Significance of quality higher education in the advancement of gender equality: the case of Bangladesh

Md Jahangir Alam  
Department of Japanese Studies, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Keiichi Ogawa  
Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies, Kobe University, Kobe, Japan

Lubaba Basharat  
Department of Japanese Studies, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh, and  
Abu Hossain Muhammad Ahsan  
Department of Public Administration, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract

Purpose – This research has been conducted to determine the core reasons for gender inequality and to evaluate the effectiveness of higher education as a sole solution to ensure gender equality.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative case study research explores the causes behind gender inequality, and interviews were conducted with 20 male and female graduates and five stakeholders. Liberal feminism theory has been employed to understand the phenomena.

Findings – The findings show that receiving a university degree cannot ensure gender equality and empowerment of women in Bangladesh. The key factors contributing to gender disparity are societal and a general deficiency of technical knowledge.

Practical implications – More policies should support women in every aspect of life, and the existing policies should be carefully followed. The government must ensure high-quality education, and people must show more significant concern by acquiring knowledge from quality education seeking gender equality.

Originality/value – This research fills the gap in the current literature by providing knowledge about the practical effectiveness of quality higher education in solving the problem of gender inequality, its core reasons and possible solutions in Bangladesh's context.

Keywords  
Sustainable higher education, Gender development, Gender equality, Women empowerment, Bangladesh

Paper type  
Research paper

Introduction

Over the past two decades, women in Bangladesh have achieved significant development and gained immense recognition in social development. However, more than 80% of married girls reveal that they are involved in gender-based violence, which stops them from reaching their full potential (Klugman, 2017). Limited, low-paying segments of the economy continue to hinder women’s labor involvement. Numerous initiatives are triggered toward gender equality and greater economic autonomy of women. Women increasingly participate in the labor force, but their participation lags behind males. Barriers of a social and economic nature often impede women from gaining access to assets and utilization. Society insists women stay home and bear children, but this should not be a gender-based stereotype. Women have borne

Funding: Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), Grant No: 90379464 (KAKEN).
a disproportionate share of rising rates of joblessness, gender-based violence and domestic caregiving responsibilities (Tembon, 2021).

There are still several obstacles to accomplishing gender equality, even in the 21st century. Despite the ascending number of women in the paid workforce, there remain gender differences in the employment market, salary disparity and lack of employment opportunities for women. There are significant gender disparities in key social development indices, particularly when comparing male and female members of the same family. Encouraging and shielding the rights of female and male transitory experts in Bangladesh, expanding women’s entrance to skills training and elevating the status of Bangladesh’s indigenous people are all steps that might lead to the successful implementation of orientation enhancement.

Bangladesh should initiate several policies to become an upper-middle-wage country by 2031 and a significant affiliation country by 2041 (Hayes and Jones, 2015). These are immediate changes: development to close pay, efficiency gaps and a more critical balance. Women must be financially independent to break the stereotype that they are weaker. There is a massive connection between the level of skills training and the strengthening of women; thus, the higher the degree of the institution, the more noteworthy the strengthening of females. Despite being highly educated and having much support from the government, women still confront various obstacles in terms of economic, political, social and cultural sectors (Al-Ansi et al., 2023). There is no segregation considering orientation in instructive foundations and designer projects to the ages, sexes and areas of the understudies signed up for them, for instance, metropolitan, provincial, low-performing Upazilas and lags in the work sector.

This study investigates the issue of gender discrimination and the solution that has already been taken to ensure higher education, which evaluates its effectiveness toward eliminating gender disparity and offers distinctive solutions for decreasing the gender gap in the society of Bangladesh. This research examined the following questions:

RQ1. What are the policy initiatives adopted for sustainable women empowerment through higher education?

RQ2. To what extent does higher education promote equality in rural and urban areas?

**Higher education and gender development in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh ranked 71st based on the global gender gap index among 146 countries. Although Bangladesh performed better in reducing the gender gap among the South Asian nations, there remains a significant gap in gender equality in education, ranking 123rd worldwide (World Economic Forum, 2022). In the fiscal year 2009–10, the government of Bangladesh then implemented the gender budget, which has increased 3.5 times since its inception (Haque, 2019). The National Education Policy focused on an inclusive education plan to eliminate gender inequalities and enhance women’s employment.

The government and other stakeholders have encouraged women’s empowerment and contributed to closing the gender gap. The female unemployment rate dropped from 4.2% in 2016–17 to 3.6% during 2022. Women are now employed in workplaces traditionally considered more suited for men, such as business customer service, development, agribusiness, guard, police officer, trainee and labor. The readymade clothing industry employs 4.0 million people, primarily women. The government has raised minimum wages in 43 sectors. Hence, the gender salary gap has narrowed, and there is minimum wage discrimination in the public sector, which has successfully surpassed the goal of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number eight.

Despite so many policies and initiatives, women in Bangladesh still face domestic abuse due to a lack of financial independence and information. While women in Bangladesh have made many strides forward, they are still paid less than males for doing the same job.
Moreover, they are subjected to violence in their private and public spheres (Haque, 2019). The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics reported that 80.2% of Bangladeshi women have experienced physical or mental abuse by a male partner or someone outside the family.

Over the last 20 years, a dramatic shift in women’s involvement has been seen in legislative matters. The absence of philosophical groupings and acceptable definitive models affects women’s cooperation in public government issues. Individuals see this situation as the norm. Women now have a greater chance to have their voices heard on crucial progress topics because of the 50 politically reserved spaces in the national parliamentary afforded to them.

Nevertheless, they have a place in the process of local administration recently, and their contributions are more valued than ever. There is still a considerable gap for females before participating in fair cycles and political discussions as residents or as scheduled representatives in local government organizations (Table 1). This gap in the political sector is driven by societal conventions and patriarchal attitudes, maintaining a male-dominated political arena (Helvetas, 2022).

Females’ cooperation in the labor force developed from 16.2 million in 2010 to 18.6 million in 2016–17 (Ferdous, 2019). Bangladesh has been placed 50th worldwide by the global gender gap index 2020, because it performs better than its South Asian neighbors in extending women’s rights (Alam, 2020).

However, female involvement in higher education in Bangladesh rose from 14% in 1990 to 48% in 2005 and 69% in 2015 (Rahman et al., 2019). The proportion of Bangladeshi women participating in the labor force climbed to 27 and 31%, an increase from the previous rate of 24% (Islam et al., 2016). This growth occurred between the years 1990 and 2005. This is a giant leap forward. During a similar period, men’s workforce cooperation was 80–85% (Tanaka et al., 2021). As the educational level of females increases, their ability to oppose patriarchy does not inevitably increase as a result. Also, the rise in labor force participation is not confirmed.

Significant gender gaps in education levels occur, with remote women falling far behind their urban and male counterparts. There are considerable disparities between the genders in higher education. In rural Bangladesh, women did not have equitable access to higher education or good physical and mental health care, so they had difficulty navigating the job market. Additionally, the jobs available to women in Bangladesh’s urban and rural areas are vastly different. A rural woman’s ability to migrate to a location where she can find work is limited by the long-standing custom of women being segregated from men, which prevents rural women from relocating independently.

Young women from low-income homes or rural regions are expected to face physical and financial dangers on the job since they are more likely to experience sexual provocation. Women in the service business do not get top positions or promotions, even when they have a higher degree or are otherwise well-educated and talented. The Asian Development Bank finds that only 0.6% of parliamentarians, high-ranking representatives and supervisors are women, and only 0.32% of specialized and skilled staff are women in Bangladesh.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>0.704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>0.670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>0.627</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source(s): UNDP (2020)*

Table 1. Global gender gap index of Bangladesh
Research method
A qualitative method has been employed to address the aim of the study. In this research, researchers can delve deeply into the subject and grasp the social, cultural and environmental aspects that affect how people behave and make decisions (Tenny et al., 2017). It offers comprehensive and in-depth insights that are impossible to get only using quantitative techniques. This study’s secondary data have been utilized to support the study with significant and minor information regarding the current state of higher-quality education, gender equality in Bangladesh and the relevance of higher studies to eliminate gender inequality. It is regarded that the subjectivity of people’s experiences, perceptions and interpretations is the main emphasis of qualitative research. It investigates human drives, convictions, principles and feelings to give readers a better grasp of the overall phenomena. Rigid procedures have been used in this qualitative research to increase the reliability and validity of the results.

The data were gathered by conducting purposive sampling, where interviewees were chosen selectively to comprehend the significance of higher education in gender development in Bangladesh. The acquired data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Furthermore, interviews with experts from government officials and specialists were undertaken to triangulate the data further and provide insight into the root causes of gender disparity. Ethical considerations were rigorously considered during this research. The results portion of this research includes direct quotations from several interviews to facilitate clarity and better comprehension.

Sampling
In this study, the qualitative method has been applied with inductive reasoning to develop new theories by employing the existing literature. Purposive sampling, aiming to grasp the study’s objectives, involves a qualitative sample of 25 individuals, consisting of twenty participants and five experts. To understand the phenomena, the total sample size has been taken from urban and rural units. It has been expected that urban and rural individuals’ mentality differ from various perspectives; thus, interviewees from both units have been well-maintained for balancing the perspectives of the present situation and position of women and how higher quality education can eliminate gender disparity within society of Bangladesh. To maintain gender equality within the study, ten men and women participants have been chosen selectively.

Moreover, five experts from government officials and specialists aged 26–52 from urban and rural areas participated in this research. They all completed higher education and were connected in the job sector (Table 2).

Sample size analysis
Individuals from various urban and rural regions have been selected purposively to maintain a balance and mix of various perspectives. To maintain gender equality, a proper mix of men and women has been considered. The analysis of the selected sample size that participated in the interview is shown in Table 3.

Tools, sources and methods of data collections
To collect primary qualitative data, researchers conducted interviews and employed semi-structured questions. Following the recommendations, data triangulation was performed using various sources. For the public stakeholder study, the researchers reached out to government authorities and for the private stakeholder analysis; they spoke with private institution staff. The research used several methods: interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII). Secondary data sources were utilized
to understand the influence of higher-quality education in decreasing gender discrimination in the society of Bangladesh. This study used semi-structured questions designed to collect qualitative data.

**Theoretical framework**

This research is grounded in the liberal feminism theory by Marry Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Betty Friedan and Begum Rokeya’s (Akter *et al.*, 2019) and Sigmund Freud as well as Sandra Harding’s gender and development theory, to address concerns about gender inequality and directions for gender equivalence and women’s emancipation (Figure 1). According to the liberal feminism theory, women desire the same things as men: to gain an education, create a respectable living, achieve financial independence and provide for their families. Even though liberal feminism does not deny that there may be biological distinctions between men and women, which cannot be used to justify things like the difference in pay between men and women. Gender is a socially created term influenced by cultural norms and expectations. This theory emphasizes health, employment, schooling, politics and administration changes to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment.

In this study, both theories underpin the relationship between quality higher education and gender equality in Bangladesh. However, ignorance and socialization are the primary drivers of gender inequality (Thompson, 2016). The authors intend to clarify the need to modify the policy implications and practices since it lacks attractions and proper knowledge to introduce society to relevant knowledge of gender equality. Thus, ensuring quality higher education for women might undoubtedly be a pathway to advancing gender equality.

**Findings**

Based on the interview and data analysis, six subordinate themes emerged: “Mentality,” “System of society,” “Lack of supervision,” “Religious perspective,” “Morals” and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants’ group</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Sample selection criteria</th>
<th>Tools/instruments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purposively selected participants</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Participants from urban and rural were selected, conducting a purposive method to ensure a balance of data</td>
<td>Semi-structured questions for interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University faculty</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>One university faculty was selected via a purposive method</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government stakeholders</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Three government officials were interviewed via Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and one gender specialist was interviewed via Key Informant Interview (KII)</td>
<td>Semi-structured questions for FGD and KII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialists</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.** Detailed sampling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.** Sampling size analysis
“Qualifications.” Among these six themes, “system of the society,” “Morals” and “Qualifications” are for the superordinate theme—more educated yet less employed, and “Mentality” and “Religious perspective” are for the superordinate theme of rural women’s hovering progress.

More educated yet less empowered

System of the society. The participants were asked, “When was the first time you confronted discrimination?” Most participants responded that they had encountered discrimination primarily in society and, thus, believed that society’s structure is antagonistic to women’s empowerment. The contradictions between men and women in society serve as the basis for inequality. The participants blamed the patriarchal societal customs and norms that restrict male and female rights that are still widely prevalent in most parts of Bangladesh. The economic worth of women’s rights is much lower than men’s; women often have restricted mobility and are tied to the home realm.

Participants who resided in the urban area stated that, according to the norms of society, a woman must complete her education before finding a husband who can provide adequately for her and her children (Table 4). Women do not need outside jobs since their primary responsibility is to look after their husbands and children and cook and clean for them. This has been accepted in a culture where the man’s role is limited to providing for the family. Due to this, women cannot be self-sufficient and the males remain to maintain positions of authority within the family.

In this regard, some male participants also showed indirect prejudice towards women and their points of view. They believe that women cannot handle the pressure of office work. Also, some individuals feel that the money they bring in is sufficient to sustain their families, and they do not think the women in their families need to work outside the house since they believe they bring in enough money themselves. On the other side, several male participants expressed complete support for employment opportunities for women.
I cannot understand why people do not want women to work outside. When women work outside, society should be proud because sometimes a woman can do more than a man. (Res20)

They consider the women they work with more productive than the males. They also believe they can develop even more; society does not encourage them. Therefore, they believe the rights and policies regarding women should be promoted in rural and urban areas to develop awareness.

Policies and legislation are already in place; thus, I believe a concerted effort to raise public awareness is required. (Res24)

**Morals.** Several respondents responded to the question, “How would you describe your work environment?” One of the grounds for the low number of women who can make their upper-level positions is that there is no morality in the workplace. In most cases, males are selected for employment over women for no reason other than being male. This sort of gender discrimination has been going on for centuries. It has been shown that there is a prejudice against women in the hiring process, screening, application process, selection options and advancement opportunities (Table 5).

In response to “How do you maintain competitiveness with your coworkers?” participants responded that women need to provide a more significant body of evidence than males. Because of this change, the criteria generally used to measure performance are changed when a man is used as a benchmark.

A participant stated that she had been subjected to harassment and the environment was not conducive to working efficiently in response to the question, “How comfortable are you in your workplace?” She stated that,

Due to my family’s disapproval and fear of their family name being dishonored, I could not take action. Moreover, I did not want others to see me negatively since this may lead to future troubles. (Res09)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary codes</th>
<th>Key reflections</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unequal social system</td>
<td>The structure of society is skewed in favor of males</td>
<td>“I think the reason behind the gender gap is the unequal system of our society ...” (Res01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earning source</td>
<td>Women are not regarded as earning members of the family</td>
<td>“I think this is about society. It has been a tradition and ancient practice among the community that male family members should get privileges in all walks of life.” (Res07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical weakness</td>
<td>Women are regarded as weak, thus restricting them to house</td>
<td>“I do not believe that women should take this kind of pressure if they have a male in their family who works.” (Res18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary codes</th>
<th>Key reflections</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unequal hiring process</td>
<td>The hiring process is skewed in favor of males</td>
<td>“I have seen a classmate get the job even though he had fewer qualifications than me.” (Res08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biased promotion</td>
<td>Women encounter degradation in terms of promotion</td>
<td>“I think they are biased. Because I am a woman, I do not get the promotion.” (Res05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative workplace environment</td>
<td>A hostile workplace environment creates barriers to women working effectively</td>
<td>“I left my job because I was uncomfortable with the male CEO ...” (Res06)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Thematic analysis of the system of the society

Table 5. Thematic analysis of the morals
Although many women in Bangladesh allege that they have been subjected to sexual harassment on the job, their accusations are seldom taken seriously. The fear of not receiving proper justice prevents them from taking action, leading to many victims choosing to end their own lives rather than live and look forward to judgment because they are somewhat ashamed, which should not be the case. Thus, the gender specialist stated that,

Girls and young women need to be able to speak up, live without fear of violence, and get their rights. The government, UN, development partners and networks, CSOs, and private sectors must work together. (Res22)

**Lack of supervision.** The government has sufficient guidelines, but people do not follow them appropriately since no one is looking. These steps were not helpful; therefore, the monitoring was inconsistent throughout. Law enforcement authorities with patriarchal views are not held accountable, so women are discouraged from filing complaints. A government official stated in regard the question, “What could be done to improve the alignment of policy and practice?”

It is about keeping the fixed seats for women in public transport and the strict supervision that everyone abides by the rules. (Res10)

**Qualifications.** Participants were asked, “What was your family’s or neighbors’ opinion while pursuing higher education?” Several participants from rural areas stated that they got a hostile approach from family and urban counterpart individuals portrayed the negative attitude they received from the neighborhood. A female respondent indicated that women believe they generally have lower levels of competence than men because that is what they have been taught since childhood. As a result, women cannot compete successfully with their male counterparts in the same way (Table 6).

Some of the individuals interviewed believe that the educational qualifications of women are not lower than those of men. As a result, it is troublesome for girls to contend with men for higher-level jobs and grow in their careers. The answer regarding “What were your most significant support and worst hurdles to reaching your goal?” a participant stated that the most challenging part of a woman in a workplace is the lack of skills and career development opportunities, which hinders women’s future potential. Therefore, the university faculty argued that,

I believe there must be a considerable investment in women’s health, education, skills development, and employment. (Res23)

**Rural women’s hovering progress**

**Mentality.** Regarding the question, “What were your worst hurdles to reaching your goal?” participants indicated that the attitudes held by individuals are the primary factor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary codes</th>
<th>Key reflections</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of qualifications</td>
<td>Women hardly receive higher education</td>
<td>“At some level, I do not have enough skills to reach that position . . .” (Res04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of training facilities</td>
<td>Women possess the potential but lack good training opportunities</td>
<td>“Some women who work under me could do much better if they had more chances to improve their skills because they have the potential.” (Res15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Thematic analysis of the qualifications
contributes to the gender gap, and it was the consensus across all the women. People who live in more remote parts of the country sometimes have mentalities that have not yet been reformed. They believe women do not need to engage in academic or professional pursuits. Participants were asked, “When was the first time you confronted discrimination?” A female participant regretfully stated women are still the last to sit down for daily meals, which adds to their chronic malnourishment problem. Furthermore, it prevents individuals from participating in social activities (Table 7).

People consider women to be a liability to the community. It is possible for women who reside in remote locations to complete their degrees at a four-year institution, but they are not permitted to continue their studies. Because to pursue further education, they are required to move to the city and people who live in rural regions feel that females who live in metropolitan areas have character flaws. They cannot get a job that pays well because of their gender and the way they appear. That is why a female responded that,

I think this is about society and mentality. The policies and laws are no point until we change people’s minds. (Res06)

Cultural issues. Women who grew up in rural regions and went on to get advanced degrees spend much of their time discussing how people in rural areas are still prejudiced. The people of Bangladesh are traditional in their beliefs and practices, and they also place strict limits on the independence of women. The only work women are permitted to perform is housework; they are strictly prohibited from working outside the home (Table 8).

Rural individuals prevent women from leaving the house by declaring that women are not allowed to leave the house. They believe they will maintain their virtue if women do not leave the house. Without religious freedom, women cannot participate in politics and their vital, insightful and original thoughts will not be considered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary codes</th>
<th>Key reflections</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ignorance</td>
<td>The rural people seem to see the advancement of women as a degradation of norms and values</td>
<td>“These city women forget their values, so they should stay at home. Thus, they can be protected.” (Res14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area discrimination</td>
<td>Rural women are often overlooked for their birthplace and appearance, even if they are well-skilled</td>
<td>“We, rural women, might not have as good a sense of style as modern people, but we have the same qualifications and potential as everyone else, and maybe even more. We do not get the chance to show that, however.” (Res03)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Thematic analysis of the mentality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary codes</th>
<th>Key reflections</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious barriers</td>
<td>Religious practices in rural areas create barriers</td>
<td>“I think the religious mind view plays a significant role . . .” (Res05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictions of achieving future potential</td>
<td>Religious practices in rural areas create discrimination in gender that restricts women from achieving higher education</td>
<td>“There is not a single religion that supports gender discrimination. All they are doing is using religion as an excuse to oppress women.” (Res02)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Thematic analysis of the cultural issues

High-quality education in gender equality
Discussion

Intrinsic empowerment to instrumental empowerment

The theories of liberal feminism and gender and development were found appropriate to discuss the findings. A contradiction exists between females “increasing participation in higher education and their continued low involvement in the skilled labor force (Parvin and Alam, 2016). Female students’ intrinsic levels of empowerment increased due to their involvement in and retention in higher education. There is a dissimilarity in the degree of instrumental strengthening in Bangladesh.

Gender inequality is rooted in societal gender inequities. Social constructs of relationships come from biologically based sexual divisions of work (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). Society encourages women to further their education, not for personal growth but to get a better partner and improve their children’s lives (Kumar, 2021). In society, only males are considered the primary earning source and are usually offered jobs from job sectors over women based solely on their gender.

Anti-female bias has been found in recruitment, applicant screening, selection and promotion. Unethical behavior reduces the number of female workers. Women hardly get to work at a higher level (Alam et al., 2022). The dominant ideology in Bangladesh’s patriarchal culture is that males are inherently superior to women and that women contribute nothing to society beyond the ability to run a home. The dominant ideology is the fundamental basis for the inequality that exists between the genders from the moment of their birth. Men are always given more of a chance than women are when it comes to employment and sometimes even education (Haque, 2019).

Therefore, women seek higher education, which is advantageous to their personal development (Davis and Maldonado, 2015). Even after achieving personal growth, they are unable to contribute to their country’s growth or demonstrate their value to society because obtaining a higher level of education is insufficient to fulfill the requirements of the entire development process, which prevents them from being able to contribute to the growth of their country.

Gender development comparing the urban–rural sector

Women in rural Bangladesh did not have equal access to higher education or appropriate physical and mental health care (Islam et al., 2017). Because of this, they had a difficult time finding work in the workforce. Moreover, people in our country still have the wrong ideas about what constitutes sexual harassment, and a critical piece of the complete populace knows nothing about the regulations that oversee it, which has added to an expansion in orientation-based viciousness (Hajian et al., 2014). Despite the numerous laws and campaigns, people’s ideas about sexual harassment are still wrong.

Many families refuse to let their daughters leave the house for gainful employment (Haque, 2019). Some employees were dismissed or police officers were paid by the families of those charged when women complained about what they were experiencing (McDonald, 2012). So, women often lack the self-assurance to stand up to verbal or physical abuse from men in situations involving competition for scarce resources or sexual harassment (Van Deuren et al., 2016).

The employment opportunities open to women in urban and rural parts of Bangladesh are diverse (Alam and Sharmin, 2023). The age-old practice of keeping women and men in separate spaces, which prevents rural women from transferring independently, restricts a rural woman’s ability to go to an area where she might find employment (Heintz et al., 2017). In urban regions, female university graduates have risen steadily in recent decades. Employment rates have not kept pace, resulting in a decline in the proportion of women actively working and graduating (Alam et al., 2023a, b).
Gender equality in Bangladesh has reached a high level of growth. It is calculated by averaging the rates for urban and rural regions. The results show that rural women suffer much more than their urban counterparts. This is because many individuals living in rural regions stick to the old convictions that “guys are predominant” or “ladies are the more fragile,” the two of which are misinterpretations. The rural counterparts lack literacy and delve into prejudices more than rural individuals; they suffer more inequality in society to preserve a male-dominated social system.

**Recommendations**

The following policy recommendations are inevitable to consider:

*Enactment of relevant policies*

The government must adequately implement policies to decrease gender inequality. The authority should implement specific policies for women’s empowerment. It is to be ensured that rural women cannot be put behind urban women.

*Ensure quality higher education*

The stakeholders must provide women with quality higher education to ensure their empowerment in the economic, political, social, and cultural fields. The authorities should take the initiative to provide knowledge regarding the technological potential.

*Literacy of women’s rights*

Women should bring to light the laws and women’s rights preserved through quality education. TV channels, radio, the Internet and social media campaigns might increase the concern for women’s rights.

**Conclusion**

Higher education is a significant pathway to make people aware of their rights and responsibilities and exercise those rights when necessary. Various legislations support women, but a lack of understanding prevents women from progressing toward gender equality. In addition, the community has seemed to be a significant barrier to restricting women’s empowerment. Thus, advanced education is one of the most appropriate and relevant ways of engaging women with economic, political and social activities and building self-empowerment. This research is unique in terms of illustrating the inherent challenges focusing on both urban and rural areas toward women empowerment in Bangladesh. As this study is limited to the context of Bangladesh and the role of higher education in advancing gender equality, the study creates a scope for future research regarding the role of reproductive rights, equal wage rate and childcare system in developing gender equality. Furthermore, the incorporation of sex education in various levels of education can be a significant area to eliminate gender disparity in the context of rural Bangladesh. Thus, further research is expected to achieve a better understanding of reducing gender discrimination globally.

**References**


**Corresponding author**
Md Jahangir Alam can be contacted at: mjalalmjsc@du.ac.bd

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com