

2. RURAL WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES OF NONFORMAL EDUCATION EXPERIENCES: A CASE STUDY IN A BANGLADESHI VILLAGE

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I think, underneath, all women are feminists. It's just a matter of time and encouragement [1].

2.1 Introduction

In this study I explore how rural women in Bangladesh describe their experiences with nonformal education from their own point of view. Education, formal or nonformal, plays an important part in women's lives in a variety of ways, including family planning decisions and the enhancement of self-esteem. Education has also been regarded by the governments and citizens as a potential element for rural development and a panacea for all ills in the developing countries. According to Coombs and Ahmed [2], formal education in the developing countries has not contributed nor has it catered to the needs of the majority who live in the rural areas. "Formal education also tends to support the status quo and to maintain socio-cultural values, norms and myths" [3, p.50]. Critics [3,4] also argue that the formal education which women in the developing countries receive usually serves to maintain the status quo by tending to reinforce the existing hierarchy and the distribution of power in society. The realization of these problems led educational planners to look for alternatives, for learning experiences outside the formal schools, in other words, for nonformal education. Coombs and Ahmed [2] claim that in its versatility, adaptability and diversity, nonformal education has greater benefits than formal education, especially in developing areas (p.233). Some even esteem nonformal education as "totally pragmatic" [5].

Women in developing countries do not get equal access to and control over resources and opportunities as men do. If gender equity is properly understood and applied effectively to the important arena of education, its potential for changing women's lives is immense. The question becomes, then: What kind of knowledge do women need in developing countries? Various studies [6-8] show that the existing nonformal education (NFE) programs in developing countries also give women predominantly traditional knowledge, that is, knowledge of family planning, nutrition and healthcare. NFE programs tend to address the short-term aspects of living by meeting women's immediate needs. Further, when exceptional nonformal education programs are focused on benefiting women and meeting their needs, then they are vaguely conceived "as women's programs," and consequently receive little priority at the national level [9,10]. However, such a narrow focus does not deal with increasing women's awareness of their own oppression and exploitation. Women need knowledge with which to analyze their own situation and which

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will give them an understanding of their position in the larger society and in their immediate family. Those including Buvinic [11], Leacock et. al., [12] and Stromquist [8], who argue from the feminist perspectives, showed that failure of projects (for women) was often related to exclusion of women in the design as well as the implementation of the project and the planners did not consider women's perspectives. The feminist discourse argues that the modernization-oriented development does not bring the expected improvements in poor women's conditions. Rather, in many cases such development actually disempowers women by first divesting them of their traditional power, and, second, by ignoring their importance to the success of the development process. It is argued that development policies ignored, patronized, subordinated and disempowered women and the poor [12-17]. The NFE programs also fail to raise women's consciousness as women.

Radical feminist texts also argue that education can work as a leading force for social transformation if women know that their lives are negatively affected not only by unequal economic relations between classes and nations but also by unequal gender relations between men and women [18]. Such an understanding, feminists believe, will allow women to learn to develop a critical consciousness of why and how social transformation is necessary for their own liberation and they can then work as agents of social change. Since formal education inadequately educates women, nonformal education is, therefore, seen as an alternative way of adequately educating women by increasing their consciousness.

In Bangladesh the knowledge women receive through the education programs is limited [19]. Most women's education has been carried out by the formal education system which is limited to middle- and upper-class women. Main role of such education is to support and maintain the existing patriarchal system. Poor rural women have been almost totally excluded from formal education. Instead, they are recruited as an important cheap, and unskilled labor force for industrialization.

The conditions under which poor women live in Bangladesh have drawn the attention of many conscientious educators and intellectuals, particularly women educators and intellectuals. These female professionals have set up educational projects for rural women in Bangladesh. The aims of these projects are to help them analyze their oppressive situations critically and provide them with the knowledge with which to take actions to increase their basic skills and develop a functional literacy and thereby to become more self-sufficient. Some NGOs, particularly NGOs run by women in Bangladesh, are successful in attracting rural women to join their nonformal education classes. This is because they not only include many issues of particular interest to women, such as dowry, divorce, oppression, exploitation, family laws, etc. but they also utilize practical life stories and experiences of women in the curriculum. However, the number of these female-oriented NGOs is very few.

The purpose of this study is to acquire descriptive information on the perspectives of rural women in a village in Bangladesh, Srefultoli, a village of Faridpur, on their experiences with nonformal education, on how they see it effecting their lives, and what they expect from the

nonformal education programs. I also explore whether the current NFE programs give rural women new knowledge about their current situation in society and in the family and whether these rural, Bangladeshi women are conscious of their strategic as well as their practical needs.

2.2 Research Methodology

People's needs develop out of the socio-cultural and economic contexts in which they live. So, it is appropriate to examine women's nonformal education needs from the perspective of women in the communities they live in. After thorough consideration, I have therefore, chosen an ethnographic approach as the most appropriate and complete means of answering my research questions. Stacy [20] states, "Ethnography fits many of the criteria feminists call for a research methods". I chose to collect data by participant observations, in-depth interviews (both semi-structured and unstructured), group discussions, and analysis of documents related to nonformal education programs. Initially, I interviewed sixty women who were directly or indirectly involved with the NFE programs and out of these, I selected 20 for the in-depth interviews.

For my study I select mainly one women-run NGO's NFE program, named *Saptagram* because I find, it exclusively focuses on women's issues and it creates a space for rural women's own voices to be heard. In providing this space, therefore, such organization has helped to challenge conventional stereotypes about gender needs, to make visible hitherto hidden categories of women's needs and to lay bare the interconnection between different aspects of women's lives" [21, p. 231]. I also observed another NGO's NFE program in this area. The name of that organization is *Palli Progati* which is run by males. I interviewed a few women who were also directly or indirectly involved with this organization.

2.3 *Saptagram Nari Swanirvar Parishad* or *Saptagram*

Saptagram Nari Swanirvar Parishad (SNSP), known as *Saptagram*, came into existence in June, 1976. It is an organization run by women for women, working in rural communities of Bangladesh. *Saptagram* believes that women themselves must work for their own empowerment; and to be empowered, they need to be united and organized. *Saptagram* views that economic dependency is a big barrier towards women's empowerment. Economic emancipation can help improve the women's lives in their families as well as in the society. *Saptagram* also believes that if these women are provided with credit facilities, they can properly utilize that money for income generation.

In *Saptagram*, education is used as a powerful tool to bring about changes in the quality of life for disadvantaged rural women. Education can help these women get equipped to work for their own development. It creates critical awareness among these women about their situation in the society and encourages them to get organized and fight all sorts of oppression, exploitation

and injustice. Through education, the women can become aware about their rights and responsibilities, about their roles in the family as well as the community, about their potentials and power. Therefore, conscientization through adult education classes is an important component in *Saptagram's* approach. This organization believes that conscientization takes place through a learning-teaching format in which literacy is brought about through a dialogue of words and themes that have a deep resonance in the everyday lives of poor people and not through the convention of using words that have little relevance to them. Such dialogue may include class-based themes such as wages, landlords, property, or gender-based themes such as dowry, wife beating, divorce and land rights. Discussions generated by these words allow participants in the training programs to analyze and question the realities behind these everyday words, to construct alternative visions, and to reflect on the strategies by which alternative visions might be brought closer. The act of moving beyond the blind acceptance of social structures which are so pervasive and deep rooted that they are invisible to the exploration of how such structures are sustained, and whom they benefit, is seen as a politicizing process [21, p. 251]. *Saptagram* also includes in their syllabus five stories in simple language, with a message aimed at deepening the rural women's understanding of different social, economic and cultural issues. The illustrated stories touch on subjects such as the importance of registering a marriage, family planning, procedures for acquiring land, etc.

2.4 Summary of my findings

The findings of my research show that there are many factors which affect women's needs, interest and participation in NFE programs: economic independence, skill training, conscientization, empowerment, self-esteem etc. Most women, particularly young women, see nonformal education as an empowering process. Women think that NFE gave them a "voice" against social and political injustice, which women are now more conscious of. As a result of this awareness, these women have begun rallies against many issues pertaining to them both in local as well as in national levels.

All the participant women in Srefultoli realize now that without education, there would be no opportunities for them and for their children. The participants also agree that no education or opportunity will change their status without a basic change in the attitudes towards men. So, these women in Srefultoli believe that men also need to be conscientized so that they will change their outlook on women and will value women's education. Men need to be conscientized so that they take equal responsibility for their children and recognize that women have the same rights as men. The women participants, like feminists [12], recognized patriarchy as perpetuating their subordination. Most of the participants viewed that the rich and the people in power control the society.

Several women have felt that they are too old to get education, particularly basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. This older group of women believe that there is no connection between nonformal education and the possibility of improving the quality of their lives, but that

NFE might bring change to their daughters' lives.

In general, almost all women have shown very positive attitudes towards education for their children, especially for their daughters. Young and middle-aged women feel the necessity of education for their daughters because they do not want to see their daughters become dependent upon their husbands as they feel themselves to be. Some misconceptions existed about the programs, where some women, mainly from middle class families who have a traditional outlook on women's role in society, viewed that the NGO education proposed an anti-Muslim curriculum by teaching *bepurdah* (shameless) activities.

Time, location of class, negative attitudes by their husbands, overloaded household responsibilities and poverty, are some of the obstacles that affected women's attitude towards participating in the programs. Some women informed me that overloaded household duties forced them to drop out of the classes or reduce them to irregular attendance in classes. Although the time schedule for classes is flexible, still women could not manage to attend because time was inconvenient. At the time the class is scheduled some women may be busy with their other work or serving food to their husbands or kids.

Negative attitudes towards the education of women (which greatly affected women's attendance) was reflected by husband's refusal to allow their wives to enroll in nonformal education classes, to join the training, or to join *Samity* (association). All the women informants reported to me that their husbands were concerned about the curriculum because the topics of this education covered so many social issues for women such as women's oppression, women's liberation, women's equal rights, dowry, the divorce system, etc., along with the more traditional basic education classes. Most men in Srefultoli thought that this education would take their women out of their houses and would make them revolutionary and that consequently, their marriages were going to end. Furthermore, the internalization of women's own subordination role and the cultural prohibitions have also conditioned women to accept their roles and have prevented them from aspiring to learn activities that are outside their social and cultural framework and their own self-perceptions. These participant women suggest that women can overcome these problems if they know their legal rights and get an education. Nonformal education programs for women are helping women to overcome some of these problems. Women must also have the opportunity to gain autonomy and self confidence, they add.

All participants wanted education and training to provide them with skills to earn an income which would free them from their dependence on men and would give them the ability to adequately support their families. They wanted to learn sewing and handicraft works, so they could work at home or a nearby center. They wanted to work in any industry such as cottage or garment or sericulture industry which would be near their village. Women participants in my study who were directly involved in agricultural works expressed interest in agricultural training programs. They expressed their desire to learn more innovative techniques and processes in agriculture which would save them time and energy. Very few women expressed an interest in health, family planning, child-care and nutrition programs because these women think they

already have that information. Lack of employment is considered the most important issue identified by my participants.

Women also identified the necessity for economic aid in resolving village problems such as building an infrastructure of roads, electricity, transportation and clean water for drinking. Dowry is the most important issue the women raised constantly. The participants know that dowry is illegal but they can not do anything about it. They expressed their frustrations variously.

These women also indicated that development policies and education programs often do not fulfill the needs the women identify as the most urgent. The participant women in Srefultoli proposed that rural women's perspectives must be considered in planning and implementing development of NFE in order for such education to fulfill the needs of the rural women.

All the participant women in my study valued the curriculum of the *Saptagram* NFE program because they viewed it as relevant to their own daily life. They believed that they were not only learning basic skills but also different issues concerning women that they should know in order to establish their rights in the society and the family. On the whole, literacy was perceived to be important for establishing these women's voices in the family and in the society. The participant women felt that their lives had changed after joining the NFE programs. They are earning some cash through growing vegetables, buying and selling cow or goat milk and harvesting major agricultural produce from leased land. They viewed that this organization showed them how to save money every month. Savings and loans helped them to get involved with many small projects at home. The participant women viewed that their earnings were giving them some economic independence.

Some participant women suggested music to be added to the curriculum, while others suggested the addition of some Islamic studies to attract more rural women and men. These participants think that the inclusion of Islamic studies would clear up some misunderstandings about the current and rightful position of women in society.

With regard to their own participation in nonformal education programs, the women had specific suggestions regarding timing and location of classes and training, and the introduction of courses for men that would enhance women's access to the classes and would bring more changes in the relationships between women and men.

2.5 Discussions and Conclusions

It is true that women-run NGOs or NGOs in general, can not push hundreds of years of patriarchy out the door of the parliamentary chambers or the homes of the masses. Women's subordinate position is deeply ingrained in the minds of men and women in Bangladesh. One can not dictate self-confidence and self-esteem; one can only provide the conditions in which they may develop. If nonformal education seeks empowerment of women, it must involve

women in all stages of the NFE project. Women must participate in defining the problems, in identifying proposed solutions, in applying these solutions, and in assessing the process and the outcomes. Women must be given the opportunities to assert themselves, even if they make mistakes. In the long run, these women, through their participation, will be able to take steps for themselves and for the sake of others.

It will take time to change the entrenched system. But without any doubt, in a country such as Bangladesh, where village people are very conservative and where *Saptagram's* role is limited, it is a bold step to teach orthodox and conservative women in Bangladesh in a nontraditional way. The success of *Saptagram's* NFE program is due to its honest and practical curriculum and, in particular, to its participative, egalitarian and inclusive instructional methods. Its credit programs attract many women. By fostering a dialogue with the workers, by the use of a format group and by developing savings plans, the program helps women to develop a positive attitude towards nonformal education in Srefultoli, which in the long run promotes women's self-confidence and self-esteem.

Income-generating programs are difficult to implement because they are risky, time consuming and expensive. In terms of economic gain, these women's economic status might not change dramatically, but at least they are earning something from taking care of domestic animals, growing vegetables, small businesses and from loans. The income provides them with some degree of financial independence. Yet, it is not possible for only one or two NGOs to meet all the economic needs of the village women because the needs are overwhelming. However, if the government and other organizations worked together, then it could fulfill many needs of rural women in Bangladesh. Nonformal education should seek to provide women with some analysis of the job market and employability so that women could make realistic choices about job training and optimize their productive activities.

Different women participants of my study expressed different opinions on the educational needs of the women in Srefultoli because they did not all face the same problems. Therefore, no single NFE approach or program could fulfill all the different needs. The basic and strategic needs of the participants could be fulfilled only by utilizing a variety of educational approaches and flexible programs that accommodate multiple perspectives.

The critical feminist discourse views that women's voices and needs should be seen as an integral process for social transformation. Feminist discourse states that a project's failure is often related to the exclusion of women in its planning and a consequent lack of consideration of rural women's knowledge and perspectives. Therefore, all organizations in Bangladesh which focus on women should respect the knowledge, views and perspectives that these poor women bring with them to be more effective and participatory. Women's knowledge and experiences should be recognized as valid in designing the plans for NFE projects. Such consideration would result in the beneficiaries feeling closer to the programs and their organizers and feeling that they had a stake in their own development. If women are given the chance to talk about themselves and analyze their positions from their own experiences, a collective awareness will develop.

My study reveals that some NGOs are trying to change gender roles through economic participation of women. But changing gender roles through the raising of consciousness without economic participation is less fruitful. Education and income are inseparable.

Simply designing formal education programs which are thought to be "appropriate" to women, or improving women's access to loans, will not give women equal access, nor alleviate women's subordinate position in the society and all problems which emanate from that unjust status. There is a need to reevaluate and redesign the NFE programs in Bangladesh in order to give women some freedom from their long laborious work day and to assure them fair access in all respects - social, economic and political.

A demand for establishing an industry or a mill near the village was proposed many times by the women. However, very few people want to establish any industry or mill near the village because of the lack of infrastructure. Moreover, if the industry is run by males, the question of gender-based exploitation will resurface. It may bring more chaos, since the male authority may hire men rather than women, and the unequal power structure will remain unchanged. Therefore, alternative ways must be found in order to meet women's economic needs.

The existing NFE programs in Srefultoli are serving an important function for the participating women; social interaction for rural women was, and still is, limited by the patriarchal social practices and by the nonexistence of public recreation for women. The participants' demand for a NFE program that would increase male consciousness may bring some solutions to certain problems, but solutions need to be found to the participant's economic problems which continue to situate women within the subordinating patriarchal system. Stromquist [4] states, "Literacy becomes a felt need after women gain some confidence in upgrading their skills to improve their earning potential, but nothing would be sufficient if women do not realize that they live under conditions of subordination" (p. 265).

As this study reveals, individual needs and perspectives vary and should be taken into consideration, especially for the planning, policy-making, and program implementation stages of educational development. Development policy and planning must be flexible to fit the needs of the multitude of individuals being served. Women know better than outside "experts" what type of education will benefit them and where they want to take their lives. Women should have a voice in their own development. Various organizations and the government make plans on behalf of women, but such plans make women frustrated because the female beneficiaries are given little say in the actual planning and implementation process, an omission which often results in unexpected and unsuccessful project outcomes.

My study concludes that certain nonformal education can bring meaningful changes in women's lives, and that rural women themselves can discover and articulate their own needs. Socio-cultural forces exert considerable influence in shaping the educational needs of women on their participation in NFE programs. In a rural community (such as Srefultoli) where

socio-cultural norms and attitudes exert a strong influence on women's lives, NFE programs need to be designed to foster the growth of self-awareness for women as well as to foster an awareness of the socio-cultural reality that influences and shapes their lives. This would help them analyze their situation, organize their needs, and develop their ability to transform their reality. Women should organize and recognize their common needs and goals and draw upon what Faludi [1] calls their "vast and untapped vitality" to create a more just society.

2.6 References and Notes

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