

Enrollment at primary level: gender difference disappears in Bangladesh

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Abstract

In the recent past, there has been a number of new initiatives to improve the access to primary education in many developing countries. Such initiatives, which came from the public, private and non-governmental (NGO) sectors, have resulted in improved performance in various efficiency indicators. This paper reports results from a nationwide study in Bangladesh on the levels and changes in enrollment pattern of children at the primary level. Gross enrollment ratio has reached 107% and net enrollment 77%. Gender gap has disappeared; in fact girls have surpassed boys! However, the increase in enrollment taking place is not at the desired speed; it is less than one percentage point per year. The government is still the major provider of primary education with two-thirds of all enrollments, but non formal schools run by NGOs also have important contribution in the positive changes that are taking place in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Primary education; Basic education; Enrollment; EFA; Gender; Bangladesh

Introduction

The experience of the past decades has unequivocally proved the inadequacy of the development paradigms popularised in the developing world since the end of the Second World War. Building physical infrastructure and financial capital, though important, are not enough to break the cycle of poverty. There is little doubt now that human capital formation is the *sine qua non* for a sustainable improvement in the lives of the people (Sen, 1999).

Emphasis on education, particularly primary and basic education, is the order of the day in global development planning. Yet, there are 872 million adult illiterates or one in every three, and 125 million children of primary school age are out of school in the world (Oxfam, 1999). During the present decade three major conferences attended by world leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the goal of primary education.

The World Conference on Education for All (EFA), held in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990 was a landmark in reaffirming the participating nations' commitment to the cause of basic education. As a direct consequence, many initiatives to promote basic education have been launched in different parts of the world. In the Asia Pacific region, for example, UNESCO, as the co-ordinating body, drew up a plan of action to implement the World Declaration on EFA (WCEFA, 1990). Several member countries have also drawn up their own plans of action. In Bangladesh an increased commitment of the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and donors to primary education has been seen over past several years. The recent National Plan of Action for Children 1997-2002 has

summarised the positive development that have taken place in primary education in recent times in the following (Primary and Mass Education Division, 1995):

- a) The National Programme of Action gave high priority to improving basic and primary level education;
- b) Girls' education has been given priority;
- c) Establishment of separate Primary and Mass Education Division (PMED) facilitated better attention to primary education; and
- d) A National Children Policy (NCP) was enunciated in 1994 in line with the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) goals.

Some of the major educational goals of NCP which have been implemented already include:

- i. Free and compulsory primary education for all children;
- ii. Free education for girls up to Class VIII; Scholarship to all girls attending secondary schools in rural areas and incentive to the school for the purpose as well;
- iii. A food-for-education programme for poorer children;
- iv. Provision of appropriate facilities for non-formal education for children deprived of formal schooling by NGOs.

Bangladesh is a signatory to the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA). In the past, conventional strategies and traditional methods in universalising primary education has been tried, but without the desired result. Over a period of 15 years between 1980 and 1995, the literacy rate in the adults rose marginally from 32 to 38 percent; the rate for females remains at only about half of males. Contrary to these figures which are provided by some international organisations, official statistics gives a more optimistic picture. According to

the government, the literacy rate has now reached 56 percent which, however, remains to be independently validated. The government has set the goal to attain an adult literacy rate of 62 percent by the year 2000 and claims that five of the 64 districts have been freed of illiteracy (Daily Star, 1999).

The improvement in literacy rate is also experienced in many other developing countries. For example, literacy rate for adult female in Nepal increased by 104 percent over a period of 12 years between 1985 and 1997; the same figure for India and Pakistan being 34 and 51 respectively (UNDP, 1999). The world-wide gain in education is also reflected in enrollment rates. The Population Action International (1998) has compared gross enrollment ratios for almost all countries for the world 1985 and 1995 and found that excepting for some African and Middle Eastern Arab countries, the gross enrollment ratio has increased in most developing countries.

Bangladesh has also done well in recent years in increasing the enrollment at primary levels, particularly for girls. Over the period 1980-1995, the net enrollment, as reported by UNICEF and the World Bank, has increased from 62 percent to 79 percent; the girls' enrollment in the same period increased much faster from a base of 47 percent to 73 percent (Table 1).

Table 1 : Primary enrollment rate in Bangladesh 1980-1995

<i>Year</i>	<i>Primary enrollment</i>		
	Boys	Girls	Total
1980	76	47	62
1985	67	55	61
1990	76	64	70
1995	84	73	79

Sources : State of the World's Children , UNICEF (various reports)
World Development Report, The World Bank (various reports)

This paper presents recent data on trends in enrollment at primary level in the country and its distribution for various geographic, religious, socioeconomic, ethnic and gender groups. A companion paper in this issue of the Journal presents information on the quality of the learning by the various groups (Nath and Chowdhury, Pages.....).

Methodology

The data for this analysis comes from the *Education Watch* project which is a joint effort of various civil society organizations and individuals concerned with the state of primary education in Bangladesh. The purpose of the *Watch* is to monitor primary education in the country and to act as an advocacy group. The *Watch* has its secretariat at Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), a supra-body of over 400 NGOs in Bangladesh and is being implemented by the Research and Evaluation Division of BRAC, a large NGO itself. The school year in Bangladesh starts in January and the field data were collected in October-November 1998, just before the annual examinations.

The country was divided into eight strata and independent samples were drawn from each based on random multi-stage techniques. The strata included the rural areas of six administrative division separately (Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal and Sylhet),

the four metropolitan cities (Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna), and other urban settlements (other than the above metropolitan cities). A total of 42,584 households from 312 villages or urban *mahallas* representing all 64 districts were surveyed.

Bangladesh has a five year primary cycle and the official primary school age is 6-10 years. Since previous knowledge suggested that children outside of this age group also are enrolled in various types of institutions providing primary and basic education, the survey collected enrollment information from children aged 4-20 years residing in the selected households. Net and gross ratios were computed based on the official primary age group. More details of the methodology is given in the companion paper by Nath and Chowdhury (see Pp ---).

Results

Gross enrollment

Table 2 shows the gross enrollment ratios at primary level (Grade I to V). It includes enrollment in all types of primary schools: secular and non-secular, formal and non-formal. The Table shows that the gross enrollment exceeded 100 percent in almost all strata and for both girls and boys. The gross enrollment nationally is 107; girls having a higher ratio of 109 percent compared to boys' (104 percent). Division-wise, rural Khulna has the highest of 117 percent, and the Metropolitan cities have the lowest of 101 percent; in both cases girls exceeded those of boys. In fact, girls were ahead of boys everywhere except rural Chittagong where boys were marginally ahead. The table also shows that the Metropolitan areas were worse off than other urban areas.

Table 2: Gross enrollment ratio at primary level (Grades I to V) by stratum and sex

Stratum	Gross enrollment ratio (%)					
	Girls		Boys		Both	
Rural Dhaka Division	112	(1829)	101	(1951)	106	(3780)
Rural Chittagong Division	104	(2397)	105	(2555)	104	(4952)
Rural Rajshahi Division	113	(1663)	105	(1732)	109	(3395)
Rural Khulna Division	121	(1923)	113	(2006)	117	(3929)
Rural Barisal Division	108	(1993)	106	(2041)	107	(4034)
Rural Sylhet Division	107	(2185)	104	(2300)	105	(4485)
Metropolitan cities	103	(1601)	99	(1657)	101	(3258)
Other urban areas	111	(1626)	106	(1633)	108	(3259)
Rural Bangladesh	111	(11990)	105	(12585)	108	(24575)
Urban Bangladesh	107	(3227)	103	(3290)	105	(6517)
All Bangladesh	109	(15217)	104	(15875)	107	(31092)

Figures within parentheses indicate number of children aged 6-10 years.

Figure 1 shows the gross enrollment at the national level by class enrolled. It shows several things. Firstly, the enrollment decreases progressively at every higher class. Secondly, the drop is highest between grades I and II, and between III and IV. Thirdly, there is little difference between boys and girls in the way the attrition takes place. Fourthly, the load of students was highest in earlier grades which may be a reflection of increased enrollment at the lowest grades or higher subsequent dropout or both. Ideally, one-fifth of all students should have been in each grade but a third of all students were in grade I alone.

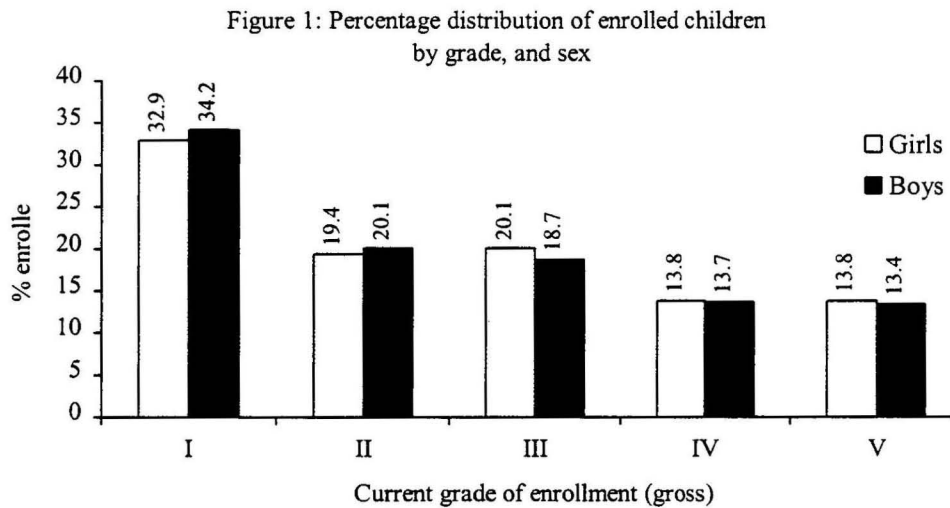
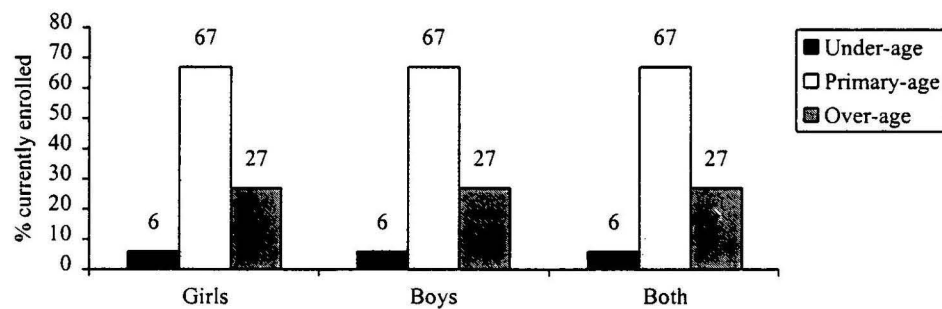


Figure 2 shows the proportion of children enrolled at primary level by age. Since the primary age is 6-10 years, the figure shows that 33 percent or a third of the enrolled students were from outside the primary age group; 27 percent were over-aged.

Table 3 shows gross enrollment for different types of primary institutions. Of the students enrolled at primary level, the government-run schools had the highest number of them with two-thirds of all students enrolled in such schools. It should be remembered that the government schools have also the highest capacity. A far-second in enrollment was the non-government (registered) schools with 12 percent of all students. The NGOs, which run non-formal schools in most cases, were the third with 8.5 percent share of enrollment. The *Madrassas*, which provide education with Islamic focus, had 6 percent of students; of these *Ebtadayee*, which is equivalent to the primary level, had 1.3 percent share. Others such as non-government (un-registered), English-medium *kindergartens* and the primary schools

attached to secondary schools were much less significant. A further look at the share of different NGOs in non-formal enrollment showed that 76 percent of such students attended the schools run by BRAC¹.

Figure 2: percentage of currently enrolled children who were under-age, primary age and over-age, by sex



There were some variations between urban and rural areas in terms of enrollment and school type. While the government and non-government (registered) sub-systems had higher than the average shares of enrollment in rural areas, others such as NGOs, *madrassas*, English-medium, and secondary-attached primary schools had higher shares in urban areas. The difference between girls and boys was more prominent for *madrassas* and NGO schools.

While there were more girls than boys in NGO schools it was the reverse in case of *madrassas*.

¹ BRAC is a local NGO with its development programmes 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).

Table 3: Percentage distribution of children currently enrolled at primary level (Classes I to V) by
type of school, residence and sex

Type of school	Rural Bangladesh			Urban Bangladesh			All Bangladesh		
	Girls (13177)	Boys (13246)	Both (26423)	Girls (3439)	Boys (3367)	Both (6806)	Girls (16616)	Boys (16613)	Both (33,229)
Primary school									
Government	68.9	69.2	69.1	57.7	55.5	56.6	67.6	67.6	67.6
Non-government (reg.)	12.9	12.7	12.8	7.2	6.5	6.9	12.3	12.0	12.1
Non-government (un-reg.)	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.0	2.8	2.4	2.8	2.9	2.8
Non-formal primary	10.0	6.6	8.3	9.0	10.4	11.7	10.2	6.8	8.5
Madrassa									
Ebtedayee	1.0	1.5	1.3	2.5	1.9	1.3	1.0	1.6	1.3
Kamil/Fazel/Alim/Dakhil	2.4	4.2	3.3	3.5	2.8	2.2	2.4	4.1	3.2
Hafezia/Kaomi/Kharezee	1.0	2.0	1.5	1.7	1.1	0.5	0.9	1.9	1.4
Kindergarten	0.5	0.7	0.6	8.8	7.7	6.7	1.2	1.6	1.4
Secondary attached	0.4	0.3	0.3	9.6	10.2	10.7	1.6	1.3	1.5
All types	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figures within parentheses indicate number of children currently enrolled at primary level.

Net enrollment

Table 4 shows the net enrollment at primary level in Bangladesh. Nationally, the net enrollment rate was found to be 77 percent which means that 23 percent of the primary school age children (6-10 years) were not enrolled at all. The difference between girls and boys as found in gross ratios was maintained here as well with the girls being significantly more enrolled than boys ($p < 0.001$). Such a difference between girls and boys persisted for several strata including rural Bangladesh, Barisal, Khulna and Dhaka divisions. An important difference between the gross and net rates emerges when one compares the urban-rural difference. While rural areas did better in gross ratio, this was reversed in net rate; this

probably implies that urban schools are more stringent in terms of age of the pupil while admitting them or urban parents are more conscious about sending their children to school at the appropriate age, or both. The urban advantage in net rates was restricted in case of boys only. The net rates varied significantly among different divisions with Khulna being the highest (82.6%) and Chittagong the lowest (74%).

Table 4: Net enrollment rate (%) among children 6-10 years by stratum and sex

Stratum	Net enrollment rate (%)			Significance
	Girls	Boys	Both	
Rural Dhaka Division	79.2 (1829)	71.7 (1951)	75.3 (3780)	p<0.001
Rural Chittagong Division	73.8 (2397)	74.2 (2555)	74.0 (4952)	ns
Rural Rajshahi Division	78.0 (1663)	75.8 (1732)	76.9 (3395)	ns
Rural Khulna Division	85.8 (1923)	79.5 (2006)	82.6 (3929)	p<0.001
Rural Barisal Division	82.0 (1993)	78.2 (2041)	80.1 (4034)	p<0.01
Rural Sylhet Division	78.8 (2185)	77.6 (2300)	78.2 (4485)	ns
Metropolitan cities	76.1 (1601)	77.9 (1657)	77.1 (3258)	ns
Other urban areas	80.8 (1626)	80.9 (1633)	80.8 (3259)	ns
Significance	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	
Rural Bangladesh	78.7 (11990)	75.0 (12585)	76.8 (24575)	p<0.001
Urban Bangladesh	78.5 (3227)	79.4 (3290)	79.0 (6517)	ns
Significance	ns	p<0.001	p<0.05	
All Bangladesh	78.6 (15217)	75.5 (15875)	77.1 (31092)	p<0.001

Notes : Figures within parentheses indicate number of children aged 6-10 years; ns = not significant at p=0.05

Net enrollment and socio-economic differentials

Tables 5 and 6 confirm again the importance of socio-economic background of parents in enrollment. Parents were asked to identify their economic status in one of the four categories: 'always in deficit', 'sometimes in deficit', 'balanced', or 'surplus'. For those parents who

reported to have a 'surplus' status in economic terms, the net enrollment was 88 percent but this was only 66.3 percent for those who reported to be in 'always deficit' situation. Table 5 reveals that girls' advantage over boys in enrollment is present more in poorer groups than in the richer groups, particularly in rural areas. In urban areas, however, boys enrollment in the better-off families was significantly higher than that of girls.

Table 5: Net enrollment rate (%) among children 6-10 years by residence, self-perceived economic status and sex

Residence	Self perceived Economic status				Significance
	Always in deficit	Sometimes in deficit	Balanced	Surplus	
Rural Bangladesh					
Girls	69.1 (4121)	80.4 (4320)	86.0 (2582)	88.7 (967)	p<0.001
Boys	64.0 (4445)	77.4 (4378)	82.8 (2748)	87.8 (1013)	p<0.001
Both	66.5 (8566)	78.9 (8698)	84.4 (5330)	88.3 (1980)	p<0.001
Level of significance	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.01	ns	
Urban Bangladesh					
Girls	67.1 (744)	80.0 (920)	83.6 (1045)	81.8 (518)	p<0.001
Boys	63.5 (781)	79.4 (938)	85.1 (1081)	92.2 (490)	p<0.001
Both	65.2 (1525)	79.7 (1858)	84.4 (2126)	86.9 (1008)	p<0.001
Level of significance	ns	ns	ns	p<0.001	
All Bangladesh					
Girls	68.9 (4865)	80.4 (5240)	85.6 (3627)	87.3 (1485)	p<0.001
Boys	64.0 (5226)	77.6 (5316)	83.2 (3829)	88.7 (1503)	p<0.001
Both	66.3 (10092)	79.0 (10556)	84.4 (7456)	88.0 (2988)	p<0.001
Level of significance	p<0.001	p<0.001	ns	p<0.05	

Figures within parentheses indicate number of children aged 6-10 years; ns = not significant at p=0.05

Table 6: Net enrollment rate (%) among children 6-10 years by mothers level of education, sex and residence

Residence	Mothers level of education			Significance
	None	Primary	Secondary +	
Rural Bangladesh				
Girl	73.3 (7936)	89.8 (2779)	95.5 (1056)	p<0.001
Boy	68.9 (8405)	87.8 (2932)	94.3 (1028)	p<0.001
Both	71.0 (16341)	88.8 (5711)	94.9 (2084)	p<0.001
Level of significance	p<0.001	p<0.01	ns	
Urban Bangladesh				
Girl	67.6 (1548)	87.3 (710)	94.2 (879)	p<0.001
Boy	68.2 (1586)	88.4 (670)	93.4 (961)	p<0.001
Both	67.9 (3134)	87.8 (1380)	93.8 (1840)	p<0.001
Level of significance	ns	ns	ns	
All Bangladesh				
Girl	72.7 (9484)	89.5 (3489)	95.1 (1935)	p<0.001
Boy	68.9 (9991)	87.9 (3602)	94.0 (1989)	p<0.001
Both	70.8 (19475)	88.7 (7091)	94.5 (3924)	p<0.001
Level of significance	p<0.001	p<0.05	ns	

Figures within parentheses indicate number of children aged 6-10 years; ns = not significant at p=0.05

Mothers' educational level continued to influence enrollment. Mothers with secondary or more education had more of their children enrolled than mothers with no or little education (p<0.001). The tendency to send girls more than boys to school persisted for mothers with no schooling themselves but for mothers with higher education it was the reverse.

In terms of religious background, Muslims had a significantly higher (77.6%) enrollment rate than non-Muslims (71.2%). This was true for all strata except Dhaka and Barisal divisions and the Metropolitan areas where the trend was reverse. Involvement of a household member with NGO activities increased the net enrollment significantly in poorer households; this was more so in metropolitan areas (not shown in table).

situation persisting approximately five to ten years ago. About a quarter of such children never attended school. For children aged 11-12 years surveyed in 1998, this proportion was much less (10.5%). By the time this cohort reaches the age of 16-20 years, this proportion will further be reduced since many of them will get opportunities in schools run for adolescents by government and NGOs.

Enrollment outside primary classes

Figure 4 shows the enrollment status of all individuals aged 6-20 years in three age groups: 6-10 (primary), 11-15 (secondary) and 16-20 (post-secondary). It shows that proportion not enrolled increased with age: 23 percent in 6-10, 33 percent in 11-15, and 68 percent in 16-20 years.

The values indicated by circles in Table 8 are of particular interest. These are the 'real' net enrollment rates at different levels of schooling. For example, the 'real' net enrollment was 73 percent in primary stage, 32 percent in secondary and 13 percent in post-secondary level. The drop in enrollment between primary and secondary stage (and post-secondary) is starkling.

Figure 4 : Percentage of children not enrolled among children 6-20 years old

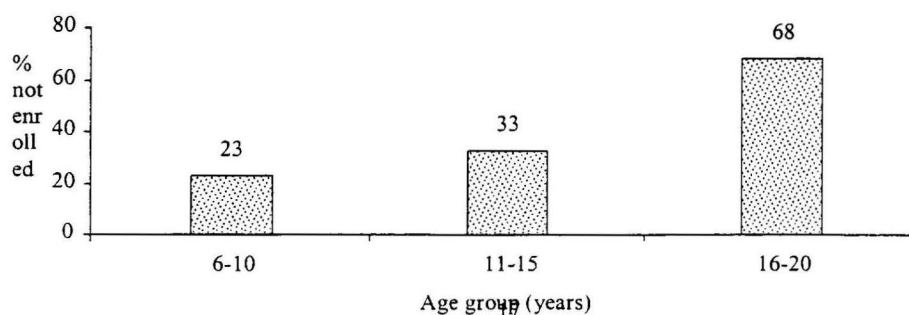


Table 8: 'Real' net enrollment rates at primary, secondary and post-secondary levels for individuals aged 6-20 years.

Age (year)	Currently enrolled in grade (%)			
	I-V	VI-X	XI+	n
6-10	72.6	0.5	-	31,092
11-15	34.0	32.5	0.2	26,597
16-20	0.9	17.5	13.5	17,232

Discussion

This study has documented improvements in access to primary education in Bangladesh in terms of enrollment. Gross enrollment ratio, which shows the number of children enrolled at primary level per 100 children of primary school age, has reached 107 percent. This is more than what the latest government figures suggest. Independent estimates by UNICEF found the rate to be 111 percent (UNICEF, 1999) but the 'Bangladesh Education Sector Strategy Note' prepared for the April 1999 Paris Development Forum quoted a gross rate of 90 to 95 percent (LGC Subgroup, 1999). The National Plan of Action set a target of 95 percent in gross ratio for the year 2000; our information suggest that this was already achieved when the plan was formulated in 1995. Since the difference between gross ratio and net rates is in the excess of 20 percentage points for most South Asian countries (this study found it to be 30), the government should set the target in terms of net rates, not gross ratio. Adherence to the gross ratio gives upwardly biased impression about the actual situation which may result in complacency.

The government primary schools run by the government remains dominant with two-thirds of

all enrollments. The government had nationalised all primary schools in 1973 but started allowing new schools in the private sector in early 1980's. The registered and non-registered privately managed schools, which now enroll about 15 percent of primary school-going children, are increasingly playing important roles. The third highest in relative enrollment are the schools run by NGOs. Most of these are non-formal in nature but cater to the learning goals as enunciated by the government (Ghosh, 1999). The NGO schools enroll 8.5 percent of primary school going children which has increased nearly four-fold in less than ten years. Children going to other types are small: 1.5 percent in *Ebtedayee madrassa*, 1.4 percent in English medium kindergartens, and 1.5 percent in primary schools attached to secondary schools.

Children of various age groups go to primary level institutions. The official primary school age is 6-10 years, but one-third of all children enrolled in primary level institutions were beyond this age group. This leads the discussion to net enrollment rate which is the proportion of children aged 6-10 years attending schools. To many this is a preferred indicator for enrollment. Seventy-seven percent of children in primary school age were enrolled in different institutions, which is an improvement over the last few years. Both gross and net rates have increased over the past few years which is indicative of the system's capability to improve. In fact, the gross rates have surpassed what was targeted for the year 2000 by the government (PMED, 1995). The target is, however, much lower than the World Declaration standards.

The improvement in enrollment rates is also confirmed by other analysis made in the text. A study carried out in 1993 found 77 percent enrollment among children aged 11-12 years

while it was 81 percent for the same age group in 1998. It took five years for enrollment in this age group to reach 81 percent - less than one percentage point per year. If we move in this pace how long will it take for all our children to gain access to primary school? 29 years! We need to devise ways through which we can move faster. The present Prime Minister soon after taking office in 1996 had declared that each village would have at least one school (Hasina, 1996) but unfortunately no new school was set up during the last two years. As mentioned already, the proportion of children going to NGO schools increased four fold during 1990-98 (Chowdhury et al, 1999), and it is conceivable for the NGOs to further scale up this programme if further space is created through encouragement and financial support by the state.

One of the reasons mentioned by parents for not sending children to school was that the child was 'too young'. This is because of the lack of awareness about the child's age and the age at which a child should be sent to school. The absence of the registration of births and the consequent unavailability of an updated list of population at different ages are partially responsible for this. Registration of births does have other important uses such as in immunization, and thus should be effectively introduced. The other reason for not sending children were related to poverty and attractiveness of school environment to children. While poverty is identified as a major reason world wide (World Bank,1997), examples have it that if the education system is made more flexible to cater to the strategic needs of the poor parents, they do send their children to school. The schools run by NGOs in Bangladesh have been successful in recruiting and retaining poorer students in their schools (Ahmed et al.,1993). In fact, the increase in total enrollment and reversal of gender gap have much to do

with the proliferation of NGO schools. In the absence of NGO schools, the gross rate would have been 98 for girls and 97 for boys instead of the present 109 and 104 respectively. The country seems to have gained much by creating a space for NGOs, and this can be multiplied with further support, as mentioned above.

The issue of equity involves several disadvantaged groups and studies have reported poor educational achievement for girls, the poor, ethnic minorities, and street and working children (Broke and Cammish, 1991; Chowdhury et al, 1992; Alam et al, 1997). The country has made spectacular progress in reducing the gender gap in enrollment which has in fact disappeared. This is a feat which no other country in South Asia has been able to achieve! This spectacular accomplishment can be traced to a number of 'positive discriminatory' actions that the state and NGOs have initiated. A most important contribution to this is the scholarships that the State provides to girls attending secondary schools. As of June 1999, the government provided Tk 4.8 billion (US \$ 1= Tk. 50) to 7.8 million girls (Daily Star, 26 June 1999). The schools also simultaneously receive a small contribution from the state for every girl enrolled, which provides incentive for improved performance. The food-for-education programme that the government initiated provides a food ration to about 12 percent children from rural poorer families for attending school. In addition, some of the NGOs have also large non-formal schools which target girls from poorer families. An example of positive discrimination in favour of girls is the BRAC Non-Formal Primary Education programme which ensures that 70 percent of its 1.2 million pupil are girls and that they are from poorer families (Ahmed et al, 1993). Such positive discriminatory steps had their direct impact. A comparison of the background profile of children attending schools in 1993 and 1998 shows

that more girls and an increased proportion of children from socio-economically disadvantaged groups are now attending school. It is not only in enrollment that the girls have caught up with boys, the girls also have achieved equality in completion rates at the primary cycle with their drop out rate equal or lower than boys.

Another interesting fact is the excess female enrollments that have been reported in specific groups: rural areas, poorer families, and among those whose mothers never attended schools. This is a welcome shift. Such an increase in female enrollment is being experienced in many developing countries. Table 9 shows the gender gap in 1995 compared to 1985 for five South Asian countries and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Except for Pakistan, the gender gap decreased in all these countries including Iran (Population Action International, 1998).

Table 9: Gender gap at primary level enrollment in selected South Asian countries and Iran
1985 vs 1995

Country	Gross enrollment ratio (1995)		Gender Gap		
	Girls	Boys	1995	1985	Increase/ decrease
Pakistan	45	101	56	26	+30
Nepal	89	129	40	58	-18
India	90	110	20	30	-10
Bangladesh	73	84	11	19	-8
Sri Lanka	112	114	2	3	-1
Iran	96	103	7	21	-14

Source: Population Action International (1998).

The design of this study did not allow separate analysis for children belonging to ethnic

groups, or urban slums. It is, however, well acknowledged that the street children are amongst the most disadvantaged in the society. There are a few programmes that address the particular needs of such children such as the 'Hard-to reach' schools implemented by NGOs with State and UNICEF support. But this is over shadowed by the reported failure to keep the children continuing through the primary cycle. This probably demands more imaginative ideas and programmes.

The situation in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) (Minority Rights Group, 1997) where most of Bangladesh's ethnic minorities live has been an unknown territory until recently. Very little was known about the educational situation in the three districts that constitute the CHT. In mid 1998, following a peace agreement between the Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity and the Government of Bangladesh, BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division carried out a large socioeconomic survey of five of the CHT's eleven major ethnic groups. Education was one of the focii of this investigation. Substantial differences among the groups in terms of literacy, enrollment, and achievement was reported. It was observed that all the groups were lagging behind the dominant Bangalees, that girls were behind boys in each group and that some of the ethnic groups such as Mro and Tripura were far behind the more numerous Chakmas. Now that peace has been restored, a pragmatic planning with participation of all is essential for equitable development of all ethnic groups. A contentious issue in this task will be the use of mother tongue. Some of the groups such as Chakmas and Marmas have their own alphabets, but these are fast becoming extinct because of various reasons. Revival and their use at least at the primary level will help children in such groups learn faster. It is well known that the use of any language other than the mother tongue at the

instruction level perpetuates inequalities (Bunyi, 1999).

Another issue which came out from this paper is the fast drop in enrollment between primary and secondary and between secondary and higher secondary levels. While the 'real' net enrollment rate was found to be 73 percent in primary, it is only 13 percent in higher secondary. The reasons for this are several, but an important one is the absence of required emphasis on post-primary levels by the government and NGO sectors alike. While many NGOs are active at primary sector, not a single NGO is found in secondary or higher secondary levels.

Years of neglect created a stagnating situation in the education sector in Bangladesh. Because of recent affirmation by the national government along with support from international community and NGOs, the situation has started to improve. But the improvements are not taking place in the desired speed. More dynamism and increased participation of the stakeholders will speed up the process of universalising primary education in Bangladesh. An important element that must be considered simultaneously with this crusade is the quality of education. As a companion paper in this issue describes, the country faces real challenges in ensuring quality education to its children.

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