Abstract: Women empowerment is identified as an essential component for the progress of a nation. One of the main tools for women empowerment is education. In Bangladesh, many girl children cannot join schools and along with that, in the hill districts of the country, the challenges of bringing and keeping the girls to schools are more complicated because of geographical position. Bangladesh Open University (BOU) has been established in 1992 with an aim to make education accessible to the population at large and Open School of BOU has been working for educating people with emphasizing the dropout and the underprivileged. Open School is offering education through open and distance learning (ODL) and has a flexible manner towards enrolling students who have been discontinued from formal education. Though government organizations, Open School of BOU, other government organizations and non-government organizations (NGOs) are working for the girl children with a special emphasis in hill districts, the girls still quit schools before they are able to complete upper primary and secondary schooling. This research initiative was taken to know what are the difficulties that the girls are facing so that they have to leave school so early. The paper concentrates on the challenges which the educators, teachers, local people, guardians, parents and girls were mentioning during a research initiative in two hill districts e.g. Rangamati, Bandarbon. The research has been based on interviews and the informants were interviewed individually and in groups. Qualitative method was employed to collect the data from the respondents and analyse the collected data. The research is providing a depth overview how girls in hill districts are confronting to the barriers and how they are discontinuing their education at a very early stage of life and how Open School of BOU can give a wider option to bring the girls back to the schools again. This essay would definitely give an understanding to the policy planners, educators, practitioners as well as general people for the girl children’s present predicaments in hill tracts in Bangladesh and recommendations to bring them back to schools for continuing education.

Key words: girls, primary education, ODL, hill tracts, qualitative method

Introduction: Open School of Bangladesh has started working for bringing drop-out girls back to school since 1995. Bangladesh like many other countries is also struggling towards the betterment of women’s status. Women empowerment is an important issue if we look at the national and global development agenda. Despite many international agreements affirming their human rights, women are still much more likely than men to be poor and illiterate (UNFPA, 2013). UNDP focuses on gender equality and women’s empowerment not only as human rights, but also because they are a pathway to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and sustainable development (UNDP, 2013). Women empowerment is one of eight goals of MDGs. Qatar Foundation focuses, "Educate a girl, empower a woman" (Qatar Foundation, 2013). Hillary Clinton delivered a rousing speech on women’s rights insisting that empowering women is a “core imperative” for society (Yahoo News, 2013). The main instrument of empowering women is educating girls. All international organizations, international agencies, world politicians, national agencies and governments at national levels are working for bringing a change for women. Bodies of United Nations and other international organizations are observing the girls’
education development situation of Bangladesh. The country has made tremendous efforts and there in the past decade have been successful in getting more girls into school, resulting in gender parity in enrolments in primary and lower secondary schools, but the percentage of girls begins to decline in the later secondary years. When the girl dropouts are added to the number of girls who have never enrolled, there are still approximately 1.5 million primary school age girls out of school (UNICEF, 2013).

Geography of Bangladesh and Introduction of Hill Tracts in Brief: Bangladesh is a low-lying plain, riverine and small country and has a total area of 147,570 square kilometers. The soil of the country is highly alluvial and fertile, because of rain and unparallel flow from outside the country, this country is prone to flood and because of river erosion and absence of deep water reservoir, this plane land country is vulnerable to drought. Hills are visible above the plain area in the Chittagong Hill Tracts which is located in the south-east part as well as the Sylhet division in the northeast. This paper concentrates on the Chittagong Hill Tracts that comprise an area of 13,295 km2 in southeastern Bangladesh and border India and Myanmar (Burma). The hill tracts consists of three districts. The three districts are Khagrachari, Rangamati, and Bandarban (wikipedia, 2007). These three districts are almost similar in physical geography. The Chittagong Hills rise steeply to narrow ridge lines, generally no wider than 36 meters, with altitudes from 600 to 900 meters above sea level. At 1,052 meters altitude, the highest elevation in Bangladesh is found at Mowdok Mual, in the southeastern part of the hills. Fertile valleys lie between the hill lines (Wikipedia, 2013).

Perspective of the Research Initiative: Bangladesh is tagged as a developing country and it is true that the economy of Bangladesh is doing better than early years after independence. Government of Bangladesh has an earnest effort to include all girl children in education. Few NGOs and education projects have been working side by side. However, thousands of girls are leaving school before completing upper primary (vi-viii) and secondary (ix-x) schooling. Socio-cultural attitudes, distances to secondary school, the lack of transportation infrastructure, and early marriage, are all factors mentioned by communities that contribute to the low enrollment of girls in post-primary education. Attitudes about school attendance of girls are changing, helped by the government policy of encouraging female attendance at the secondary school level through stipends for girls only, but girls’ secondary school attendance continues to lag behind boys (WFP, 2013). This initiative was taken to know what are the causes for girls for leaving schools in the hill districts of Bangladesh and to understand what factors which impede girls to access and to complete primary and secondary education. This research study was undertaken with a special emphasis too to comprehend how Open School should work in hill districts to motivate the girls to join open school for SSC programme. The perspective of the hill districts has been studied as there exists geographical difference.

Methodology: Open School of BOU has been working for educating people with emphasizing the girls who are dropout from the mainstream secondary (vi-x) or upper primary (vi-x) education system. In hill districts, there are challenges to bring the girls to Open School and it is more complicated to keep the girls in schools. Among the three districts, Rangamati and Bandarban were visited to collect data and there were 23 girls who are between 16-21 years old and they are involved in different jobs such as
agriculture worker, day laborer, working as housemaids, mushroom cultivator, hand loom worker, poultry farmer and some girls are working at home to support their mothers. There were 12 social leaders who are working as teachers, NGO workers, journalists, municipality ward member, imams of mosques and 18 parents and guardians who were from different social and professional background i.e. hand loom worker, shop keeper, farmer, sweeper, day laborer, working at municipality. These people are interviewed individually as well as in separate groups for understanding the nature of barriers, challenges the girls face in the hill tracts and what motivational factors are necessary to help the girls to join Open School at the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) programme. The following points are main aspects while the respondents were interviewed:

- Reasons for girls’ drop-out from schools
- Girls’ activities after leaving schools
- Necessary steps to be taken to bring girls back to school
- Necessary technology innovation for the girls
- Supports from Social Leader

After the data collection, the qualitative (Miles and Huberman, 1994) method has been used for data analysis. While the interviews were taken, I took permission of the respondents to use a voice recorder to record the views and I also wrote their idea to capture their main ideas.

Reasons for girls’ drop-out from schools

While interviewing a municipal ward commission in Bandarban district, he has pointed out that there are many problems in hill districts and the problems are primary and secondary schooling system, parents’ attitude towards girls, private tutoring cost, religious and social values, distance of school and the problems hinder girls to be in schools. However he has emphasized that the main problem is financial constraints and there are more than 40% drop-out in the region from primary to secondary education because of poverty. A college teacher was saying in a group in Rangamati district that the main problem lies with lack of education of parents because parents of the girls do not understand the further implication of education. These parents send their girls to works as agriculturer, handloom and poultry jobs are available in these areas. An Imam of a mosque was saying in agreement with the teacher that these parents have lack of awareness about what education can do for their girls and the parents do not pursue the girls for education in case the girls decline to go to school. In a parent meeting, a parent, a shopkeeper in Banderban district has mentioned that when he knew, his daughter did not pass examination in a school examination, he felt very embarrassed and he said that he should not sent his daughter back to school and he also mentioned that he could not afford to keep private tutors. Another parent in the group added that only sending girls to the school is not enough because school does not guide much so that the girls can study alone at home. In his house, there is none who can assist the girl to study. A girl in Rangamati has mentioned that she went to school with a hope that she would learn everything at school but she felt that the support she got was not enough to learn different subjects. A girl has mentioned that the School is in a hill and she lives in a different hill and she needs a boat to cross the river to attend school. A social leader has pointed out that in some
areas of hill-tracks, it is difficult to reach school for girls. Some places are so difficult that even teachers cannot stay near school. Another social leader has said that because of distance and difficult of travel for the school, parents feel insecure for girls to send schools. Another social leader, a headmaster in Bandaran district has said that in some places of hill tracts, there is no school. So, the girls have to stay in district towns at a hostel and the number of hostel is very insufficient and girls cannot come to school on hat (weekly bazaar) day. A social leader, an assistant professor of a government college has said that teenage marriage is prevalent in hilly district. There is a trend to marry early when a girl becomes a teenage. When a girl comes to class vi or to class vii, the girl herself arranges marriage by choosing a boy. The case is available in some hilly areas.

**Girls’ activities after leaving schools**

The questions related to what the girls do if they leave school without completing schools were raised to the respondents separately. A social leader, a journalist has mentioned that these girls leave for work and today the girls go for urban areas, Chittagong or Dhaka for working in a garment factory or in a beauty parlour and they want to earn working there. The girls who live in the hilly areas works for handloom, poultry farm and agriculture fields. A guardian, a primary school teacher was mentioning that the girls of the hilly never sit idle because they all learn handloom as a family tradition and each girl of a family contribute towards earning their. A girl, a drop-out who completed class iv has mentioned she makes cloth using handloom and she looks after poultry at her own house and she is earning almost Tk.5000-6000 (USD$56-80) in a month.

**Necessary steps to be taken to bring girls back to school**

The social leaders, parents and girls have frank opinions when the questions were arised how girls can be brought them back to school. Several opinions are prominent in the interviews which are taken in the paper. A social leader comes with some suggestions which are classes should be held on weekend or on Friday so that girls can participate in classes and there should not be any admission fee as well as tuition fee for pursuing the girls back to school. Now question was raised on the aspect that government is providing education for free and no tuition fee as well as financial assistance is available for girls. Still girls are leaving schools. In these perspectives, a social leader had said that parents' awareness is important and the teachers should do some counseling to the parents about benefit of education and what the girls can do in future if their girls are educated. An NGO worker has said that in some cases, school should go to the girl children if the children do not go to school because there are some areas in hill districts from where it is difficult for girls to go to school because of communication and of distance. So the number of study centres of Open School should be increased because in hilly areas, it is difficult to move for school. A high school teacher has mentioned that Open School should work in the way as the NGO does all the year round because in some areas of hill district, awareness about the education is more important as Open School should establish training centre for providing awareness programme in the rural areas of hill districts and the same opinion echoes in Bandaran that it is necessary to provide awareness training to the parents of the girls. A journalist has said in Rangamati that teachers can take initiative to visit the residence of girl in case a girl becomes irregular after getting admission in a school. Most of the respondents have mentioned that free study materials are available timely and financial
assistance should be available for each girl. Considering the living cost of an individual in Bangladesh, the minimum allocation may be Tk.1000 (USD$13) for each girl each month and they have the opinion that if the Open School can introduce that much assistant for the girl, the girls can concentrate on the study without looking for earning for livelihood in the hill district.

**Necessary technology innovations for the girls**

Some social leaders have been in favor of providing audio-video teaching materials through mobile phone and Internet. While asking to the girls, most of the girls mentioned that the girls have a mobile phone or they have an access to a mobile phone. Most of the girls didn’t listen to the Internet but they can use mobile phone for communicating as well as for listening to music, watching cinema and playing games. If they are taught through training centres about how to use mobile technology for education, they would be able to use it for education. A social leader has mentioned that if study materials are given through mobile phone using Internet, there may be a chance of misuse. A parent has said that his daughter is good at technical work if she is given any vocational training for beauty parlour work, or for sewing and embroidery or tailoring work, she will be able to work independently after passing schooling. Another respondent has added that if multi-media projector can be used in the classroom while teaching, the girl may understand the teaching topic clearly. Open School should involve some technical institute for technical training if the institution wishes to teach vocational subjects.

**Supports from Social Leaders**

Now the questions were turned towards the respondents specially to the social leaders. The social leaders in both districts have felt they have something to do if Open School takes initiatives to do. These social leaders e.g. municipal ward member, chairman, NGO workers, primary, high school, college teachers can motivate girls to come to school. The leaders will arrange teachers for free training for the girls. They will arrange workshop or seminar for making people aware. They can give land or school space on rent basis like BRAC or ASA. They will participate in the social campaigns if Bangladesh Open University wishes them to participate.

**The Strategies of Open School for drop-out girls:**

Initiatives required from Open School for drop-out girls back to School:

1. Classes should be held on Friday or on weekend.
2. Study materials are available freely.
3. There should not be any admission fee to school.
4. Open School can distribute mobile phone to the girls to provide audio-video listens through the device.
5. Open School can allot Multi-media projector for the class for teaching technical subjects.
6. Open School needs to tie up with other training centres i.e. Government Youth Development Centres for girls’ technical training such as poultry farming, beauty parlour work, mushroom cultivation, computer training, tailoring etc.
7. Financial assistance should be available. The minimum stipend allocation for each girl for each month should be at least Tk.1000 (USD$13).
8. Open School needs to set up new Study Centres in the remotest part of the hill districts as those areas are difficult for girls to go to school.
9. Open School should arrange training programme for parents, social leaders and tutors.
10. Tutors should visit the residences of girls to bring them to school.
11. Open School should involve social leaders and electronic and print media for providing awareness to the girls’ parents, for making campaign for girls security and for building girls hostels in hill districts.

**Conclusion:** Open School of Bangladesh is working since its inception in 1995 for educating the drop-out girls and boys. However, if Open School arranges academic programme with special facilities for the backward, drop-out from mainstream education system and less-privileged girls of the hill districts of Bangladesh, the girls will get a second chance for educating themselves and will definitely contribute towards national development. This research has unearthed the deep inside of the girls’ barriers and challenges. This is not only poverty that is responsible for their drop-out, but parents’ awareness and shyness for their daughter’s academic performance, social insecurity, scarcity of accommodation, distance from school, early marriage are also some of many other factors which are responsible for quitting school at an early stage of learning. Open School has to have a broader vision and empathetic approach to address the issues of girls in hilly districts while it plans to implement a programme for the girls.

**References**


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