Impact of Non-formal Primary Education on Women's Autonomy and Socialisation in Rural Bangladesh: Evidence from BRAC Villages

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Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of non-formal primary education programme of BRAC on women's autonomy and socialisation. The study was conducted in 87 villages in Manikganj district of central Bangladesh. The data were collected in 1995 through a sample survey of 744 married women belonging to the following three categories: i. BRAC school graduates who completed full three years of education; ii. formal school students who completed third grade and discontinued; and iii. women with no schooling. Woman's autonomy was measured by the extent by which she exercised her rights in five different areas of family life, viz. i. decision making power on contraception, ii. schooling of children, iii. buying right of essential items, iv. provision of free expression of opinion in front of her husband, and v. husband's acceptance of such right for her wife. Socialisation is measured by woman's autonomy, adaptability in the family and the extent of her interaction with the surrounding environment. The multivariate analysis reveals that the non-formal primary education provided by BRAC is more contributive to women's autonomy and socialisation than its counterpart who had formal schooling (p<0.01). Women having exposure to non-formal education are more likely to have delayed marriage and associate with organisations like NGOs (p<0.01). The non-formal education has no positive impact on contraception. BRAC model of non-formal education provides a feasible and sustainable alternative paradigm for promoting women's autonomy and socialisation, along with its customary contribution to attaining universal primary education.

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Introduction

Women's autonomy and socialisation in comparative perspectives of demography and socioeconomics have been studied in many countries like Bangladesh and India. It has been a common postulate that conservative cultural construct, impoverished socioeconomy and low rate of literacy are restrictive to women's autonomy and socialisation. Schools are considered the main vehicle of diffusion, those who attend school receive a different kind of socialisation and orientation to modern ways of living (Kamouza, 1986). Women always contribute to economic development, but often in activities not recognised as economic and are excluded from process of institutionalisation (Gauffenic, 1985). In Bangladesh, the high illiteracy of woman has largely restrained diffusion of ideas, the literacy rate among women of age 15 or above is still 22.9 per cent (BANBEIS, 1991). Strong affinity to family still survives in this country; and mother traditionally works as the hub. Cultural practices, values, norms and taboos usually transcend family and community boundaries through marital and maternal linkages. So, it can be argued that literate mother play an educative and promotive role in developing societal values and norms, thereby enhance much needed social capital for economic advancement. In a male dominant society, such supportive role of women gets restricted, even changes in law makes little difference. Because, the greater the male control, the easier it is for men to thwart reforms by discouraging women from taking advantage of their new rights. So, many have modified this approach by educating women first and then introducing reform (Smock, 1977). Many recent studies have explored the pathways of education in impacting infant and childhood mortality, and made some valuable postulates. Role of education in modifying reproductive behaviour has also been extensively studied and revealed that female education operates through value changes in the community (Caldwell, 1979, Cleland and Philips, 1993). Education has been instrumental to bring paradigm shift in perspectives. Such changed mind-set is an important and enabling factor for looking at issues with enhanced acuity. This way, education imparts skill to know one's own potentials and those in the environment, and helps overcome restrictive societal norms and values. But how is the impact of BRAC's non-formal primary education on women autonomy and socialisation is still not much known, and hence makes the rationale of the present study.

Specifics of BRAC schools

In Bangladesh, the economic strength of the formal education sector gets almost exhausted to meet the need of the urban elite. The rural areas do not have adequate number of schools, teachers and teaching materials. To address these inadequacies of the formal sector, the country's non-formal sector - the non-government organisations (NGOs) - are playing a significant role, and BRAC[1], being the largest NGO in Bangladesh, has been a pioneer. BRAC started its Non-formal Primary Education (NFPE) Programme in 1985 with 22 schools and currently runs more than thirty five thousand. BRAC schools have following specifics: i. easy accessibility for the poor children, ii. participatory and life-related curriculum, iii. learning through co-curricular activities like dancing, singing, story telling specifically aimed at exercising articulation, enhancing observation skill and improving co-ordination of movements of different body organs (BRAC, 1995). These schools are primarily meant for the socioeconomically disadvantaged, especially the girls of land-less rural households. However, doors are also open for children from an illiterate richer family. For easy, educative and fear-free teaching methodology, the BRAC schools have gained popularity. The children who were known for early drop-out from formal schools are showing high rate of continuation in these NFPE schools. The model has been replicated by other NGOs in the country and also outside Bangladesh. Hundreds of early graduates from

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those schools have already settled in their marital life, many of them have entered into motherhood.

Methods and Materials

a. Study area and population

The data were collected in November and Decemebr in 1995, from 87 villages of BRAC's *Watch*[2] area of Manikgonj district of central Bangladesh. *Watch* is a health and demographic surveillance system of BRAC to document changes in demography, health and socioeconomy of rural population - hypothesised as outcomes of its multidimensional developmental interventions. In the study area, along with microcredit program for the rural poor, BRAC operates single-teacher three-year schools for children. Firstly, as a part of the methodology, a listing was done in *Watch* villages for all adolescent girls who had completed three-year's education from BRAC schools and since married. Those who have migrated outside the project area for marital and other reasons have been excluded from the study. An equal number of married women of the same age of comparable socio-economic status were randomly selected from among those who have completed third grade in formal schools and those who never attended any schools. The data were collected through a structured questionnaire by trained female interviewers.

b. Definition of variables and the conceptual outline

For analysis, women's autonomy and socialisation have been considered dependent variables, and education the independent variable. Women's age, age at marriage, household status with its target (TG) and non-target (NTG) dichotomy, husband's education and occupation, household land and presence of a radio in household are considered the confounders. Households having none or less than 50 decimals of land and selling labour for a minimum of 100 days a year are labelled as BRAC target (TG) and the rest are non-target (NTG).

Autonomy: In the present study, autonomy at the household level has been considered for the analysis. Without autonomy, an individual's potentials remain largely unexplored. Restricting autonomy is synonymous to restraining creativity. It is viewed as an essential element for making a human fully capable, creative and contributory. For analysis, women's autonomy has been visualised as a composite variable of five elementary rights in family like: i. decision making power of women on contraception, ii. schooling of children, iii. buying right of essential items like cosmetics, soap, hair oil etc. for her personal use, iv. provision of free expression of opinion in front of her husband and v. husband's acceptance of such right for her wife.

Socialisation: It is visualised as a process of making individuals more adapted, assimilated and contributive in a community. The process starts working from the very beginning of life, and education plays a facilitatory role. The mentally handicap and the children with gross physical and mental constraints fail to catch up with this natural process. Socialisation helps individuals to be interactive with other co-actors in the community, and make their potentials more productive and useful. Socialisation thus works as an interface for diffusion of ideas among members of a community. Education has long been recognised as the vehicle of such diffusion (Kamuzora, 1986), and prioritised as key to all developments. It plays a crucial role to enhance socialisation of children and adolescents in their cultural vicinity, hence

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helps promote civility in society. In this study, socialisation of adolescent women has been conceptualised as a phenomenon that helps assimilate them in social institution like family, organisation and community, and provide appropriate orientation on their surrounding vicinity. Socialisation is arbitrarily considered as a composite variable of ten selected indicators. These are: I). decision taking power of women on contraception, ii. schooling of children, iii). buying right of essential items like cosmetics, soap, hair oil for her personal use, iv). provision of free expression of opinion in front of her husband v). husband's acceptance of such right for her wife, vi). whether dowry given at marriage, vii). knowledge of local body chairman, viii). basic knowledge on law of inheritance ix). knowledge on legal way of divorce, x). knowledge on prime minister of the country. The value of all these questions are either one or zero, so the maximum and minimum scores are ten and zero respectfully. The first five criteria are included in autonomy variable too. Inclusion of these criteria in socialisation variable are justified by immense importance of compatibility in family as a part of socialisation process. The other five issues like dowry, law of inheritance, local body chairman, legal way of divorce and knowledge on correct name of the prime minister are thought to be more linked with social interaction. Those who are less socialised may not get appropriate exposure to this information of national and societal importance, hence may not know the right answer on such issues.

Education: Various studies have demonstrated that those who have attended school possess higher socialisation skill than the illiterates (Kamuzora, 1986). They are better oriented to environment, values, norms, culture and enlightened practices. Each day a society is penetrated by novel ideas, perspectives and technologies, better exposure to all these new entries come through education. How effectively this very diffusive process is working in a rural set-up has not been much researched in Bangladesh. Some studies are conducted to understand the role of micro-credit in generating autonomy (Schuler, and Hashemi, 1994) but examination of the effect of non-formal education in ushering women's autonomy and socialisation has not yet been undertaken. In Bangladesh, issues like women's autonomy, and empowerment are being recently discussed in various forums. But how far women would be able to mould their traditional values, behaviour and attitudes, will largely depend on their mental construct, being constantly shaped and reshaped by educational inputs from the environment. In such perspective, the present study tries to explore the predictive strength of BRAC's non-formal primary education in generating women's autonomy and socialisation.

c. Method of analysis

The primary focus of the study was to examine how autonomy and socialisation of women are linked with educational program of BRAC. For logistic regression, autonomy - the dependent variable was made dichotomous. If a woman enjoyed at least 4 stipulated rights out of five, she is considered to possess autonomy. However, this very dichotomy was done arbitrarily to keep the cut-off point for positive cases of autonomy close to forty percent, and to investigate its possible linkage with education and other variables. Socialisation too has been dichotomised. Each of the ten elements of socialisation is accorded with single point score, those who have at least seven point score out of ten are given a positive score for socialisation, otherwise none. Like autonomy, such scoring is done totally arbitrarily, however with a view to keep the positive cases of socialisation close to 35 percent. However, as corollary of socialisation, membership of NGOs is also considered a dependent variable. These are supposed to have direct and indirect linkages with women's socialisation. Those who are less adept in socialisation, are hypothesised to be more aloof from organisations. For more than two decades, NGOs are functioning with developmental programs in rural areas. Most of their interventions are catered to the rural poor, especially women. Many of the rural women are getting involved in NGO activities as member. What are the

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differentials of the membership and how is the role of education? Such issues are thought pertinent to be analysed with multivariate logistic models to understand the predictive power of various independent variables. For multivariate analysis of NGO membership, only the target women are selected, as the non-targets are not supposed to be member. In multivariate analysis, the unit change in explanatory variable helps understand the percentage change in the odds of the dependable variable. As the dependable variables are dichotomous, the logit model is quite appropriate here (Aldrich and Nelson 1984; Hanushek and Jackson 1977).

Table 1. Definition and measurement of variables.

Variable	Category
Autonomy	Women's autonomy (No=0, Yes=1)
Age	Age of women in years (Below 18=1, 18-20=2, 21 or above=3)
Education	Education type of women (No schooling=1, Non-formal=2, Formal/government=3)
Occupation	Occupation of husband (Labor=1, Agriculture=2, Business=3, Service=4)
Land	Household ownership of land in decimals (Landless=1, 1-199=2, 200 or more=3
Socialisation	Women's socialisation (No=0, Yes=1)
NGO membership	Membership of woman or her husband (No=0, Yes=1)

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Results

Table 2 shows the characterstics of three groups of women. The percentage of women who married at legal age of marriage is significantly higher in women who have received non-formal education than others. Among the illiterates, the percentage of landless and the target women are significantly higher. Both autonomy and socialisation are found significantly more among the NFPE graduates.

Table 2. Background characteristics of sample women (N=744).

Characteristic	Type of education		
	Illiterate (n=293)	Non-Formal (n=265)	Formal (n=186)
Age			
<18	22.5	29.8	23.1
18-20	52.2	48.3	51.6
20+	25.3	21.9	25.3
Age at marriage*			
<18	88.4	74.1	86.0
18 and above	11.6	25.9	14.0
BRAC target*			
Target	50.9	37.7	28.5
Non-target	49.1	62.3	71.5
Agricultural land*			
None	58.7	42.3	36.6
1-199 decimal	30.7	45.7	44.1
200+ decimal	10.6	12.1	19.4
Occupation of husband			
Labour	68.6	70.3	62.1
Cultivation	17.0	17.6	19.8
Business	13.4	8.8	14.8
Service	1.1	3.4	3.3

Note : The number in the parenthesis shows percentage.
* P < .01 (Chi-Square Test)

In Table 3, the differentials of autonomy are analysed, education and age of women are found to have a significant impact. Education has higher predictive power, and BRAC's non-formal brand contributes better than the formal. If age is controlled, as in model I, women with non-formal education has 1.95 times more chance of getting autonomy than those with no schooling. In case of formal education, the chance is 1.64 times higher. When age at marriage and status are also included in the list of controlled variables, the log odds ratios for both the types of education get enhanced, hence proves that these two variables have restraining influence on autonomy. When education and occupation of husband are also controlled, as in model III, the ratios for both the predictors - education and age - get reduced, thus reveals promotive impact of these two factors. In model IV, household land and exposure to media are found to have no significant contribution to autonomy.

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Table 3. Log odds ratios of selected explanatory variables to predict autonomy of young women in family.

Explanatory Variable	Model I	II	III	IV
Type of education				
Illiterate	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
Non-Formal	1.95***	2.08***	2.01***	2.07***
Formal or Government	1.64***	1.76***	1.73***	1.79***
Age				
<18	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
18-20	1.36*	1.45*	1.39*	1.39*
20 or above	1.58**	1.73**	1.57*	1.55*
Age at marriage				
Before legal age		1.0	1.0	1.0
After legal age		0.3	0.87	0.88
Status				
Target		1.0	1.0	1.0
Non-target		0.2	0.3*	0.3
Year of schooling of husband				
No school			1.0	1.0
1-5			1.10	1.11
Above 5			1.08	1.08
Occupation of husband				
Labour			1.0	1.0
Agriculture			1.40	1.46
Business		\	0.98	0.95
Service			1.43	1.46
Land ownership				
Landless				1.0
1-199				0.75
200 or above				0.80
Media exposure				
No				1.0
Yes				0.96

* $p < .10$, two-tailed test
** $p < .05$, two-tailed test
*** $p < .01$. two-tailed test

In Table 4, some demographic and socio-economic differentials of socialisation are analysed and reveals education as a strong predictor. In comparison to formal education, BRAC's non-formal education has a higher predictive power. Exposure to non-formal education increases socialisation of women by more than three and half times than the reference category of illiterates, control of other co-variables make slight changes in its predictive power. Age plays a positive role, at higher age the socialisation process gets significantly accentuated. Other confounders like age at marriage, household status, education and occupation of husband, household land and media exposure are found to have no significant influence.

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Table 4. Log odds ratios of selected explanatory variables to predict socialisation of young women.

Explanatory Variable	Model			
	I	II	III	IV
Type of education				
Illiterate	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
Non-Formal	3.51***	3.60***	3.50***	3.55***
Formal or Government	2.92***	3.10***	3.09***	3.0
Age				
<18	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
18-20	1.27	1.32	1.30	1.31
21 or above	2.24***	2.30***	2.22***	2.24***
Age at marriage				
Before legal age		1.0	1.0	1.0
After legal age		0.97	0.95	0.94
Status				
Target				
Non-target		1.0	1.0	1.0
		0.79	0.76	0.79
Education of husband				
No school			1.0	1.0
1-5			1.12	1.12
5 +			1.14	1.11
Occupation of husband				
Labour			1.0	1.0
Agriculture			0.99	1.0
Business			0.89	0.84
Service			1.47	1.39
Land ownership				
Landless				1.0
1-199				0.84
200 or above				1.39
Media exposure				
Yes				1.0
No				1.27

* p < .10, two-tailed test
** p < .05, two-tailed test
*** p <.01. two-tailed test

NGO membership of target women is considered an important indicator of socialisation. As BRAC and other development organisation have almost similar criteria for selecting target population, the non-target women are excluded from the analysis in Table 5. In *Watch* area, along with BRAC, other NGOs like Grameen Bank[3] are also having their own programs, mostly micro-credits. In the analysis, NGO membership has been considered a dichotomous variable. Membership of any NGO is taken as 1, 0 for the non-members. In comparison to formal education, exposure to non-formal education significantly enhances such membership. However, women's higher age plays more stronger role than education. In model II, socio-economic variables like age at marriage and husband's education and occupation are controlled, the predictive power of the former two variables

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get significantly increased. Odd's ratios for later two variables are less than 1, so gives evidence that economic well-being is restrictive to women's NGO involvement.

Table 5. Log odds ratios of selected explanatory variables to predict NGO membership of young women.

Explanatory Variable	Model		
	I	II	III
Type of education			
Illiterate	1.0	1.0	1.0
Non-Formal	1.84**	2.02**	2.28***
Formal or Government	1.03	1.05	0.96
Age			
<18	1.0	1.0	1.0
18-20	1.46	1.65	1.70
21 or above	3.05***	3.87***	4.22***
Age at marriage			
Before legal age		1.0	1.0
After legal age		0.42**	0.45
Year of schooling of husband			
No schooling			1.0
1-5			0.52
5 or above			2.45
Occupation of husband			
Labour			1.0
Agriculture			0.84
Business			0.85
Service			0.001

*   p < .10, two-tailed test
** p < .05, two-tailed test
*** p < .01. two-tailed test

Discussion

The study findings reveal that non-formal primary education of BRAC is more contributive to women's autonomy and socialisation than its formal counterpart. Hence, it implies that BRAC's low-cost non-formal primary education may be an effective instrument of enhancing women's autonomy and socialisation in a rural set-up. The study was conducted on newly married women, 76 percent of whom belonged to age 20 years or less. Women's life cycle analysis in India shows that the status of women declines at marriage and remains low during the early reproductive years (Das Gupta, 1994). Due to geopolitical and cultural proximity, the situation may not be much different in Bangladesh. In such perspective, any positive contribution of non-formal education to women's autonomy and socialisation at this vulnerable early age may have significant contribution to improving women's status in Bangladesh.

Though education is key to all developments, but the country's present status as one of the poorest country in the world is a glaring evidence that the key has not been rightly used. Women's autonomy and socialisation process suffer from much inadequacies, and that may owe to the fact that illiteracy is still rampant in this country, especially among the rural women. The formal sector has been constrained by the poor economy to follow a low pace, hence attaining much proclaimed 'Education for All" has becomes a distant possibility. Hence, BRAC's low cost single teacher school at close proximity to the rural poor show rays of new hope. So far various studies have

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evaluated the basic competency skill of BRAC graduates and have validated their better performance (Nath et al, 1994). It can be postulated that primary education may contribute much profoundly beyond the 'three R's' concept of Reading, wRiting, and aRithmatic. Three R's are not the only things that are essential for making a full human. If the students are provided the fundamental skill of 'how to know', 'how to think' and 'how to practice' may be much contributive to ushering a fundamental value change. This way, education can be a promotive agent for women's autonomy, socialisation, empowerment and other norms.

The findings also reveal that observance of right age of marriage is higher among the BRAC graduates. Though such education has been found to have no impact on contraception, but delaying the age at marriage may significantly contribute to fertility reduction. In Bangladesh perspective, with one of the lowest female age at marriage in the world (Baldwin 1977), the postponement of age is highly significant. It has been postulated that women who defer marriage are also inclined to make up for lost time by contraception by reproducing at a faster rate during the first years of marriage (Concepcion, 1980). This may be one way of explaining why non-formal education has no impact on contraception. Issues like linkages between education and age at marriage have extensively been researched in Bangladesh. It has been found that of all variables like education, childhood and current residence, education and occupation of husband, religion, work status, women's education has the strongest influence on age at first marriage (Ahmed 1986). It also documented that education below secondary level has no discernible impact on age at marriage (Martin 1987). The present study also validates such finding, but that is true for formal education. BRAC's non-formal education for three years significantly and favourably impacts on age at marriage. Such finding has an unambiguous policy implication. Improving women's status and reducing fertility have long been the priority issues for the national planners. Some structural changes like promulgation of legal age at marriage, more schools for girls, provision of scholarship for the female adolescents have been introduced. But such laws or structural changes are not enough for attaining the desired objective. The legal age of marriage is overtly and commonly violated, even by the educated. So mere schooling is not the only important issue, the type of schooling is no less important either. Moreover, existing schools are already overcrowded, accommodating the rest of school-age children is unthinkable in the current set-up. The economic constraint largely restricts establishing more schools. So the planners must search for alternative paradigm. BRAC model of low cost single class school provides a feasible and sustainable alternative not only for universal literacy but for enhancing the cause of women's autonomy and socialisation. The study also revealed that women with non-formal education are more prone to be members of organisations like NGOs, hence for development practitioners the model offers opportunities for involving a larger number of deprived women in their programs.

Notes

1. **BRAC:** It is probably the world's largest indigenous non-governmental development organisation (NGO),[17] engaged in micro-credit, education, training, health and population interventions for the landless rural poor of Bangladesh.
2. **Watch:** It is a demographic and health surveillance system of BRAC operating in 87 villages in Manikgonj, a central district of Bangladesh. BRAC has its micro-credit and Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) education in all these villages.
3. **Grameen:** An indigenous village bank known for its micro-credit program for the rural poor.

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