

EQUITY GAINS IN BANGLADESH PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract – Although equity is a desirable objective of any form of development intervention, including education, not many studies dwell upon this important area. Information on related trends is even more rare. This essay uses field-level data from Bangladesh to examine equity levels and trends in primary education, including enrolment and quality of learning, focusing on equity for different gender, urban or rural, economic and ethnic groups. The study shows that while some disparity between girls and boys has been eliminated, girls are still far behind boys in terms of learning achievement. Children belonging to poorer families and ethnic minority groups lag behind the respective dominant groups in terms of both enrolment and learning achievement. At the same time, there have been some improvements for hitherto excluded groups such as rural girls and children of the poor. These changes are attributed mainly to 'positive discriminatory' steps taken by the government and non-governmental organizations in favour of such groups. If this trend continues, Bangladesh can look forward to establishing itself as a more equitable society than it is now.

Zusammenfassung – Obwohl Gleichstellung ein wünschenswertes Ziel jeder Form von Entwicklungsmaßnahmen ist, einschließlich der Bildung, befassen sich nur wenige Studien mit diesem immens wichtigen Gebiet. Informationen über Trends in Erfahrungen mit der Gleichstellung sind sogar noch seltener. In dieser Studie werden Daten aus verschiedenen Bereichen Bangladesch verwendet zur Untersuchung der Gleichstellung und der Trends in der Primarbildung, einschließlich der Einschreibung und Lernqualität, mit Hauptaugenmerk auf die Gleichstellung der Geschlechter sowie städtisch bzw. ländlicher, wirtschaftlicher und ethnischer Gruppen. Gezeigt wird, dass trotz einer Reduzierung des Ungleichgewichts zwischen Jungen und Mädchen die Mädchen immer noch weit hinter dem Lernerfolg der Jungen liegen. Kinder aus ärmeren Familien und ethnischen Minderheiten liegen hinter den entsprechend dominanten Gruppen sowohl bei der Einschreibung als auch im Lernerfolg. Gleichzeitig gab es einige Verbesserungen für bis dato ausgeschlossene Gruppen wie Mädchen auf dem Land und Kinder der Armen. Diese Veränderungen werden hauptsächlich den 'positiv diskriminierenden' Schritten der Regierung und Nicht-Regierungsorganisationen zugunsten derartiger Gruppen zugeschrieben. Wenn dieser Trend anhält, kann Bangladesch erwarten, sich als eine gleichgestelltere Gesellschaft zu etablieren, als sie es heute ist.

Résumé – Bien que l'équité soit un objectif souhaitable de toute forme d'intervention pour le développement y compris l'éducation, peu d'études s'attardent sur cet aspect de première importance. L'information sur les tendances des expériences en faveur de l'équité se raréfie même. Cet essai s'appuie sur des données relevées sur le terrain au Bangladesh et entend examiner les niveaux et tendances en matière d'équité dans l'enseignement primaire, eu égard aux taux de scolarisation et à la qualité de l'apprentissage, mais surtout par rapport à la discrimination sexuelle et aux différents groupes urbains et ruraux, économiques et ethniques. L'étude révèle que, même si une



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certaine disparité entre garçons et filles s'est atténuée, les filles accusent un important retard en termes de résultats scolaires. Les enfants issus de familles défavorisées et de groupes ethniques minoritaires sont dépassés par les groupes dominants tant au niveau de la scolarisation que des résultats. Parallèlement, une amélioration s'observe pour les groupes jusqu'ici exclus, comme les enfants pauvres et les filles de milieu rural. Cette évolution est attribuée essentiellement aux efforts de «discrimination positive» entrepris par les organismes publics et non gouvernementaux en faveur de ces deux derniers groupes. Si cette tendance se confirme, le Bangladesh peut espérer instaurer une société plus équitable qu'elle ne l'est aujourd'hui.

Resumen – Si bien la equidad es un objetivo deseable para cualquier forma de medida de desarrollo, con inclusión de la educación, son pocos los estudios que se han dedicado a este tema tan importante, y también son escasas las informaciones disponibles sobre las tendencias registradas en términos de equidad. Este trabajo ha evaluado datos de campo, recogidos en Bangladesh, a efectos de examinar los niveles de equidad y tendencias en la educación primaria, incluyendo la escolarización y la calidad de aprendizaje. Hace especial hincapié en la equidad entre géneros y grupos urbanos y rurales, de distintos niveles económicos y de diferentes etnias. El estudio muestra que pese a que se hayan eliminado algunas desigualdades entre niñas y niños, las niñas aún presentan una gran desventaja frente a los niños en cuanto al éxito en el aprendizaje. Los niños y niñas pertenecientes a familias más pobres y a etnias minoritarias se quedan a la zaga de los respectivos grupos dominantes, tanto en términos de escolarización como de éxito en el aprendizaje. Al mismo tiempo comprueba algunas mejoras para grupos que hasta ahora estaban excluidos, tales como los niños y niñas de familias pobres y las niñas de zonas rurales. Este cambio se ha atribuido principalmente a las medidas de «discriminación positiva» emprendidas por organizaciones gubernamentales y no gubernamentales a favor de los niños y niñas de familias pobres y las niñas de zonas rurales. Si esta tendencia continúa, la sociedad de Bangladesh podría llegar a establecerse como una sociedad más equitativa.

Резюме: Несмотря на то, что любое поступательное развитие, в том числе и в сфере образования, предполагает стремление к максимальной объективности, проблеме объективности в образовании посвящено очень ограниченное число исследований. Еще меньше материала по основным тенденциям развития, актуальным для данного вопроса. Настоящая работа подготовлена на основе данных, полученных во время полевых исследований в Бангладеш. Целью этих исследований была оценка существующего уровня объективности и выявление основных тенденций развития начального образования, в том числе в таких областях, как доступность и качество образования. Особенный упор делался на объективность в отношении детей различного пола, городских и деревенских жителей, представителей различных экономических и этнических групп. Как показывают результаты исследований, несмотря на то, что половое неравенство детей до некоторой степени удалось ликвидировать, девочки все еще сильно отстают от мальчиков в части учебных достижений. Дети из бедных семей и представители этнических меньшинств реже посещают школу и учатся хуже представителей больших групп населения. В то же время ситуация с представителями до сих пор исключенных из образовательного процесса групп, таких как деревенские девочки или дети бедняков, определенным образом улучшилась. Эти улучшения во многом стали возможны благодаря реализуемой правительственными и общественными организациями концепции «предвзято позитивного отношения» к данным социальным группам. В случае, если подобная

тенденция будет сохраняться, по прошествии определенного времени общество Бангладеш может стать более объективным, чем сейчас..

The 1990s saw many international conferences and summits, including the World Conference on Education for All (1990), the International Conference on Population and Development (1995), the International Conference on Women (1994), the World Social Summit (1995) and the World Summit for Children (1990). A common message that came out of all these conferences was that it is vital to ensure education for all children.

The 1990 declaration of the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), held in Jomtien, Thailand, reaffirmed the "right of all people to education" (UNESCO 1992). In 1993, a conference of the heads of governments of the nine most populous developing nations which took place in Delhi, India, reinforced the WCEFA declaration by calling for the removal of disparities in access to primary education due to "gender, age, income, family, cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences and geographical remoteness" (UNDP 1996). Over the decade, some progress was made in making education accessible to a large portion of the world's children, as has been widely documented (UNDP 1999). The World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 further reaffirmed the global community's commitment to achieving education for all by removing such disparities (UNESCO 2000). What is lacking, however, is an assessment of the progress made in eradicating, or more pragmatically reducing, inequities in educational access and actual learning.

The present study employs field level data from Bangladesh in examining levels and trends in selected indicators of primary education, focusing in particular on the degree to which equality in education has been achieved for different gender, urban or rural, socio-economic and ethnic groups. It demonstrates that an eradication or reduction in inequality or disparity in education is taking place in Bangladesh, and that this is happening because of certain changes in the overall policy environment of primary education.

Background

Bangladesh ranks among the bottom 20 countries in the literacy league table. Between 1980 and 1998, the adult-literacy rate rose marginally from 32% to 38%, with the rate for females only half that of males. Recent statistics provided by the government, and unfortunately not impugnable, indicate that the literacy rate reached 65% in 2001. Since the mid-1980s, particularly since the Jomtien conference, a number of new initiatives have been undertaken by the public and private sectors as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to promote primary education in the country. Among these policies and programmes are: (a) free and compulsory primary education for all children; (b) free education for girls up to grade eight and free books for all

children at the primary level; (c) scholarships for girls reading in rural secondary schools, including financial incentives for the schools themselves; (d) a food-for-education programme that provides a food ration to about 20% of poor primary school children in rural areas; (e) a proliferation of non-formal education programmes by NGOs;¹ and (f) creation of a separate Primary and Mass Education Division (PMED) headed by a secretary to the government.

According to government statistics, over 37,000 primary schools owned and managed by the government form the mainstream of primary education in the country. In addition, approximately 23,000 other privately established primary schools are managed with limited government subvention. Over 7000 Islamic schools, the *Ebtedayee madrassas*, provide education with an Islamic focus. Several NGOs have initiated primary education programmes for those who are left out of the formal system. In total, the number of students served by NGOs in the non-formal system is estimated to be 1.4 million, including 1.2 million served by BRAC² alone (Alam and Hussain 1999). In terms of public spending on education, Bangladesh spent 2.3% of its gross national product in 1993/1994 on education, which is considerably lower than the average 3.5% investment in education for the South Asian region (Haq and Haq 1998). More importantly, 96% of the revenue expenditure on primary education in the country is allocated to teachers' salaries, leaving very little for monitoring, supervision, training and other quality-enhancing activities (Ahmad 1996).

In Bangladesh, primary education has never been equally accessible for all groups in the population. Earlier studies had indicated that girls, children living in rural areas and urban slums, children from socio-economically disadvantaged families and ethnic minorities were particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to education (Broke and Cammish 1991; Chowdhury et al. 1992; Nath et al. 1993; UNICEF 1992; Alam et al. 1997). This, however, is not peculiar to Bangladesh. In developed societies such as the United States, social stratification is also found to be increasingly linked to the system of education (Hurn 1993). In Singapore, children from 'favoured' backgrounds have also been found to be beneficiaries of new educational policies (Mukhopadhyaya 2003).

Methods

Most of the data for this study, unless mentioned otherwise, comes from *Education Watch*, a civil-society initiative in Bangladesh which is designed to monitor progress in primary education on a continuous basis (Chowdhury et al. 1999). For its latest investigation, *Education Watch* collected data on selected internal efficiency indicators, including enrolment, completion, attendance and basic learning competency. While data on enrolment were collected at the household level, those on completion and attendance were gathered from school records. Basic learning competency was assessed by interviewing a

subsample of children aged 11–12 years in the same households through a curriculum-independent test called the *Assessment of Basic Competencies* (ABC), which evaluates a child's competency in reading, writing, arithmetic and life skills/knowledge. Children attaining a minimum level of competency in each of the four areas were assumed to have achieved "basic competency" (see Box 1).

Box 1. Assessment of basic competency

The Assessment of Basic Competency (ABC) is a simple, inexpensive and rapid methodology for evaluating the basic education of children. It relies on selected assumptions about the minimum level of competency that a child should attain in reading, writing, numeracy and basic life skills/knowledge. It is a curriculum-independent test, elementary in terms of difficulty level, and is administered to children irrespective of schooling status. The ABC also recommends a sampling technique. It requires testing 420 children of a particular age spread equally over 30 random clusters for a defined population to get a good estimate of "basic education" (Chowdhury et al. 1994).

In a multi-stage, nationally representative random sampling, 42,584 households in 312 villages/neighbourhoods from eight strata in rural and urban Bangladesh were visited. The enrolment status of all children and adolescents aged 4–20 years living in these households was determined along with their socio-economic characteristics. A total of 885 schools included in the sample and adjacent villages were also visited. Finally, a subsample of 3360 children (or 420 from each stratum) aged 11–12 years (those who had just crossed the primary school age of 6–10 years, irrespective of enrolment status) from the above households was randomly identified for administration of the ABC. The sample selected for ABC contained children in and out of school. Structured questionnaires and checklists were used to collect the data in October 1998. A detailed description of the methodology is reported elsewhere (Chowdhury et al. 1999).

Results

Enrolment trends over time

Bangladesh has a pluralist system of primary education. Table 1 shows the share of different types of school in primary-level enrolment, by gender. Two-thirds of students enrolled are in government-run primary schools. Non-government formal schools (registered and unregistered) constitute 15% of total enrolment, while non-formal schools run by NGOs represent 8.5%. Others are less significant. It also shows that non-formal schools enroll more girls than boys, but in government primary schools the enrolment of girls equals that of boys.

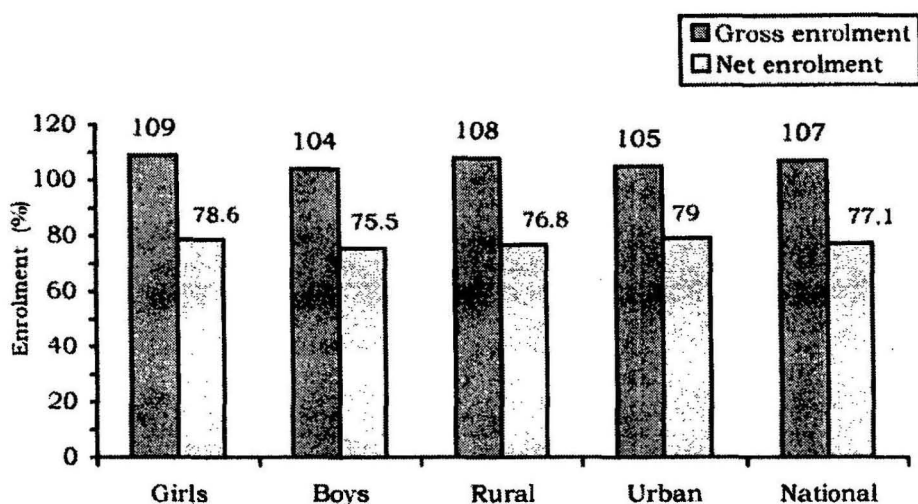
Figure 1 shows the gross (all) and net (primary-school aged only) enrol-

Table 1. Share of different types of school at primary level

Type of school	Enrolment (%)		
	Girls	Boys	Total
Government primary	67.6	67.6	67.6
Non-government primary	15.1	14.9	14.9
Non-formal	10.2	6.8	8.5
Ehtedayee madrassa	1.0	1.6	1.3
Others	6.1	9.1	7.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of children	16,616	16,613	33,229

Source: Education Watch (Chowdhury et al. 1999)

Figure 1. Gross- and net-enrolment rates in Bangladesh by gender and residence



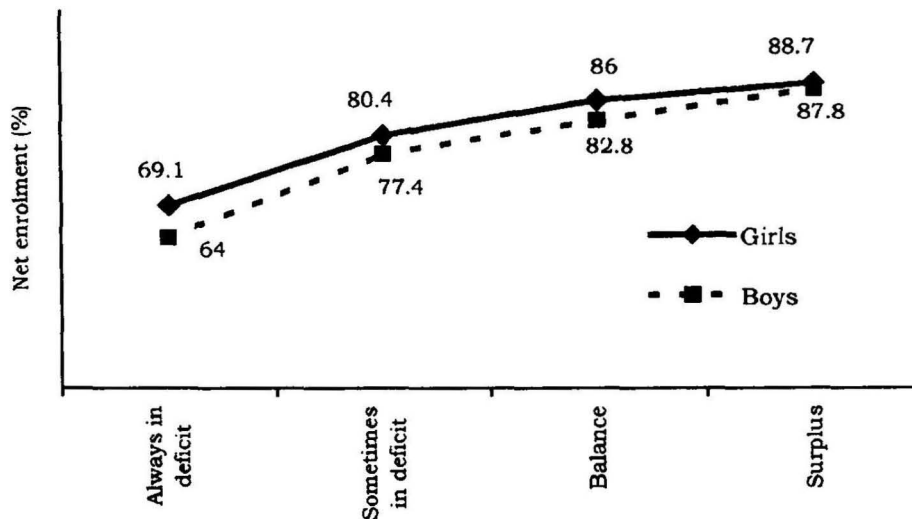
Source: Education Watch data (Chowdhury et al. 1999)

ment for various subgroups.³ Gross enrolment exceeded 100% for all subgroups. Nationally, the gross ratio is 107%; the corresponding net rate of 77% indicates that about 30% of students at the primary level are from outside the official primary age group of 6–10 years (approximately 80% of them being overage and 20% underage). Furthermore, the net rate also indicates that 23% of primary-school aged children are still outside the reach of the formal and non-formal school systems. The figure also shows that girls have surpassed boys in terms of both gross and net rates⁴ of enrolment. When one compares rural and urban enrolment, rural areas have a higher gross ratio than urban areas. This is reversed, however, in the case of net rates, implying that urban schools are more stringent in terms of determining the age of the pupil on

admission or that urban parents are more conscientious about sending their children to school at the appropriate age or both.

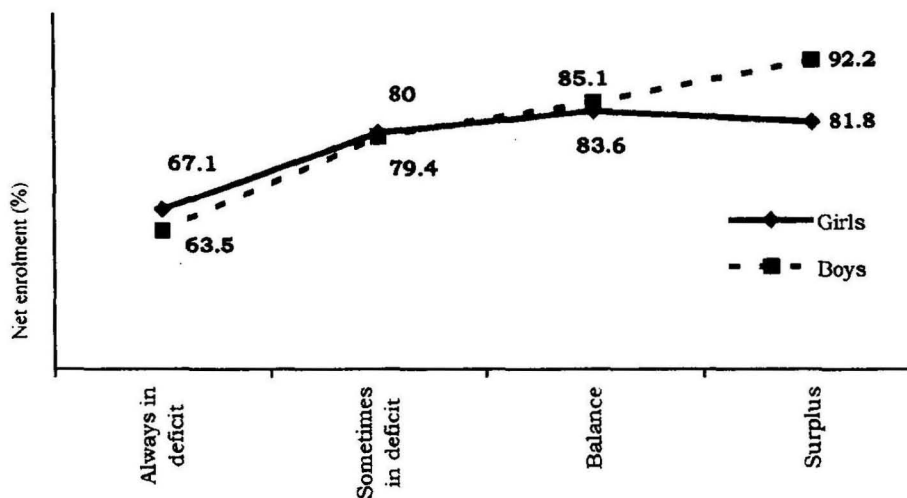
Figures 2 and 3 compare rural and urban net enrolment rates according to self-perceived economic status and gender. Because of the difficulties in

Figure 2. Net enrolment and self-perceived economic status in rural Bangladesh



Source: Education Watch data (Chowdhury et al. 1999)

Figure 3. Net enrolment and self-perceived economic status in urban Bangladesh



Source: Education Watch data (Chowdhury et al. 1999)

collecting valid information on economic status indicators such as income in Bangladesh, a proxy measure of self-rated economic status is commonly employed which was found to be a valid indicator of wealth (Rahman and Hussain 1996). Adult respondents for the household questionnaire were asked to classify their own economic status through one of the following four categories (in decreasing order of poverty): always in deficit, sometimes in deficit, balance or surplus. The figures show that, as in most other developing societies, enrolment increased progressively with decreasing poverty. The gender gap in favour of girls narrows as affluence increases and poverty decreases. This is particularly true in urban Bangladesh, where boys surpassed girls among 'surplus' households. In the 'deficit' group, by contrast, the gender gap in favour of girls is widest.

Table 2 shows net enrolment rates for four of the country's small ethnic minority groups who live in three hilly districts collectively known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) (Minority Rights Group 1997). Three important trends are discernible. First, the enrolment rate for each of these groups is far behind the national estimate. Second, significant disparities exist between ethnic groups. Third, the enrolment of girls lags behind the enrolment of boys irrespective of ethnicity. It should be noted, however, that this data was collected independently of *Education Watch* at a time when the region was recovering from a long period of civil strife and armed conflict. Peace was restored in 1998 through an agreement between the government and local insurgents. The CHT has about 1% of Bangladesh's 125 million people and occupies 10% of the land area. There are eleven ethnic groups who inhabit CHT, and this survey collected information from the four most populous ones (Nath 2001).

Figure 4 shows trends in gross enrolment at the national level over time for a particular age group of children. The rates have been reconstructed for children aged 11–12 years from *Education Watch* data and are compared with another study conducted five years previously with a similar methodology

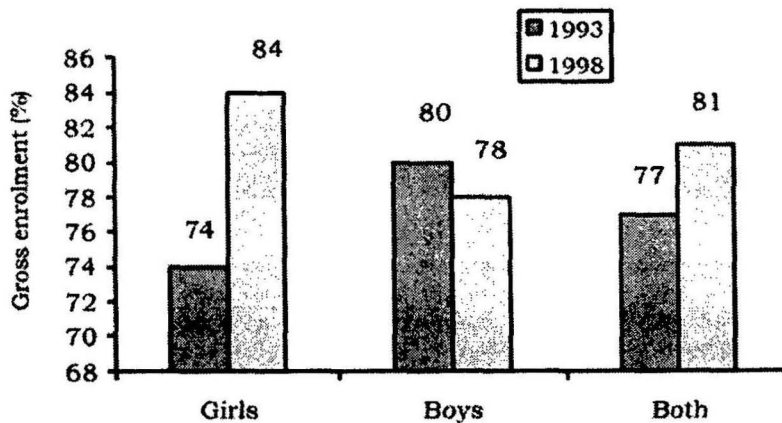
Table 2. Primary net enrolment rate for four major ethnic groups in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh by gender of child

Ethnic group	Net enrolment rate (%)	
	Girls	Boys
Chakma	52.9 (225)	53.2 (228)
Marma	41.2 (183)	44.8 (177)
Mro	2.7 (221)	7.7 (224)
Tripura	28.9 (212)	32.2 (210)
National	78.6 (15,217)	75.5 (15,875)

Note: Figures within parentheses indicate number of children in sample.

Source: *Independent Survey of CHT* (Nath 2001)

Figure 4. Gross-enrolment ratio for children 11–12 years in 1993 and 1998 in Bangladesh



Source: Education Watch data (Chowdhury et al. 1999)

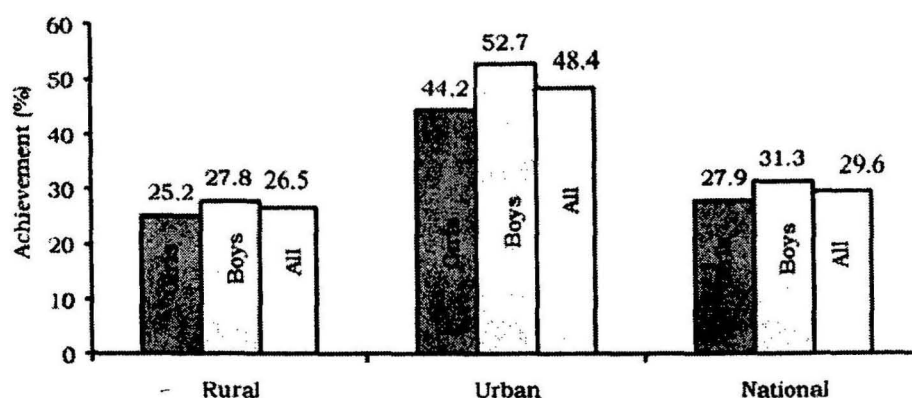
on the same age group of children⁵ (Nath et al. 1993). An increase of four percentage points is indicated over the period, meaning that the improvement has been less than one percentage point per year. Furthermore, the improvement is restricted to girls only, whose enrolment rate increased by ten percentage points, while boys actually experienced a slight decline in enrolment over the same period. In terms of completion, girls completed the five-year cycle equally or more often than boys (73% for girls versus 72% for boys – not shown in the figure or table).

Trends in basic learning competency

Figure 5 shows basic learning competency as defined by the study for children aged 11–12 years, including children both in and out of school (Box 1). In contrast to the observed high enrolment rates, learning competency is low, with 29.6% of children achieving basic competencies. Furthermore, a female advantage over boys as found in the case of enrolment is not reflected in competency: boys outperformed girls, with a male advantage being more pronounced in urban than in rural areas. Overall, urban areas are much ahead (48.4%) of rural areas (26.5%). Table 3 shows that the proportion of children achieving basic-learning competency was highest for non-formal schools (38.3%) and lowest for *Ehtedayee madrassas* (15.2%). The type of school attended did not alter the trend in observed gender differences. Even in non-formal schools, girls trailed boys.

Figure 6 shows the percentage change in basic learning competency over a five-year period (1993–1998). The column percentages indicate an increase (or decrease) over the base of 1993. On average, there has been an 11% increase nationally; the increase is marginally better for girls than for boys.

Figure 5. Proportion of children aged 11–12 years achieving basic learning competency by gender and residence



Source: Education Watch data (Chowdhury et al. 1999)

Table 3. Proportion of children aged 11–12 years achieving basic learning competency by type of school

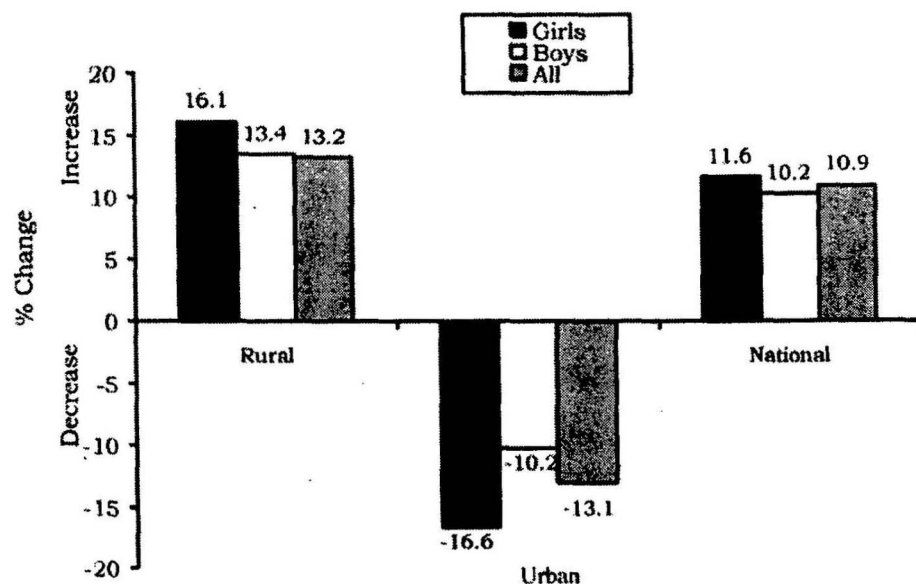
Type of school	% achieving basic education		
	Girls	Boys	Total
Gov't primary	18.9	24.2	21.5
Non-gov't primary	19.9	27.1	23.5
Non-formal (NF)	34.5	44.0	38.3
Ebtedayee madrassa	12.1	18.1	15.2
All school types	27.9	31.3	29.6

Source: Education Watch data (Chowdhury et al. 1999)

This increase, however, came about more in rural areas, particularly among rural girls. By contrast, the trends indicate that basic competency has in fact declined in urban areas, and that this decline is greater among girls than boys.

Figure 7 presents the change in basic competency according to self-determined economic status. A dramatic improvement is seen for children in poorer households (the 'deficit' group). For children in the 'surplus' category, achievement rates declined. The figure also shows that the improvement among poorer groups was more pronounced in rural than in urban areas. The performance of children in the 'always deficit' group actually improved nationally by 88.4% over the five-year period and by 108% in rural areas. In contrast, the achievement of children belonging to the 'surplus' group deteriorated in both rural and urban areas, more dramatically among urban children.

Figure 6. Change in proportion of children achieving basic learning competency, between 1993 and 1998 by gender and residence



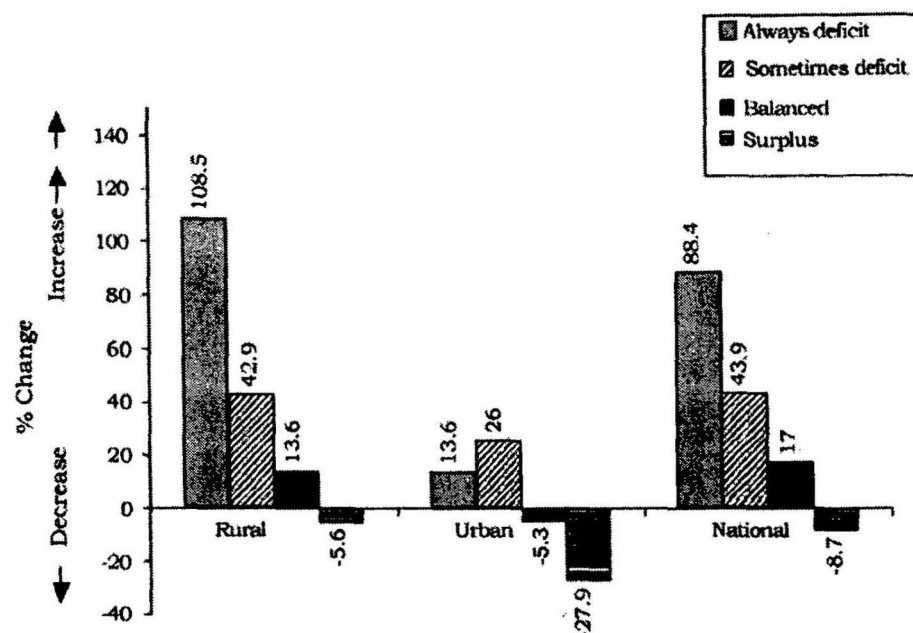
Source: Education Watch data (Chowdhury et al. 1999; Nath et al. 1993)

Discussion

In any treatment of equity in education, the experience and performance of different subgroups in the population on educational output and outcome is the issue. In most developing societies, including Bangladesh, differences in educational output are reported between boys and girls, urban and rural areas, and for different socio-economic and ethnic groups (Broke and Cammish 1991; Chowdhury et al. 1992; Alam et al. 1997; World Bank 1997). The difference in literacy rates between women and men is often pointed out as an example of inequity in education. A recent report provided detailed statistics on the gender gap in education for 174 countries (UNDP 1999). Of the 31 countries belonging to the 'low human-development' group, 30 had a female adult-literacy rate which was less than 80% of the male adult-literacy rate. In contrast, all 45 countries belonging to the 'high human-development' group had a female adult-literacy rate which was more than 90% of the male adult-literacy rate. Bangladesh, which belonged to the former group, had a female adult-literacy rate which was only 55% that of the males. In neighbouring India and Pakistan, this figure was 59% and 46%, respectively.

Adult literacy, while useful as an indicator of the overall educational scenario in a society, does not adequately reflect recent changes in educational

Figure 7. Change in proportion of children achieving basic learning competency, between 1993 and 1998 by self-perceived economic status and residence



Source: Education Watch data (Chowdhury et al. 1999; Nath et al. 1993)

inputs and outputs. Indicators of internal efficiency such as enrolment and learning achievement are more sensitive to recent changes.

Bangladesh has adopted a pluralist system in basic education provision. Dominated by the public sector, with two-thirds of all enrolment, it has a private sector share of 15% and a NGO sector of 8.5%, as shown in this study.

A review of recent changes in the targeting of educational provision points to some elements of 'positive discrimination' or affirmative action⁶ in favour of those who were hitherto considered disadvantaged. Secondary school stipends and a 'food-for-education' programme at the primary level are examples from the public sector of selected incentive schemes to attract more girls and poor children to government schools in rural areas. Similarly, the policy of recruiting at least 70% girls and children of poorer families by BRAC and other NGOs are examples from the non-government sector. Such schemes and policies seem to have had a tremendous impact on the way parents send their children to school. As shown, the gender gap in enrolment has disappeared, and poorer parents are sending their daughters to school more often now than before. Such a positive change in the equity situation has several implications. First, the disappearing gender gap that was heralded in many developing countries (Knodel 1997; UNDP 1999) is now taking place in Bangladesh. The second and probably more important point concerns how

sustainable this improvement will be and whether the country can maintain it in the future. That the increase in girls' enrolment is induced by affirmative action taken by the government and NGOs cannot be doubted; the very fact that the improvement only marginally appeared, if at all, in other groups (such as boys and children from urban areas) not targeted by the government and NGOs adds support to this. These initiatives are described in brief in Box 2.

Financial incentives through scholarships and food provided by the state induced demand, while the NGO initiatives targeted select groups. The improvements that have been seen in Bangladesh may well be very fragile and dependent on the continuation of these special schemes for some time to come, until real demand is built and delivery mechanisms become more responsive to meet the increased demand of disadvantaged groups. The deterioration in the performance of certain groups (such as boys and children in urban areas and of well-to-do parents) demands the special attention of policy-

Box 2. Selected interventions for equity in education

The Food For Education (FFE) programme

Begun in 1993, the programme provides free monthly wheat rations to poor children as an incentive for attending primary school. In 1998, about two million students (and their families) benefited from this at a cost of Taka 3,750 million (US\$ 75 million) (or 20% of the country's total expenditure on primary education). A recent evaluation concludes that the FFE programme has been successful in increasing primary school enrolment, particularly for girls, and reducing the number of drop-outs. It also found that the quality of education in schools covered by FFE could not keep pace with the increased enrolment (Ahmed et al. 2001).

Female Stipend Programme (FSP)

The FSP was introduced to reduce the gender gap in secondary school enrolment. About 2.6 million girls benefited from this programme in 1998, that is, nearly 75% of all girls enrolled at the secondary level. The government pays Taka 30 per month for Grade VI–VIII and Taka 40 per month for Grade IX–X female students. Of this, half is retained by the school and half is paid to students. Also, students are not required to pay any tuition (World Bank 2000). It not only resulted in a near gender parity at the secondary level but also had a big impact at the primary level. Parents viewed this as a big incentive, and consequently the programme had a profound effect in reducing drop-out at the primary level.

The BRAC Non-formal Schools Programme

BRAC is a Bangladeshi non-governmental organization. Since the mid-1980s it has been carrying out a non-formal primary education programme which now reaches 1.2 million children all over the country. The target group of the BRAC programme are girls from poorer families. Of all the children enrolled in BRAC schools, 70% are girls – the result of a deliberate policy to minimize the gender gap in primary schooling (Ahmed et al. 1993).

makers. Some children do need more attention, but others should not be overlooked (Chowdhury et al. 2002).

The third point lies in the observation that focused interventions (through incentive schemes and deliberate policies) can make a significant positive impact on the equity situation in education. In Bangladesh, BRAC and other NGOs have been successful in bringing girls and children of poorer parents to non-formal schools in large number (Ahmed et al. 1993). These schools now constitute 8.5% of all enrolments. In many societies, poverty has been identified as a major impediment to achieving equity in enrolment and other parameters of education (World Bank 1997). It has been shown in this study that considerable improvement in reducing inequity in educational access can be achieved without significant improvement in the poverty situation. The positive role that focused interventions can play in reducing inequity in health status has also been documented in Bangladesh (Chowdhury and Bhuiya 2001). It has been found that poverty alleviation programmes (including micro-credit) run by NGOs helped to reduce gaps in infant and child mortality between gender and socio-economic groups (Bhuiya et al. 2001).

When one considers learning outcomes, the reverse is observed in the equity situation. Girls and children from rural areas are still disadvantaged to a considerable extent. Even in non-formal schools which promote girls' education, girls perform worse than boys. Yet when the trend over the past half-decade is considered, the picture is not that disquieting. Although overall improvement over the years has not been very rapid (three percentage points in five years),⁷ the rate of improvement experienced by rural girls and children from socio-economically disadvantaged groups is noteworthy. These children are not only enrolling in larger numbers, but are also learning more. However, the downward trend in overall achievement in urban areas is alarming. This is partly due to a dramatic increase of the slum population and the failure of educational facilities to keep pace with population growth. The reason why the gender gap in favour of girls did not improve among children of well-to-do parents (Figures 2 and 4) is intriguing. The NGOs, whose work have resulted in greater empowerment for women in various societies, including Bangladesh (Chen 1983; Lovell 1992), work with poorer communities, and the well-to-do sections are systematically overlooked by them.

The types of school to which children have access and their relative role in learning competency is a contentious issue. The non-formal (NF) system is generally construed by some as a poorer option compared to formal schools. There is less investment in NF schools, and the children attending such schools are from disadvantaged sections of society; they are not expected to perform as well as formal-school students, according to conventional wisdom. However, this study reported better performance by non-formal students on competency tests. Earlier studies have also reported similar results (Alam et al. 1996). The NGOs who run most of the NF schools are not only facilitating increased access to schooling by girls and children of socio-

economically disadvantaged families, but are also contributing to their better performance in school. Since they constitute only a small portion (8.5%) of all enrolments, the chances of this having a major impact on the national scenario is limited. Instead, either the coverage of the NF system has to increase (which is feasible given that the system experienced a four-fold growth between 1990 and 1998) or government schools, which enroll two-thirds of all school-going children, must adapt some of the more interesting features of NF schools, or both. The positive features which distinguish NF from formal schools include flexible school hours, relevant curriculum and materials, supportive supervision and practical and frequent teacher training (Ahmed et al. 1993).

The present study is one of the first to report on the situation of primary education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Minority Rights Groups 1997; Rafi and Chowdhury 2001). Although the equity situation in primary education among the dominant Bengalees, as reported here and elsewhere, is improving, the situation in CHT demands the special attention of all concerned. Overall, this area lags far behind the national average in educational efficiency indicators. Girls lag behind boys, and there are significant differences among various ethnic groups. In its recent poverty reduction strategy paper, the government has acknowledged that poverty and deprivations are higher for ethnic minorities in CHT and other parts of the country (Government of Bangladesh 2002). Now that peace has been restored, pragmatic planning involving all parties is essential for the equitable development of all ethnic groups. Thereby, a contentious issue will be the medium of instruction. Although some ethnic groups, such as the Chakmas and the Marmas, have their own scripts, these are near extinct due to neglect. A small investment may help revive these for use at least at the primary level (Chowdhury et al. 2002). Indeed, evidence from Africa suggests that the use of a language other than the mother tongue at the instruction level perpetuates school inequalities (Bunyi 1999).

In conclusion, it can be said that Bangladesh has made important gains in rendering primary education accessible to its population. Such access has increased in recent years for some groups of the population such as girls, children living in rural areas and those from poorer households. A positive change is also occurring on the quality front, but unfortunately very slowly and marginally. Positive in this regard is that such change is taking place more for the disadvantaged sections of the community. This is a function of certain deliberate and focused interventions by the public and NGO sectors. The challenge is how to increase their dynamic as well as how to bring along those groups being left behind. In meeting this demand, the government, the private sector and NGOs will need to cooperate. If Bangladesh is successful in this, it can look forward to establishing itself in the near future as a society which is more equitable than it is now.

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Notes

1. Bangladesh has a large NGO-sector working for the development of disadvantaged groups, including the poor and women. This sector has been particularly engaged in adult education: since the mid-1980s in primary and basic education. NGO-schools now claim 8.5% of all primary enrolments in the country.
2. BRAC is a local NGO with its own development programs spread over more than half of Bangladesh's 86,000 villages. It is one of the largest NGOs in the country, with 26,000 full-time and 32,000 part-time functionaries (Lovell 1992; Ahmed et al. 1993; Chowdhury and Cash 1996; Evans et al. 1999).
3. *Gross-enrolment ratio* is defined as "the number of children currently enrolled at the primary level (Grade 1 to 5) for each 100 children aged 6–10 years". *Net-enrolment rate* is defined as "the percentage of children currently enrolled in primary schools among children aged 6–10 years". It may be mentioned that the official primary school age in Bangladesh is 6–10 years (Chowdhury et al. 1999).
4. The difference in net rates is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).
5. Since the age group (11–12 years) is past the primary-school age group, and since a large number of children at primary level are found to be over-aged, the numerator for this ratio contains children attending both primary and secondary schools.
6. 'Affirmative action', a term first officially used by U.S. President John Kennedy in his Executive Order 10925, means taking extra measures to ensure the participation of under-represented and often neglected minorities in various parts of society (Kantrowitz and Wingert 2003).
7. More recent studies have documented continuing improvements (Chowdhury et al. 2002).

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