

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION: CASE STUDY OF BEGUM ROKEYA UNIVERSITY, RANGPUR, BANGLADESH

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Abstract: This study considers higher education a catalyst for liberating women and their psycho-social development. Education is a yardstick for empowerment of poverty stricken areas such as the greater Rangpur region of Bangladesh. Rangpur division is the top listed for poverty in the country. It is perceived that establishing a tertiary education institution like a university can best serve playing out the role of educator in disseminating the light of education among the young generation therefore serve the region and the threat of chronic poverty. Therefore, the government of Bangladesh established Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur (BRUR) in 2008 as it was a long cherished dream for the people of the northern region from the British colonial period. This university has been named after a legendary feminist scholar and social reformist-Begum Rokeya, and actively functioning to educate young generation as potential human resources for development of the northern Bengal, therefore, the researcher intends to explore how this newly established academic institution is going to contribute women's empowerment through higher education in the north Bengal and beyond. The aim of the present study is to investigate how BRUR contributes to women's empowerment- socially, economically and politically. The present study uses secondary data, and two case studies to meet the aims of the study. The findings of this proposed study examines Begum Rokeya's influential writing about women's empowerment, its exercise into academic departments, and students' own perceptions around the dynamics of empowerment in the local context as well as their expectations from their future degree.

Keywords: Begum Rokeya, Higher Education, Women and Gender Studies Program, Women Empowerment

Introduction: Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur (BRUR) named after a legendary woman scholar *Begum Rokeya* who pioneered and encouraged female education in the city of Rangpur, in the north east zone of Bangladesh. Rangpur is a culturally vibrant place – an excellent center of arts, culture and education. It prides itself on its rich heritage of numerous contributions and achievements of many scholars, poets, novelists, social and political thinkers and philanthropists (BRUR, 2014). This study investigates the relationships between access to education of female students, their achievements (Academic and professional) and gendered experience. Furthermore, this study also explores the impact of their education on gender identity as well as women's empowerment in the greater Rangpur. In order to meet the study aim, researchers consider aspects of experiences in BRUR, peer interactions among students, classroom interactions between students and teachers, staffing patterns, academic curricula and activities of women and gender studies program.

Education and Women Empowerment: Historically, it is found that due to uneven power relations between men and women, and conservative social attitudes of the patriarchal gender ordering of poverty stricken society, women play out social roles to a little extent. This restricts their access to higher education. Previous studies on women's empowerment highlight on gaining literacy and access to education for women, therefore, these issues remain alive in developing countries (Nepal, Pakistan,

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Education liberates ones attitudes, values and behavior as well as enables oneself to make independent decisions. Education operates to privilege and constrain individuals in a society by producing and maintaining, as well as challenging and changing gender inequality at all levels of social life (Collins, 1990). It is education that offers opportunities for exposure to new knowledge and resources and the possibility of obtaining new statuses in society. A study shows that higher levels of education are related to greater knowledge of nutrition and health (Hyman et. al., 1975). Besides, education is related to age at marriage (Martin, 1995), egalitarian attitudes (Persell et al., 1997) and effective use of contraceptives (Rosenzweig, 1996). Therefore, educated women can contribute significantly to the economic development of developing countries (Chafetz, 2006, p.429) and other aspects of society.

Studies shows educational attainment is related to the act of voting (Hyman et.al., 1975; Persell et.al, 1997) and increases the politicization of women (Lansing, 1972). Khatun (1998) in 'Education and Women Empowerment' had shown essential information regarding female education and their empowerment from Bangladesh context. Shah(1998)discovered the positive relation with the parental level of education and the attainment of higher education by the child.Mahtab (2007) recognizes participation level of women in higher education increases gradually in Bangladesh. In the field of higher education, she has added that on average, only 19 percent of women are in higher education.

Research on education and empowerment reveals some disparities. Murtaugh (1988) found that male students in the U.S.A were significantly more likely than female students to be involved in extracurricular activities (80 per cent compared to 50 percent). For average academic achievers outside activities provide an important alternative source of achievement and self-esteem (Murtaugh, 1988). Higher education is another arena in which gender roles are constructed, particularly in informal interactions (Chafetz 2006, p. 418). A Scottish study (Macintosh, 1990) indicates that teachers spend more time with their male students than female students. Women are underrepresented in administrative positions (Tallerico, 1997) in the university. Women are disadvantaged both as learners and as producers of knowledge (Grant et al., 1994, p.93).

Integration of gender issues in higher education in Bangladesh:

Equal access to education is relatively new in all over the world. In the United States, Oberlin College was founded in 1833 and was the first institution of higher education to admit both female and male students. Afterwards, the number of female students in higher education was following an increasing trend. It is exemplified that in the U.S. women comprised 21 per cent of undergraduates in 1870, 40 per cent in 1910, and 47 per cent in 1920 (Graham, 1978). Similarly, University of Dhaka, located in Bangladesh was the first tertiary level academic institution founded in order to promote the higher studies for all. At present, 35.65 per cent comprises of female students, whereas, 27.71per cent are female teachers (UGC, 2013) exist at the University of Dhaka. The country has thirty four public universities and seventy eight private universities where women and gender issues related courses are offered among undergraduates and postgraduate students. It clearly shows that priority of gender issues have turned to an important agenda in higher education.

Table 1 demonstrates the number of female students and female teachers of universities in Bangladesh. The numbers of female teachers in both public and private universities seem to be satisfactory showing that significant numbers of female graduates are inspired coming to higher education that leads them to be empowered.

Table 1: Number of University, Teacher and Student by Type and Gender

Type of university	No. of university	Student			Teacher		
		Total	Girl	% Girl	Total	Female	% of Female
Public	34	454530	168499	37.07	11505	2377	20.66
Private	78	399182	106629	26.71	12522	3684	29.42
Total	112	853712	275128	30.23	24027	6061	25.24

Source: UGC Report 2013

Liberal feminism: individual and social consequences of education: Liberal feminists, with their focus on the individual level of analysis and action, see gender as one of many statuses that individuals occupy, but it is by no means their dominant status. Liberal feminist perspectives focus on how education benefits women and increases their status in society. They tend to stress the occupational and income effects of education. It is argued that education affects health, fertility, economic development, political participation, social attitudes, occupational status and income. Liberal feminism further argues that women should receive equal treatment within university and other social institutions (e.g., family). Women should receive equal encouragement from peers and teachers and

whether they participate equally in all social and extracurricular activities, such as class discussions, sports, school governance, and curriculum. In Bangladesh, liberal feminists (e.g., Nazmunnessa Mahtab) focus attention on the availability of male and female role models, equal representation in educational materials, and equal access to educational resources, equal social relationships, classroom practices, and equal protection from sexual harassment. The assumption within the liberal feminist paradigm is that educational institutions have the potential to be gender-neutral institutions (Chafetz, 2006).

Role of BRUR in Women’s Empowerment through Higher Education in Rangpur:

Women's empowerment through higher education: Since the present study considers education is the yardstick of empowerment, this dimension fits better for women especially in the context of newly emerging middle-income country like Bangladesh. 'Education is a key institution for understanding gender in society because it mirrors social relationships in societies as well as being a fulcrum for struggles and changes occurring within them' (Chafetz, 2006, p.407). Liberal feminist identifies education as a source of liberation, empowerment, and advancement for women. The ideal of equal access to higher education especially in university for women in Rangpur division is relatively new. Gender disparities in educational access are greater in northern region of Bangladesh because of the highest prevalence of poverty. In Begum Rokeya

University, Rangpur, peer-group of students admitted into the undergraduate programs come predominantly from working-class or lower class family background with little extent of cultural exposure. Therefore, female students are encouraged to be achievement oriented and competitive in classroom.

Staffing and Student Patterns of BRUR: Gender neutral staffing and student patterns depend on gender friendly human resources policies and a recruitment system which allows for gender balanced admittance system for male and female students. Data reveals that there are appreciating numbers of female faculty members in the BRUR. Male-female student's ratio is almost equal but there is under representation of female in staffing pattern of BRUR shown in the following table.

BEGUM ROKEYA UNIVERSITY Rangpur			
	Total	Female	% Female
Student	4738	2240	47.28
Teacher	107	23	21.50

Source: UGC Report 2013

In BRUR, there are no gender patterns by subject, both men and women equally like to teach math, science, and business studies, English, languages, social studies, history, economics and other courses.

Curricula of BRUR: Curricula have socializing and gatekeeping implications (Chafetz 2006, p.421) for human. BRUR has twenty two academic departments within the faculty of engineering, life sciences, business studies, humanities and social sciences. Faculty of Business Studies offers BBA and MBA degrees respectively in the area of finance and banking, accounting and information system, marketing and management studies for the regular students of the BRUR. It is one of growing faculties as it also offers executive MBA degree for the professionals serving in the government and development NGOs. By contrast, there are six academic departments (Sociology, Public Administration, Economics, Mass Communication and Journalism, Women and Gender Studies) within the faculty of social sciences. Courses of these departments are designed and updated according to market demand. Each undergraduate program offers 132 credit hours with 42 courses, of which Rokeya Studies is a mandatory course taught at the first year students of each department. Courses are taught by the respective expert faculty members who have master degree earned from home and abroad. Most of the departments of social sciences focus courses on gender theories, contemporary feminists' and

thoughts. It is found that there is no difference of curriculum for male and female students. The academic track record of the last few years shows that female students' achieve better grade, perform well in in the class room discussion and are academically active than that male students. It is worth noting there is a special department titled Women and Gender Studies.

Case 1: Sadia Arefin (Jhinuk), appeared graduate with an MBA in Marketing comes from a middle class family. Due to her parents loving literature, she been introduced with the world of literature from childhood. She secured highest CGPA in BBA. She followed Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hossain's as role model dreaming to make a women friendly society with proper education, human rights, freedom of movement, political recognition and aspirations. She became motivated to be well educated, do good tasks of for society, to do something for the poor- deprived women & to be a good leader to fulfill her dream of becoming a professional. Soon after the completion of her BBA & MBA degrees respectively, she did not waste any time. She is the recipient of couple of professional development courses. Apart from academic studies, she arranged many cultural programs, actively took part into those programs, collected sponsorship for those programs, participated in the debate competition, tried to help poor, deprived & flood affected people etc. These experiences have developed her communication & leadership skills.

Besides, as the student of 1st batch of the Marketing department, she had to experience political clashes that occurred in her residential hall (Sheikh Fujilatunnesa Mujib Hall) as well as in the campus. From all of these events, she has gathered experiences to adapt with all situations. She thinks herself an empowered lady indeed.

Women and Gender Studies Program: The Women and Gender Studies program established in 2011 offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees respectively. This department belongs to seven scholar faculty members (e.g., four female and three male) as well as total four undergraduate batches with total 235 students, of which 47.66 percent are female students. It is one of the well equipped departments at the BRUR. Annually, the department organizes Rokeya Day, International Women's Day, Gender Fair, Intra-department football and cricket tournaments, debating tournaments, workshops, gender training, seminars and lecture series in order to make gender sensitive society within the BRUR and beyond. Women and gender studies program integrates trans-disciplinary pedagogical approach combining other departments-Sociology, Economic, History and Archeology.

Case 2: Farhana Rahman Srabony, one of the top-notch scorers of first batch of students from Women and Gender Studies of BRUR thinks herself lucky. Because she is learning about women's empowerment and their rights thus making her aware about own rights as well as responsibilities for society to diminish gender disparities. According to her, most of the women living in Rangpur hold inadequate knowledge about their own rights; therefore, they are deprived from their rights and empowerment and lag behind men in economic, social and political atmosphere. Studying in WGS, she can properly and effectively learn and apply this valuable knowledge in her

practical life, which she never thought before. For example, she always tries to take her own decisions by herself rather than being dependent on others. It should also be mentioned that, her family members emphasize on her decisions in familial issues. Now, she is confident to protest against any injustice and superstition towards women and also against unlawful activities that he faces. Nevertheless, she is in a position to raise voice against it and also able to breakdown the stereotypical norms and values surrounding her. She believes the departmental knowledge has changed her conservative thoughts and ideas she had.

Conclusion: BRUR offers higher education for female and male of the greater northern region. This region is historically remote compared to the remaining six divisional cities of Bangladesh, because it is encompassed with high level of poverty, illiteracy, child-marriage, malnutrition, transportation, unemployment and natural disaster etc. Therefore, people dwelling in rural and urban regions are connected with information and communication technologies to a little extent. There is also shortage of industrialization, urbanization and limited room for investment by the donor agencies in order to grow up new business and commerce. More importantly, people and the region receives inadequate political attention from the government. Since this region has produced legendary feminist scholar-*Begum Rokeya* whose writing is taught to the undergraduate students at several departments of the BRUR, it is expected that the future graduates will receive the oath from those writings and replicate them into resourcing their own communities, areas and beyond. BRUR has the opportunities to address these issues in this region playing out as key driver for women empowerment because it is welcomes new generations and serves as human industry.

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