factor in Bangladesh and one with its own history of martyrdom and political struggle [Alam et al 2001:8].

The vision of nationalist identity enshrined in Awami League education policy is a matter of party political competition, as is the reading of liberation war history with which it identifies. The Awami League has established and constantly seeks to reaffirm its claims to guardianship of the national liberation movement. From its prominent uses of the symbols of liberation, it seems that the Awami League believes this guardianship to be a political asset, giving it stronger claims to legitimate rule and closer connections to the founding myths of the nation. As a vehicle for transmitting such claims, education policy is thus thrust into the arena of political competition. The then – Awami League prime minister Sheikh Hasina indicated a preoccupation with the curriculum:

> We are carrying the burden of an unethical education policy handed down from the past. The present curriculum is a burning example of this. The distorted history in the curriculum of the past 21 years has crippled the new generation... save the nation from losing its sense of values by taking necessary steps as soon as possible to abandon such unpatriotic and unethical ingredients from the curriculum (speech delivered to conference on Universal Primary Education in Bangladesh in 1996, from Jalaluddin and Chowdhury 1997: 23).

That the content of the national history curriculum is an arena for party political conflict was highlighted again on the return of the BNP to power in October 2001. The impressive speed with which the new BNP-led government revised the curriculum, within only six months of taking office, incurred the wrath of the now-opposition Awami League, who complained of a 'deliberate distortion of history' (*Daily Star,* March 29, 2002).

The political emphasis on curriculum content suggests that national education policy is perceived as an important site for party political competition. Such competition may seem trivial to development practitioners concerned with improving education quality for human development outcomes. But it is vital to party political competition in a polity in which the major parties are all but indistinguishable on ideological or programmatic grounds. The ability to transmit and define the specific model of national identity favoured by a particular political party explains the strength of the stake in controlling education policy.

V
Supply of Education: Transforming Policy into Outcomes

There are three parts to the 'supply-side' of our story, that is, to the extent to which latent and expressed aspirations for education together with elite support and political will translated into the effective provision of educational services. The first is state commitment to rapid expansion, particularly at primary. The second relates to the large-scale presence of NGO schools, which appear to have drawn girls into schools and established competitive (and expansionary) pressures on the state. The third is the role of the donors who have provided a substantial proportion of NGO resources as well as strengthening their support to state efforts in education from the 1990s.

Figure 3 periodises educational achievements by political regime, using total enrolment figures to give some sense of the scale of

both the challenge facing policy-makers, as well as the magnitude of their achievements. The figure testifies to the slow growth of education during the Pakistan era. It also suggests that despite the importance accorded to education by the post-liberation Awami League regime, the first decade of independence saw limited progress on educational provision. One observer noted that during this crisis-ridden period it was a struggle to simply manage the existing system, without developing it further (cited in ADB 1986: 50). The main achievements during this period were symbolic. The constitution of the new nation stated its mandate to ensure mass-oriented, universal education, to be geared towards meeting the needs of society, including to 'create enthusiasm to establish the cherished socialistic society' [cited in Gustavsson 1990: 19]. The transmission of secular values was also a priority, and the report of the first national education commission accordingly recommended that madrasas be integrated within the mainstream [Muhith 1999]. The nationalisation of the 36,000 largely community-based primary schools in 1973-74 was carried out to signal attention to the needs of the masses and fulfil the constitutional mandate [ADB 1986; Muhith 1999].

There was equally slow progress on education during Zia's regime (1975-81). Once again, activity was generally confined to symbolic politics, in the form of an attempt to reverse the secular principles of education in favour of a more Islamic curriculum. Ershad's regime (1982-91) saw the beginning of progress in expansion, possibly a populist measure designed to ensure popular support for a military regime. A Directorate of Primary Education was established, the goals of Universal Primary Education and mass literacy were stressed in the Third Five Year Plan (1985-1990) and there was increasing emphasis on reducing gender disparities in enrolments at all levels [Alam et al 2001]. The Fourth FYP (1990-1995) focused firmly on primary education, including introducing legislation to make attendance compulsory.

The period of the greatest progress in expanding access also marked the return to democratic multiparty politics. Under the General Education Project (1991/2-7), educational opportunities expanded massively [Sedere 2000]. By 1997, more than 18 million children were enrolled in around 78,000 primary schools, GERs were over 100, NERs were about 85 per cent, and perhaps most remarkably, gender disparities in enrolment had been virtually eliminated at primary. The literature is silent on whether political competition for electoral support helped sustain expansionary policies and higher spending, pointing to the technocratic tendencies in the literature: democratic political competition seems to have been seen as a diversion from the real job of implementing policy, rather than, as was more likely, a source of pressure on governments to provide education.

Observers have, however, noted the importance of strong political commitment to the achievement of the EFA goals, particularly during the 1990s (see World Bank 2000). Public spending on education increased as a proportion of GDP from 0.9 per cent (1973-80) to 2.2 per cent (1997-98). Education has also been increasingly high priority, rising from about 9 per cent of total spending in the First FYP (1973-80) to 16 per cent (1995-96) [World Bank 2000]. Even within the social sectors, the share of development spending on education increased faster than on other sectors during the expansionary surge of the 1990s.

Targeted efforts to expand access for girls and poor children have been in place since the 1990s. Government schooling incentive programmes such as the Food-For-Education (FFE) and Female Stipend (scholarships for girls to attend secondary) programmes had succeeded in improving access for groups more usually excluded from the formal system. The massive FFE programme, in which children from selected poor families received 15-20 kg of wheat per month for regular school attendance, reached more than 2.2 million students by 1999 [CAMPE 1999].[2] The current BNP-led government (2001-) planned to monetise, expand and extend these programmes, although many aid donors remain ambivalent or critical. There is evidence to indicate that these have improved the educational prospects of many girls and poor children, by altering the household incentives for educating them [see Ravallion and Wodon 1999]. The stipend programme to encourage girls to attend secondary also appears to have delayed girls' marriage [Arends-Kuenning and Amin 2000].

It should be noted that less effort has been expended to expand access for geographically, ethnically and socially marginal groups – 'chor' inhabitants, tribal minorities and urban slum children [see CAMPE 1999: 61]. This exclusion by default is consistent with the argument outlined above that part of the purpose of education is political: to produce a uniform nationalist political identity, and to maintain a formal presence within local communities. The state has little incentive to establish permanent schools in urban slum communities it represents as temporary and illegal [see Hossain et al 2002] or with tribal groups who less likely to subscribe to hegemonic views of the national identity.

An additional political pressure to expand the supply of education may have come from the internationally-acclaimed successes of NGO interventions, in particular that of BRAC. Hossain et al suggest that one motivation for building a mass, centrally-provided education system is that it enables the state to have a presence at the heart of rural society, in the form of teachers (or 'village-level bureaucrats' (2002)). But in the early 1990s, BRAC seemed to have a more significant rural presence: over one million students were enrolled in 35,000 non-formal primary schools, employing almost 33,000 teachers [BRAC 1996]. It was only by the late 1990s that government provision had expanded to 37,000 primary schools [CAMPE 1999]. There were times during the early 1990s, then, when NGO education provision was very likely more prominent than the state in rural Bangladesh. It seems plausible that mass NGO provision of education represented a threat to the state – or at least a source of competition over the authority to mould young minds [see White 1999]. Similar pressures from the growth of madrasas and private school provision may have been at work to encourage state provision, particularly where control of the curriculum being taught in non-state schools was at stake [see Hossain et al 2002 for an extended argument along these lines].

The NGOs in Bangladesh, and BRAC in particular, can be credited with pioneering new and innovative approaches to education, including the emphasis on 'joyful learning'. They have also had an important impact on girls' education. From the outset, BRAC's education programme has attempted to improve girls' access to school, with girls making up around 70 per cent of enrolment. The programme is flexible with respect to the needs of the community: parents must request and support schools, ensuring they remain committed and that the school remains responsive. Unlike in state schools, more than 90 per cent of BRAC school teachers are women, the need to travel is minimised and timings are set to allow the domestic responsibilities largely shouldered by girls. Parents inevitably prefer female teachers to teach their daughters, and that teachers are locally-recruited

women appears to help retain girls in school.[3] That many BRAC school graduates enter the formal state system has undoubtedly helped improve the overall gender balance. It is also possible that there has been a 'group effect' in terms of exposure to new norms and ideas, signalling that girls' education is valuable, and that BRAC at least deems it worth investing in [see also Drèze and Kingdon 2001].

Donors had always backed NGOs, and so their role in expanding education extends back into the 1980s. But an additional factor explaining the massive expansionary surge of the 1990s was that donors had begun to invest heavily in formal, state-sponsored education after Jomtien. Bangladesh was already well-placed to invest in meeting its EFA commitments by the time of the Jomtien Conference [Sedere 2000]. Although donors had come relatively late to the education sector in Bangladesh, here, as elsewhere, they proved increasingly willing to support government efforts after the EFA conference, providing half of total financing for primary between 1990 and 1995 (see Sedere (2000) on Bangladesh) for a global overview of aid to education after Jomtien. Even in the 1990s, however, public financing for NGO primary education consistently outstripped and increased faster than aid to state primary education, as donors appeared to favour NGO education provision. In the recent past, government displayed reluctance to permit much direct donor involvement in education, resisting suggestions of a sectorwide approach to resourcing the sector. This seems to have changed, and at the time of writing, donor-government coordination in education appears to be on a more promising footing (see Sedere 2000 for the background to this reluctance).

Given that our explanation for the expansion of education rests on the argument that domestic political commitment to education has been high, it is significant that education has been one of few sectors in which donor influence was relatively marginal until recently [Alam et al 2001]. One World Bank sector review noted that in the early years, Bank staff were ambivalent about funding activities which they viewed as 'nation-building rather than skill-building' (1999: 12).[4] Donors' perceptions of their influence on education policy in Bangladesh may have changed latterly, since they scaled up their activities in the 1990s. But on the whole, donors have tended to be modest about their role and to have attributed successes to the strength and steadiness of government commitment [see for example, ADB 1986 and World Bank 1999, 2000]. It may be precisely because education has been such a political issue in Bangladesh that donors have until recently steered clear; arguably, however, it is also because education is such a political issue that Bangladesh has so successfully expanded access. However, there is worrying evidence that expansion in access may have been achieved at the expense of quality of education. The overcrowding of government schools as a result of government educational incentives appears to have had some negative effects on the quality of learning achieved [IFPRI 2000].

Conclusion

Bangladesh's achievements in the field of education clearly represent the confluence of different forces, including those which drove its demographic transition. However, its homogeneity has also proved to be a factor in hastening the pace of change. New ideas spread quickly in a densely populated environment where structural inequalities, while present, have proved malleable. Indeed, a very general level of explanation for the swiftness with which educational aspirations took root may have to do with an overall sense within the population that upward social mobility was possible, perhaps over a generation. While downward mobility was more likely for most, the absence of deeply-entrenched caste-type distinctions, meant that upward mobility was also possible.[5] That most of the contemporary Bangladeshi elite have themselves relatively recently left their village communities, retain strong roots within them, and may themselves have experienced upward mobility from modest backgrounds, may help to explain their belief in the power of education to improve the plight of the poor and their willingness to support mass education.

It should be noted that many of the changes in gender relations which we here argue enabled girls' educational access are hardly cause for celebration: the long-term crisis- and shock-induced changes in how gender relations are evaluated may have enabled some autonomy for women and girls in Bangladesh, but at the cost of massive, rapid and undoubtedly traumatic social upheaval. These have been unsettling changes for men as well as women, as testified to by the rise in violence against women. And these achievements may be reversible, if fundamentalist religious groups are not kept in check.

The challenge is now unequivocally to improve the quality of education [CAMPE 2002]. As we have argued elsewhere, this is likely to be a greater challenge than the expansion of access [Hossain et al 2002]. The political forces and institutional pressures that enabled the expansion of the education sector are also implicated in its systemic problems: centralised administration, the political power of teachers, and the political prize of control of curricular content. The hope for the future lies in the strengthening of grassroots democratic forums in the educational sector which will allow those who have the greatest stake in the quality of education – parents and the community – to exercise a greater influence in shaping its delivery. EPW

Address for correspondence:
n.kabeer@ids.ac.uk
naomih@dhaka.net

Notes

[The authors are grateful to Ramya Subrahmanian for letting us draw on an earlier joint paper on this theme, and to Md Shamsul Hoque of BIDS library for help with compiling statistics.]

1 The belief that schooling breeds social transformation regardless of its quality has some support in 'anecdotal evidence' to show that schooling has an impact on people's attitudes and behaviour, independently of their literacy and numeracy achievements [cited in World Bank 2000: 49].

2 Problems have been identified with this programme and the World Bank consistently describes it as 'controversial'. However, despite the ambivalence of donors, it seems to be politically popular, and the government backs it fully [see World Bank 2000; also Ravallion and Wodon 1999].

3 This paragraph is adapted from Subrahmanian (2002).

4 Donors have had reservations about funding education in other countries, too, again because they see education as at least partly about nation-building. Some donors take a principled stance against funding an activity which they view as the responsibility of the state.

5 Bengali Muslim society historically had 'caste'-like social structures, but although theoretically hereditary, these were never as rigid as Hindu caste, and movement was possible. Economic change and the Faraizi movement meant these were declining by the late 19th century and have little resonance in the present day. The optimism of Bengali Muslims about social mobility in the early part of the century was expressed in the much-cited proverb: "last year I was a weaver (Jolaha), now I am a sheikh, and next year, if the crops are good, I shall be a Syed".

References

Adnan, S (1990): *Annotation of Villages Studies in Bangladesh and West Bengal: A Review of Socio-Economic Trends over 1942-1988*, Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, Comilla.

Alam, S (1985): 'Women and Poverty in Bangladesh', *Women's Studies International Forum* 8 (4) 361-71.

Alam, M, K Begum, and A Raihan (1996): 'Status of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Bangladesh', mimeo, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies report, Dhaka.

Alam, M, J Ross and E Unterhalter (2001): 'A Fragile Dialogue? Research and Primary Education Policy Formation in Bangladesh, 1972-2001', paper delivered at Oxford Conference on Knowledge, Values and Policy, Oxford, September 2001.

Arends-Kuenning, M and S Amin (2000): 'The Effects of Schooling Incentive Programmes on Household Resource Allocation in Bangladesh', Population Council Working Paper no 133, Population Council, New York.

Arthur, B, and G McNicoll (1978): 'An Analytical Survey of Population and Development in Bangladesh', *Population and Development Review* 4(1) 23-80.

Asian Development Bank (1986): 'Bangladesh: Sector Study on Education', Education Division, Infrastructure Department, Asian Development Bank, Manila.

Aziz, K M A and C Maloney (1982): *Life Stages, Gender and Fertility in Bangladesh*, ICDDR, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

BBS, various years, *Statistical Yearbook,* Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Dhaka.

Cain, M, S R Khanam, S Nahar (1979): 'Class, Patriarchy and Women's Work in Bangladesh', *Population and Development Review* 5(3): 405-38.

CAMPE (Campaign for Popular Education) (1999): *Hope not Complacency: State of Primary Education in Bangladesh 1999*, CAMPE/University Press, Dhaka.

– (2002): *A Question of Quality: State of Primary Education in Bangladesh,* Vol 1, CAMPE/University Press Limited, Dhaka.

Chen, M, and R Ghuznavi (1977): 'Women in Food-for-Work: The Bangladesh Experience', United Nations World Food Programme, Dacca/Rome.

Cleland, J, J F Phillips, S Amin, and G M Kamal (1994): 'The Determinants of Reproductive Change in Bangladesh: Success in a Challenging Environment', *World Bank Regional and Sectoral Studies*, World Bank: Washington DC.

Drèze, J, and G G Kingdon (2001): 'School Participation in Rural India', *Review of Development Economics*, 5 (1) 1-24.

Duraisamy, P (1992): 'Gender, Intrafamily Allocation of Resources and Child Schooling in South India', *Yale University Economic Growth Centre,* Discussion Paper No 667.

Government of Bangladesh (2001): 'Primary Education Statistics in Bangladesh (as on June 2000)', Directorate of Primary Education, Primary and Mass Education Division, Dhaka.

Gustavsson, S (1990): *Primary Education in Bangladesh: For Whom?* University Press, Dhaka.

Hossain, M (1988): 'Nature and Impact of the Green Revolution in Bangladesh', *Research Report* No 67, International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington DC.

Hossain, N (2003) 'Elites and Poverty in Bangladesh', unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Sussex.

Hossain, N, R Subrahmanian, and N Kabeer (2002): 'The Politics of Educational Expansion in Bangladesh', *IDS* Working paper 167.

IFPRI (2000): Results of Evaluation: Food for Schooling in Bangladesh. www.ifpri.org

Jack, J C (1916): *The Economic Life of a Bengal District: A study*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Jalaluddin, A K, and A M R Chowdhury (eds) (1997): *Getting Started: Universalising Quality Primary Education in Bangladesh*, University Press Limited, Dhaka.

Kabeer, N (1986): 'The Functions of Children in the Household Economy and Levels of Fertility: A Case Study of a Village in Bangladesh', PhD dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science.

– (1991): 'Gender Dimensions of Rural Poverty: Analysis from Bangladesh', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 18(2): 241-62.

– (1997): 'Women, Wages and Intra-Household Power Relations in Urban Bangladesh', *Development and Change* 28(2): 261-302.

– (2001): *The Power to Choose*, Verso, London.

Kibria, N (1995): 'Culture, Social Class and Income Control in the Lives of Women Garment Workers in Bangladesh', *Gender and Society* 9 (3) 289-309.

Lloyd, C, C Mete, and Z A Sathar (2002): 'The Effect of Gender Differences in Primary School Access, Type and Quality on the Decision to Enrol in Rural Pakistan' Population Council Policy Research Division Working Paper, no 164.

Muhith, A M A (1999): *Bangladesh in the Twenty-First Century: Towards an Industrial Society*, University Press, Dhaka.

Nag, M, M B Duza and M Koenig (1988): 'Explaining Fertility Transition in Matlab, Bangladesh: A Qualitative Study', Population Council/ICDDRB Report prepared for Swedish International Development Agency, Dhaka.

Sattar, E (1974): 'Women in Bangladesh: A Village Study', Ford Foundation Report, Dacca.

Ravallion, M and Q Wodon (1999): 'Does Child Labour Displace Schooling? Evidence on Behavioural Responses to an Enrolment Subsidy', World Bank Policy Research Working Paper no 2116.

Rozario, S (1992): *Purity and Communal Boundaries: Women and Social Change in a Bangladeshi Village*, Zed Books, London/New Jersey.

Sedere, U (2000): 'Rethinking Educational Aid: Sector Support Approach to Financing Basic Education: Lessons from Bangladesh', *Prospects* XXX (4) 451-60.

Subrahmanian, R (2002): 'Gender and Education: A Review of Issues for Social Policy', UNRISD Social Policy and Development Programme Paper, Number 9.

World Bank (1999): *Education in Bangladesh: A Country Sector Review*, Washington DC.

– (2000): *Bangladesh Education Sector Review* (Vols I and II), World Bank/ University Press, Dhaka.