Education and Capabilities in Bangladesh

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Overview

Based on Martha Nussbaum’s list of central human functional capabilities, this chapter is an empirical study of the links between education and the development of girls’ and women’s capabilities in Bangladesh. The study arises from the expansion of girls’ education in Bangladesh; the widespread assumption that education helps lead to empowerment (which I take to be the development of capabilities); the claim by some that Bangladesh has already achieved the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of the empowerment of women, and the evidence indicating otherwise. Through interviews with adolescent girls about what going to school and “being educated” means to them, there is an exploration of which capabilities are enhanced by the educational process in Bangladesh, and which are not. I argue that education cannot be regarded as a basic capability unless it specifically addresses the process of developing the capabilities necessary to live a life one has reason to value.

Achieving the MDGs

At the United Nations World Summit held in New York in September 2005, leaders of the nations of the world met to review progress toward the MDGs agreed in 2000, most of which were set to be met by 2015. Of particular interest was MDG 3, to “promote gender equality and empower women,” which was the only goal to have an interim target for 2005.
That target was to “eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and in all levels of education no later than 2015” (United Nations 2000). Out of this summit came reports that Bangladesh had already achieved MDG 3; this report was picked up and circulated around the world (e.g. News from Bangladesh 2005; Zia 2005; Arabic News 2005; Asia-Pacific Daily News Review 2005). Unfortunately, although Bangladesh can be seen to be moving toward equality and empowerment in some areas, the claim is quite simply not true. That such a claim was made, unquestioningly published, and then repeated in various forms indicates a widespread misunderstanding of this particular MDG, and of the concepts or measurement of equality and empowerment. That the internationally agreed target for reaching the goal is to eliminate gender disparities in education indicates an enormous confidence in—or naïveté about—the power of education to bring about social justice. In this case, the social justice under discussion is that of women’s empowerment, or capabilities, and the role that education might have in enhancing it.

In this chapter, the aim is, therefore, to examine girls’ educational experiences in Bangladesh through a capabilities lens to try to get a better picture of how close Bangladesh is to achieving MDG 3, or even the target of eliminating gender disparities in education. The chapter reviews the expansion of girls’ education in Bangladesh, the widespread claim that such education helps lead to empowerment, and the limited evidence indicating that it might not. Many of the “empowerment” claims or reports work with loose or undefined conceptions of either education or empowerment, and in Bangladesh there have been few attempts to measure specific education-linked empowerment other than the proxy indicator of numbers of girls in school. Nussbaum’s list of central human functional capabilities (2000, 2002) can be seen as one approach to encapsulating the elements that make up empowerment, and here I use her list as a framework for identifying links between girls’ education or schooling and the development of their capabilities, or what could be called empowerment. The analysis rests on data collected through an interview-based study of adolescent girls in rural Bangladesh.

Links between the capability approach and education are clearly defined, but the term capabilities—as used by Amartya Sen—has rarely been used in connection with education policy and practice in Bangladesh. This may be partly because there is no easy shorthand term for the process of having a person’s capabilities developed so that they are able to live a life that they have reason to value, or for the state of having had those capabilities developed. Therefore I am appropriating the more commonly used terms of empowerment and empowered for this purpose.