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Gender Awareness of Rural Women in Bangladesh

By Shahnaj Parveen¹

Abstract

This study aims to determine the social status of rural women and their level of gender awareness (GA) in three villages within the Mymensingh district of Bangladesh. Data were collected from 156 respondents through group discussions and personal interviews from December 2002 to April 2003. Women's social status and GA was determined following the Likert scale method. The study reveals that personal income and physical beauty of rural women are the most important factors determining a higher social status while women with distressed conditions including mental and physical disabilities were found to have a lower social status. Among ten pre-selected attributes relating to gender, the respondents were able to recognize gender discrimination with respect to domestic violence, community participation, inheritance of property rights, timing of marriage and divorce rights. However, they failed to recognize disparity regarding payment of dowry during marriage, undervaluation of own work and sex bias in terms of age, education, food and health. A rank correlation analysis points out a significant positive relationship between women's GA and their formal education, exposure to the media, spatial mobility and access to institutional resources, while length of marriage and spousal alienation were negatively correlated. These findings led to the conclusion that development agencies should make pragmatic efforts to increase rural women's gender awareness in respect of increasing their literacy levels, providing useful information through different media, facilitating access to productive resources and establishing women's organizations in the locality. These efforts would help to achieve a higher level of gender awareness among women in rural Bangladesh.

Keywords: Rural women, gender awareness, Bangladesh.

Introduction

Women and men are by constitution equal in the People's Republic of Bangladesh, but in reality they are not (Islam, 2000). Most on-going discussions and research related to women's development and women's rights in Bangladesh indicate that there are at least four mutually interdependent factors influencing the macro-societal system. These include, economic setting, political organization, legal system and ideology and religion. These factors often cocoon women in the social system (Epstein, 1986). There is a gross disparity between women and men in every sphere of life, especially in economic aspects, since the agricultural sector which dominates the national economy is controlled mostly by men. Traditionally, men are the breadwinners and economic dependence makes women socially backward and considered to be a burden on the family. However, the subordination of women in Bangladesh is a consequence of the existing patriarchal social system which determines power relations within households and the bargaining power of household members through the organization of the family, kinship and marriage, inheritance

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patterns, gender segregation and associated ideologies (Khair, 1998; Kabeer 1999; Naved, 2000). Women's powerlessness arises from their illiteracy, lack of awareness, poor knowledge and skills and also from their lack of self-esteem and confidence (Lazo, 1995). Thus, even though women constitute almost half of the population in Bangladesh, their status has been ranked the lowest in the world on the basis of twenty indicators related to education, health, marriage, children, employment and social equality (NCBP, 2000).

There are social stigmas, such as early marriage, dowry and limited property inheritance rights that cause misery for many women in Bangladesh, especially in rural areas. Early marriage is one of the prominent factors for low educational attainment among females, which leads to lower participation in economic activities as their physical mobility become restricted after marriage (Khatun, 2002). Another contributing factor is that Muslim women's rights to inheritance are not equal to those of men, because a daughter inherits half the share of her brother and a wife receives only one-eighth of the deceased husband's property (ADB, 2001). Furthermore, there is a growing spectrum of violence against women. Bangladeshi women are the most battered in the world, an estimated 47 per cent have suffered from different types of assault (Mahmood, 2004). As a result of these norms and practices, women lack choice and agency in decisions that shape their welfare (Mahmud, 2003). Thus, most aspects of women's lives, particularly women's freedom of choice, decision-making power and access to resources are controlled by the norms of the patriarchal society (Sebstad and Cohen, 2002). Consequently, they are marginalised as production units for bearing and rearing children (Ahmad, 2001). The empowerment of women could be the principal strategy to tackle these crises and upgrade their status, as is evident from a significant body of literature in this area. The government of Bangladesh has enforced laws, such as the 'Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980', 'Acid Crime Prevention Act 2002' and 'Speedy Trial Tribunal Act of 2002'. Recently, the government's approval of the 'Muslim Marriage and Divorces Act 2005' is an innovative step, which aims to empower women and reduce child marriages.

It is pertinent to explain the meaning of 'gender awareness' at this stage. Musokotwane and Siwale (2001) define gender awareness as the recognition of different needs, expectations and life experiences of women and men that often create inequality between them but these are subject to change. In this study, gender awareness refers to the ability of women to identify problems arising from gender inequality and discrimination, which affect their ability to have access to and control over resources. This awareness needs to be created through incorporation of gender analysis in the design of projects, programmes and policies (UNDP, 2001). It leads to a high level of gender 'conscientization' - a process of enhancing people's perception of unequal gender relations in society (NCRFW, 2001). Conscientization involves taking control of one's own life and acquiring understanding of the social, religious and cultural restrictions that limit one's potential for personal development (Rowlands, 1995). Longwe (2001) further describes this as an essential step in women's empowerment, which involves awareness and understanding of the difference between sex roles and gender roles and that gender roles are socially created and therefore, can be changed to promote equality. Thus, awareness building about women's situation, discrimination, rights and opportunities is a step towards greater gender equality (Karl, 1995).

The study reported here, therefore, attempts to focus on gender awareness as an important indicator of the psychological dimension of women's empowerment in Bangladesh. For highlighting the aforesaid issues, the study has the following specific

objectives: i) to assess the social status of rural women; and ii) to determine the extent of their gender awareness and the factors influencing it.

Gender Awareness and Women's Empowerment: Reviewing Critical Issues

Women's empowerment depends on a range of factors including psychological, cognitive, economic, social and political dimensions (Stromquist, 1995). The United Nations' Population Information Network states five dimensions of women's empowerment, such as women's sense of self-worth, choices, access to opportunities and resources, power to control own lives and ability to influence the direction of social change (POPIN, 1995). This indicates that empowerment is understood not only as an extrinsic control over resources (human, financial, intellectual), but also as a growing intrinsic capability, seen through greater self-confidence and an inner transformation of women's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers to accessing resources or changing traditional ideology (Sen and Batliwala, 2000). It has also identified by many researchers that the self-confidence and self-esteem as essential 'first steps' to an individual's empowerment (Anderson, 1996; Claridge, 1996). This kind of power is termed by Rowlands (1997) as the 'power within', which means an individual power by believing in oneself and one's abilities by increasing one's self-esteem, awareness or consciousness raising and confidence building. This inner power of a person is demonstrated in her/his self-confident behaviour that often results from successful action in the social or political domains (Friedmann, 1992). Lack of this power results in the feelings of worthlessness, which leads to oppression of women and hence, many interventions targeting to uplift women seek to bring about changes at the 'power within' level.

Therefore, women's fallback position and poor bargaining power within a patriarchal structure can be improved through enhancing women's self-perceptions (self-esteem and self-confidence) and gender relations within the household through bargaining power (Chen and Mahmud, 1995). More importantly, the empowerment of women in disadvantaged positions can be achieved through raising awareness of their rights in order to achieve control over their own environment (Musokotwane and Siwale, 2001; Hashemi *et al.*, 1996). Empowerment is, thus, a process of changing the power potential within an individual first and consequently, a change of relationships at different individuals, groups and societal levels. These changes have to be permanent and thus necessitate constant efforts by development agencies over a long period of time. A growing body of evidence points to the importance of undertaking various policy initiatives and interventions for enhancing women's empowerment. Some of the strategic measures reviewed from literature in this connection are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Strategies for empowering women as revealed through reviewing literature

Key strategies	Outcomes of women's empowerment
Education and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enhanced position through knowledge, decision-making autonomy, control over resources, exposure to the modern world and spousal harmony (Jejeebhoy, 1996; Kishor and Gupta, 2004; Tripathy, 2005) - Stimulated recognition and respect for women's own knowledge leading to increased awareness and ability to address gender inequity (Ishengoma, 2004)
Credit-based programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enhanced access to productive resources, income and asset position, bargaining and decision-making power, self-esteem and confidence, social networks and freedom of mobility (Ahmed, 2002; Pitt <i>et al.</i>, 2006; Ramanjaneyulu, 2006) - Widened economic activities, gained independence from male dominance and improved social status (Raheim and Bolden, 1995; Kabeer, 2005; Tripathy and Mohanty, 2005)
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased self-confidence and self-esteem, more motivated and inspired, more valued and respected, experienced greater well-being (Lennie, 2002)
Information media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Raised social consciousness about the symptoms and causes of the oppressive economic, socio-cultural, familial and legal practices (Acharya, 2003) - Gained ideas about poverty alleviation, human rights and changed traditional mindset of people (Islam and Hasan, 2000)
Formation of women's groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gained self-confidence to speak out, reinforced solidarity to challenge and change power relations, increased participation in local institutions and political process (Mayoux, 2003)

It is, therefore, assumed in this study that the rural women's empowerment can be attained by fostering their level of awareness of ten selected gender issues (including under-valuation, educational gap, inheritance of property rights, timing of marriage, practice of dowry, divorce rights, sex bias, birth registration, political awareness and violence against women) through implementing some innovative measures by intervening institutions (Figure 1). The efficiency of these measures depends mainly on the prevailing policies and laws, funding opportunity and infrastructural facilities. It is important to mention here that institutional weakness, religious barriers and corruption appear to be major causes hampering women's development in Bangladesh. Thus a basic change in the institutional structure is necessary to ensure women's rights. Notwithstanding, there are some positive opportunities like education, training, information sources and institutional resources, which can be created as interventions in the existing condition of society. This, in turn, will empower rural women through developing their self-confidence, self-esteem, bargaining power and gaining freedom in order to become independent and conscious about their rights.

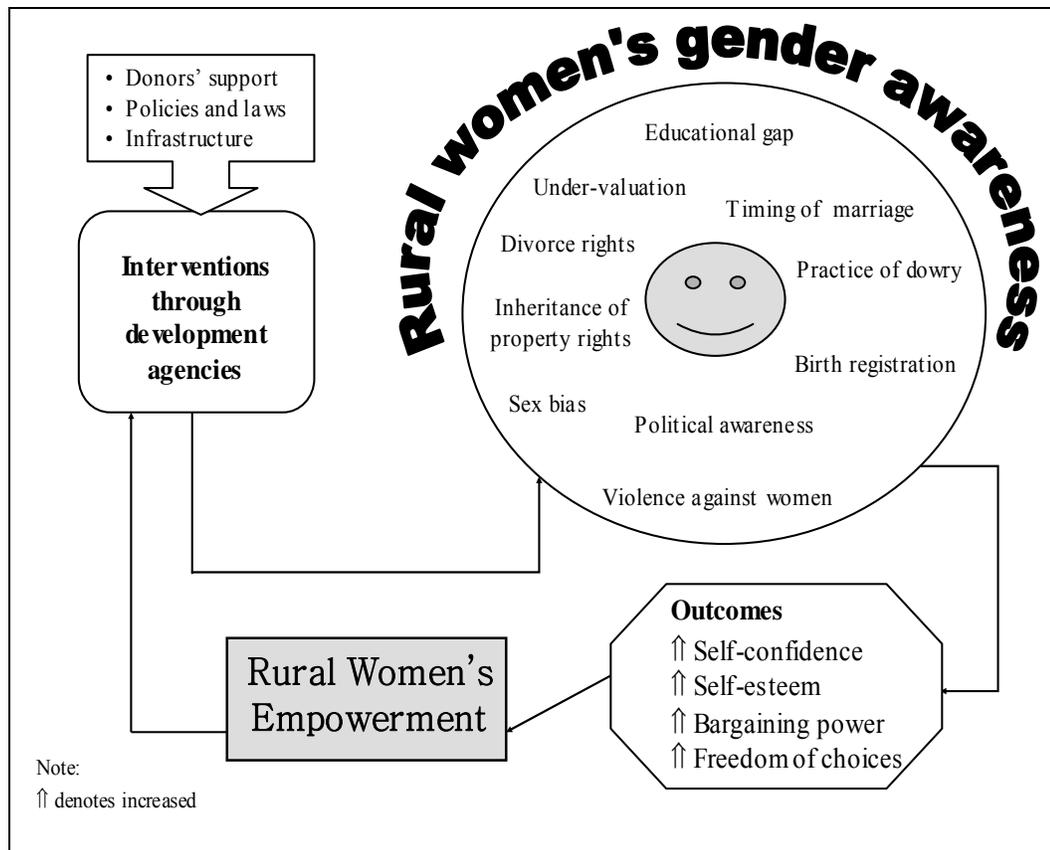


Figure 1: A framework showing the ways of attaining rural women empowerment through enhanced gender awareness

Methodology of the Study

Sources of data

The study was conducted in *Sutiakhali*, *Bijoy Nagar* and *South Charkalibari* villages in Mymensingh District. These were purposively selected based on their degree of substantial development, as indicated by the availability of rural institutions like co-operatives, literacy rate, public welfare services, agricultural modernisation and infrastructural facilities. The farmwives who form the sample belonged to four categories of farm households, defined in terms of their size of land. These were landless (up to 0.20 ha), marginal (0.20 to 0.60 ha), small (0.60 to 1.00 ha) and medium (1.00 to 1.82 ha). Stratified random sampling was used to select 156 (52 from each village, 39 from each category of household) rural women. Additionally, a sub-sample of 84 women was selected for focus group discussions (FGDs). A total of 12 FGDs (4 sessions in each village, each group contained 7 participants) were organized in December 2002. The researcher acted as facilitator and was supported by two assistants. The aim of organizing FGDs was to obtain an understanding of underlying issues related to women's status and their awareness of gender issues. A pre-test was done with a sample of 24 rural women (8 women per village, 2 from each household category) over a one-week period in January 2003 by the researcher. This pre-test helped primarily to adapt the research instrument to the local situation and to improve its content. Interviews with 156 respondents were then conducted using the pre-tested and refined instrument between January to April 2003. It was administered by the

researcher herself with the assistance of six enumerators in a face-to-face setting. Finally, the raw data were compiled and cleaned to make it suitable for statistical analysis. SPSS software package (12.0 Version) was used for data entry. Frequency distribution, percentage, mean, standard deviation (SD), coefficient of variation (CV), rank, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and rank correlation were used to analyse and interpret the data scientifically.

Measurement of variables

Status of rural women

This refers to rural women's perceptions of their position in the household as well as in the community. While referring to 'position', it means women's social and economic standing relative to men, and status is the social value attached to one's position in the class hierarchy (NCRFW, 2001). Women's position and status are formed around a series of cultural and economic factors, such as resource access and use, ownership, control, legal and ideological structures, education and information (Haddad, 1999). The status of rural women in the study was measured based on ten traits selected from a review of the relevant literature. These were modified following the FGDs from which the researcher obtained a clearer picture of rural women's position in the community. Among the traits, five were positive and included income, physical beauty, social status of natal family, payment of dowry and ability to give birth to a son. The negative traits were distress, mental and physical disabilities, illiteracy, poor reproductive health and age. A four-point scale was administered - 0 for 'don't know', 1 for 'lower position', 2 for 'middle position' and 3 for 'upper position' to get a woman's response for each positive trait. It was in reverse order in the case of negative traits. Finally, mean values were calculated separately to establish a rank order among positive and negative traits of women's perceived status.

Measuring gender awareness (GA)

This refers to the ability of a woman to express her opinion with regard to existing gender inequality and discrimination. Out of 15 dimensions of gender inequality, five were discarded after pre-testing ($n = 24$) and proving construct validity (mean 29.46, variance 93.91, item 10) that helps to measure gender awareness accurately. Internal reliability (Cronbach's α 0.78) as well as test-retest form of reliability ($r = 0.82$, significant at 1% level) was also determined to justify that the scale items were relatively free of measurement errors. Consequently, ten crucial dimensions of gender inequality were selected (mentioned earlier). These were ascertained through a 5-point Likert scale and responses ranged from 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'undecided', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. A score of 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 was assigned respectively to each positive statement, whereas it was in reverse order in the case of negative statements. A cumulative awareness score (GA index) was calculated for each of the respondents. The range of the score varied from 10 to 50, where 10 indicate the 'lowest level of awareness' and 50 indicate the 'highest level of awareness' on gender issues. Finally, a rank order was constructed for 10 aspects based on mean score for each item.

Results and Discussion

Socioeconomic profile of rural women

Data regarding the socioeconomic profile of the women are presented in Table 2, which show that there is a fair distribution of the sample among the categories of length of marriage.

Table 2: Percentage distribution of socio-demographic profile of rural women (n = 156)

Variables with category	Per cent	Variables with category	Per cent
Length of marriage		Media exposure	
1-10 years	25	Low exposure	51
10-20 years	36	Medium exposure	39
20-30 years	20	High exposure	10
Above 30 years	19	Spatial mobility	
Formal education		Low mobility	55
No schooling	50	Medium mobility	36
Primary school level	28	High mobility	9
Secondary school level & above	22	Access to institutional resources	
Spousal alienation		No access	38
Yes	41	Low access	30
No	59	Medium access	21
		High access	11

Half the respondents (50%) lack formal schooling, which may have an adverse effect on women's cognitive domain, making them dependent and subordinate to men. A distressing fact is that four out of ten women have unsatisfactory relationship with their spouses. Their exposure to information media is low (51%). Physical mobility of the respondents was limited, which deprives them of getting better livelihood opportunities. A sizable proportion of the respondents (38 %) have no access to education/training, credit, co-operatives and banking facilities because access is highly influenced by external societal structures or processes as well as cultural factors.

Social status of rural women

Analysis of data in Table 3 indicates that those women who have income, physical beauty (mainly fair skin colour), high social status of natal family, sons and the ability to pay dowry during their wedding are more likely to have a higher social status compared to those who are distressed, mentally and physically disabled, illiterate, infertile and very young. This supports Ghassemi's (1990) argument that illiteracy and poor education is a significant factor in contributing to women's lower status in relation to men. Amin and Pebley (1994) have suggested that marriage prospects as well as the status of a woman depend on her beauty, skin colour, education and dowry. The findings in Table 3 confirm these beliefs among the women in this sample, indicating that rural women's subordination is facilitated by strong traditional concepts, beliefs and prejudices. It is, therefore, difficult to envisage how the goal of empowerment can be achieved for women unless these prejudices are deconstructed and eliminated gradually within the Bangladeshi society.

Table 3: Status of women in the local community as perceived by the respondents (n = 156)

Traits	Women's status in the community (%)				Mean ¹ of traits	Rank order
	Not known	Lower	Middle	Upper		
Positive traits						
Income earning ability	0	2	3	95	2.93	1
Having physical beauty	1	0	7	92	2.90	2
High status of natal family ²	1	0	8	91	2.88	3
Giving heavy dowry during marriage	1	4	10	85	2.80	4
Having sons	2	0	18	80	2.76	5
Negative traits						
Distressed women ³	3	96	1	0	2.89	1
Mental and physical disabilities	1	91	8	0	2.87	2
No or very low education	3	86	11	0	2.79	3
Poor reproductive health ⁴	4	85	11	0	2.78	4
Very young housewives ⁵	6	48	33	13	2.24	5

¹ Mean value of indicators ranging from 0 to 3

² Customarily the rural community leaders and elite have the high social status

³ Widows, divorcees, acid survivors and raped women

⁴ Miscarriage, infertile and having any sexual disease

⁵ Indicates women with short length of marriage

The extent of gender awareness among rural women

Result from Table 4 show that among ten items, the respondents were able to recognise gender discrimination with respect to violence, political awareness, inheritance of property rights and timing of marriage. However, they failed to recognise disparity regarding dowry, non-recognition of women's work, birth registration and discrimination between boys and girls. Ten dimensions of gender awareness of rural women are illustrated here using both quantitative and qualitative data.

i) Violence against women: By analyzing the focus group discussions, it appeared that dowry, physical aggression, threat to divorce, polygamy, unwillingness to provide livelihood support, extramarital relationship and mental torture were the most common acts of violence against women at the household level. It is interesting to note that more than half of the respondents (65%) were well aware of the importance of family courts for the victims. They agreed that oppressed women can get justice under the auspices of the local Union Council and that punishment imposed by the 'family court' greatly helps to reduce violence against women within the community.

ii) *Political awareness*: Among the surveyed women, 66 per cent agreed that women should have equal opportunities with men to participate in community development. Although village women can discuss their problems with a female leader freely, 26 per cent of the respondents disagreed with women's political participation. They thought that due to religious values, it is a sin to interact with men in public, which would amount to a transgression of the social limits set by the custom of veils. The high level of illiteracy is also a constraint to women's political awareness and ability to make effective choices.

Table 4: Extent of rural women's gender awareness (n = 156)

Dimensions	Statement (s)	Level of agreement ¹ (%)			Mean ² of items	Rank order
		A	UD	DA		
Violence against women	'Family court' is very important for victimised women (+)	65	7	28	3.72	1
Political awareness	Female members should be given equal importance in community elected bodies (+)	66	8	26	3.69	2
Inheritance of property rights	Sons and daughters should have equal right to their parental property (+)	64	1	35	3.56	3
Early marriage	Marrying off girls between 14-17 is not bad (-)	36.5	0	63.5	3.45	4
Divorce rights	Both husband and wife should have equal right for divorce (+)	51	4	45	3.16	5
Sex bias	Sons should get priority than daughters for food and health care (-)	51	2	47	2.90	6
Educational gap	It is not bad if females are less educated than males (-)	55	0	45	2.76	7
Birth registration	Girls actual age should be kept hidden because of existing social system (-)	60	3	37	2.63	8
Under-valuation	Women's work is less important than men's (-)	81	0	19	1.82	9
Practice of dowry	Selection of bride groom by offering dowry is good for daughter's happiness (-)	84	0	16	1.67	10

¹ A= Strongly agreed + Agreed, UD = Undecided, DA = Strongly disagreed + Disagreed

² Mean values of indicators ranging from 1 to 5

iii) *Inheritance of property rights*: More than half of the respondents (64%) agreed that both boys and girls should have equal share in their parental property. The remaining 35 per cent felt that sons should receive a greater share than their sisters.

Findings from an earlier study regarding attitudes towards inheritance of father's property (Ahmed *et al.*, 1997) indicated that 78 to 84 per cent of the respondents (depending on income status) were in favour of giving more property to male children, while the remaining respondents were in favour of sharing property equally between daughters and sons. Indeed, another study by Monsoor (1999) explored that 77 per cent of rural Bangladeshi women were deprived of their legal share of parental property, especially land. As the payment of dowry is a pre-requisite for girls' marriage, natal families are reluctant to give land to girls after their marriage. Consequently, women stand to forfeit the right to inherit their parents' property after marriage which makes them more economically vulnerable since they lack ownership of property in their own right, making them more vulnerable in the event of divorce.

iv) Timing of marriage: Approximately 36 per cent of the women surveyed supported early marriage, while 63.5 per cent expressed an opinion against it. They argued that the health of girls who married early is at risk, including complications such as low birth-weight babies or, in extreme cases, leading to the death of the mother after delivery.

v) Divorce rights: A little over half of the respondents (51%) indicated that both husband and wife should have equal rights to divorce since marriage occurs with common agreement between partners. At the same time, however, they were concerned about women's powerlessness to divorce their husbands. More notably, a woman cannot leave her husband easily because of her dependency on him for maintaining her livelihood. In contrast, 45 per cent women were in favour of husband's power over divorce, reflecting the existing religious norms. In fact, men enjoy unlimited rights to divorce their wives, interpreting religious norms to suit their interests. Women, however, are often not able to face the hassle and stigma attached to going to a court in order to get justice and also obtain post-marital allowances. Evidence suggests that income-earning women from better-off households are considerably more knowledgeable than their non-earning counterparts with respect to family laws including legal age for marriage, legal procedure regarding divorce, and how marriages become legal by registration (Ahmed *et al.*, 1997).

vi) Sex bias: Fifty-one per cent of the respondents gave greater importance to sons than daughters in the distribution of food and health care, which severely disadvantages girls' personal development and may lead to enduring problems. The main reason identified for the inferior position of females within the family structure is not religion or tradition, but rather is attributable to patriarchal influence and authority (Mannan, 2002). Sons are generally preferred over daughters because they contribute to the family income which leads to less financial burden for the family, provides old-age security for parents and would carry forward the family lineage (Khan and Khanum, 2000). However, 47 per cent of women suggested that both boys and girls should get equal care and facilities during their development. They suggested that awareness-raising within the community is of utmost importance to change this discriminatory social attitude.

vii) Educational gap: More than half of the respondents (55%) were not aware of the significance of education for girls. This result supports Tisdell's (2002) findings, which revealed that 57 per cent of women perceived a longer period of education being better for sons than for daughters. However, 45 per cent of the respondents in this study believed female education to be important. They suggested that educated mothers are necessary for children's welfare, for reducing population

growth and for overall development of the nation. In essence, few rural women are able to read and write because of gender biased family practices and unwillingness to invest in daughters' education. It is important to emphasise here that the majority of rural girls drop out of school after completion of Junior High School (Level 8) in favour of early marriages. This is despite the government's policy of free education exclusively for girls up to the Higher Secondary level.

viii) Birth registration: Rural people are not aware of their obligation to register the birth of their children in the Union Council. With no record of the date of birth, parents often fail to recall a child's exact age when making visits to the doctor. Similarly, at the time of sending the children to school or arranging their marriage, parents simply approximate age. Hiding the age of a girl at marriage, so as to save her from public criticisms and dowry is common because early marriage is preferred. This would explain why 60 per cent of the women were not in favour of birth registration. Recently, there has been an effort on the part of the concerned agencies (e.g. GO and NGOs) to inform and motivate rural population to register births. Consequently, consciousness among rural people is slowly increasing in favour of registration of children after birth.

ix) Under-valuation: Rural women and men are involved in activities belonging to two separate domains. The domain occupied by women is informal, unpaid and not recognized. They are predominantly involved in repetitive and manifold household chores, such as caring for household members, cooking, food processing, fetching water and collection of firewood. Conservative and powerful social customs deter women's mobility in the public domain and confine them to low productive household activities (Hossain *et al.*, 2004). The majority of the women (81%) were not concerned with the fact that their work was not recognized within society. Their argument was that men do hard physical work, whereas women cannot leave their homes or easily do the same kind of work. It is critical to keep in mind, however, that rural women have very low self-esteem and they unknowingly accept their subordinate position.

x) Practice of dowry: Eighty four per cent of the women were in favour of paying bride price for their daughters in the event of their marriage, although the practice is legally banned. Women reported that they start accumulating assets as dowry for girls just after their births. The remaining 16 per cent were opposed to dowry culture, terming this problem as a 'social evil'. Most respondents laid emphasis on launching a 'social movement' against dowry culture along with strict enforcement of anti-dowry laws in order to combat this deep-rooted mal-practice.

Variability of rural women's level of gender awareness

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicates a significant variation among women's levels of gender awareness depending on their size of households (Table 5).

Table 5: Variation of level of gender awareness of rural women according to farm households

Farm household category	Mean	% CV ¹	F-Statistic
Landless (n = 39)	27.38	19	F = 2.89* (P = 0.04)
Marginal (n = 39)	27.18	38	
Small (n = 39)	30.36	28	
Medium (n = 39)	32.36	32	
Total (n = 156)	29.36	32	

* indicates significance at 5% level (2-tailed) with 155 degrees of freedom

¹ CV = (SD / Mean) × 100

Women who are landless and marginal were less capable of identifying gender-based discrimination than the women in small and medium farm households. The conventional explanation is that the women in richer households can gain better education, exposure to media and access to and control over resources, thereby increasing their status in the household. This achievement has perhaps given them the confidence to think about gender discrimination stemming from tradition, conservative cultural attitudes and religion. In contrast, women with low socio-economic status lack the knowledge, skills and finances to acquire the essential prerequisites to enhance their confidence.

Correlation analysis

A rank correlation analysis was performed to identify the factors that influence women's gender awareness (Table 6). It shows that there is a significant but negative correlation between length of marriage and women's gender awareness levels. This indicates that older women had lower gender awareness due to the fact that longer marital relationships tend to lead to the perpetuation and entrenchment of traditional customs.

Table 6: Factors influencing rural women's level of gender awareness (n = 156)

Variables (scales)	Spearman's correlation co-efficient (r _s)
Length of marriage (1-4)	- 0.23**
Formal education (0-3)	0.53**
Spousal alienation (0-1)	- 0.23**
Media exposure (1-3)	0.34**
Spatial mobility (1-3)	0.21*
Access to institutional resources (0-3)	0.20*

* & ** Indicate significance at 0.05 and 0.01 probability level (2-tailed)

Related to this, it was also observed that young wives were more likely to be educated and conscious about their future than the older ones. Women's education is positively correlated with their level of gender awareness, confirming the findings of

previous studies. For example, Hadi (2001) found out that education was important in raising women's perceptions regarding rights to the use of contraceptives and childbearing. It is of general consensus that education can enhance women's capabilities in order to form favourable awareness regarding gender issues. This also appears to be enhanced by increased exposure to different communication media, along with increased mobility. It is important to note that women benefit from information broadcasted through radio and television regarding socio-political issues, such as marriage without dowry, penalty for giving or taking dowry, discouragement of early marriages, marriage and birth registrations and voting freedom. It is also suggested that confidence levels are further improved by gaining access to and utilizing institutional resources. The study of Farashuddin *et al.* (1998) showed that women's involvement with activities of micro-credit based NGOs helped to instil a greater awareness of issues including knowledge of inheritance laws, laws against polygamy, dowry, divorce, early marriages and other legal matters. Conversely, however, spousal alienation played a negative role in terms of women's awareness of gender issues. In short, it is evident from this study that increasing gender awareness among rural women in Bangladesh can be achieved through access to education, information media and institutional resources. This may alter the currently submissive character of women who are often viewed only as important for reproduction, as homemakers and as caregivers.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that the majority of the rural women, based on sample investigated, were not aware of gender inequality because of traditional beliefs kept them in the shadow of their fathers, husbands and sons. To improve this unfortunate situation, some pragmatic steps are needed to be undertaken not only by the major intervening agencies, such as GO and NGOs but also by the rural community itself. Strategies aimed at empowering women must address both their practical gender needs and their strategic gender needs. Efforts, therefore, need to be made to arouse people's concern and create awareness of gender differences, with particular emphasis on poorer farm households. Those areas that need much attention include education, income, nutrition, reproductive health, dowry, early marriage, son preference, legal rights and violence against women. In view of the above considerations, the following strategies are recommended.

1. The status of rural women could be improved via a number of approaches, with access to formal education being a foremost concern. The provision of adult community-based education to women is something which, if supported by governmental organizations, NGOs and local community leaders, would be effective in beginning to uproot illiteracy and related social deficiencies from rural communities. Likewise, addressing social and cultural education concerning early marriage, sex bias and dowry in school curricula may provide a long-term solution to eliminating gender discrimination in rural communities. In addition to these, recruitment of female teachers and the improvement of school infrastructure might encourage the continued attendance of girls at school, while at the same time safeguarding future families.
2. Encouraging informal women's groups in rural areas would be a step toward increasing their empowerment since this would facilitate greater mobility outside the home and their access to media. Local community leaders, extension personnel, NGO workers and representatives from women's organization would

provide a vital contribution to such group by motivating them toward engaging in various development activities. Although access to mass media, such as radio and television are limited in rural areas, this situation could be improved with the support of GO and NGOs. This would also aid in improving women's access to different institutional resources. Indeed, provision of training by the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), the Department of Livestock Services (DLS), the Department of Fisheries (DOF), the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the Grameen Bank (GB) with regard to income generating activities, such as home gardening, nursery development, cattle fattening, fish culture, craft production and embroidery would not only advance women's skills, but would also reduce their economic dependency.

3. In the context of existing situation, the following special measures should be undertaken in addition to creation of gender awareness through the electronic media.
 - i. Providing gender awareness training to local leaders would encourage them to organise an action-oriented dialogue with the rest of the community to develop their own action plans and its execution through coordinated efforts.
 - ii. Launching of spirited conscientization campaigns (for example, dowry free marriage campaign) by organising rallies and public meetings involving rural people could be an effective strategy to create massive awareness on women's rights.
 - iii. Encouraging the creation and screening of documentaries or commercial films, which disseminate a positive image of women, could change the mind-set of rural people. The local community could organise such shows with the assistance of GO/NGOs.
 - iv. Students, in general, can take active part in implementing these programmes at village level by performing street dramas and role-plays against retrogressive social practices.
 - v. Counselling the parents of adolescents on importance of educating women, disadvantages of early marriages, payment of dowry and violence against women by the rural community leaders could be a good initiative. Creating awareness among youngsters on these issues can also be very helpful.

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