

January 2017

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### Recommended Citation

Sarker, Shahidul Islam; Karim, A.H.M. Zehadul; and Suffiun, Samrat Mohammad Abu (2017). Parental Educational Aspiration and Gender Inequality of Rural Children in Bangladesh: The Role of Parental Attitudes of Traditional Gender Role, Gender Biased Capability, and Gender. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(2), 134-142.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol18/iss2/9>

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## **Parental Educational Aspiration and Gender Inequality of Rural Children in Bangladesh: The Role of Parental Attitudes of Traditional Gender Role, Gender Biased Capability, and Gender<sup>1</sup>**

By Shahidul Islam Sarker<sup>2</sup>, A.H.M. Zehadul Karim<sup>3</sup> and Samrat Mohammad Abu Suffiun<sup>4</sup>

### **Abstract**

This study investigates how gender inequality in higher education is produced by the attitudes of parents in rural Bangladesh. To this end we examine (i) parental traditional gender role attitude, (ii) parental attitude toward girls' capability and (iii) parental gender biased investment attitude as three types of parental attitudes based on the responses of 435 rural parents in which 52.05% were parents of boys and 56.25% of girls. We conduct logistic regression analysis to determine whether the observe variables (these three types of attitudes) significantly predict the odds of parental aspiration for higher education and whether the effects of these predictors significantly differ in parental aspiration outcome according to the gender of children. Results in the nested model (model 3) show that after controlling the parental background variables (income and education), these three types of parental attitudes have individual significant impact on parental educational aspiration in which, if these attitudes increase, it significantly decreases the odds of having parental aspiration of higher education for their children. Furthermore, in the separate modes for boys and girls we observe that if these three types of attitudes increase, the likelihood of having parental aspiration of higher education significantly increase only for the case of boys but significantly decrease for the case of girls.

*Keywords:* Gender roles, Gender biased attitudes, Educational aspiration, Girls' education Bangladesh

### **Introduction**

Gender inequality in education has long been an issue deserving proper attention in Bangladesh. Although in recent years Bangladesh has registered significant improvement in

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgment: The authors are grateful to the "Research Management Centre (RMC) and Department of Sociology & Anthropology, faculty of Islamic Revealed knowledge and Human science, International Islamic University of Malaysia for the academic support, including financial resources which allowed them to write this paper.

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gender disparity in the enrolments at the primary and secondary levels of education; however, gender disparities are significantly high in higher education. According to a 2011 report by the Bureau of Bangladesh Education Information Statistics (BANBEIS), at public universities, only 24.3% were female students and male enrolment is almost three times higher (75.7%) than that of females. Given this disparity, this study seeks to identify the underlying causes for lower rates of female enrolment in higher education in Bangladesh.

Much of the literature that has focused on gender and education in Bangladesh has found significant gender disparities in education, particularly girls' education in rural settings (Chowdhury et al., 2002; Khandker et al., 2003). The literature has also examined the various factors influencing gender disparity in the enrolment in higher education. For instance, it has been noted that parental education and income, positively influence the academic achievement of children (Juma, 2012). Although parental socio-economic background improves the educational attainment regardless of the gender of children, in this study we argue that parental attitudes formed by the perception of socio-cultural values are the foremost influential factor for educational attainment, especially for girls. In this respect, Chege and Sifunali (2006) observed that cultural expectations and values influence female participation in formal education and can have distinct effects on the educational outcomes of boys and girls. Hamid (1993) observed that female schooling participation in higher education in most developing countries is still significantly lower than that of males. Hamid further found that parental attitudes are significantly associated with girls' schooling attainment and attitudes towards girls' schooling is directly associated with cultural values that act as constraints to gender equity in education. Morinaga, Frieze, & Ferligoj (1993) also argued that societies with narrow and traditional gender values likely have broader gender disparities in terms of educational aspiration.

A key rationale for providing higher education to children is based on the notion of who will eventually become economically prolific contributors to the household. Hence, parental attitudes towards education may vary according to the gender of children when parents consider cultural backgrounds of their societies. For instance, in a society like Bangladesh it is assumed that girls will be married and after that become members of their husbands' household. Consequently, parents may consider girls' education as futile investments while boys are viewed as resourceful investments (Sawada and Lokshin, 2001). Hence, parental educational aspiration varies according to the gender of the children in which cultural and economic perception and attitude of parents shape their decision-making whether to provide higher education to girls. In this study, we consider parental attitudes based on the following three views: (i) parental gender role attitude, (ii) parental attitude on girls' capability, and (iii) parental gender biased investment attitude. From this view, to find out the causes of low rate of girls' enrolment in higher education, we examine how these three types of attitudes affect parental educational aspiration for their children and how these effects vary according to the gender of children. Although most of the literature on educational aspiration has been performed on students' individual level factor, we argue that to identify the underlying causes of lower female educational attainment, it is also important to examine which factors affect parental educational aspiration for their children.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Research on educational aspiration demonstrates that parents act as role models for their children through which children gain economic, social, cultural, and intellectual resources which shape their aspiration to attain comparable socioeconomic positions in the adolescent period (Kao

and Tienda, 1998). Research has examined that parental aspiration is positively allied with the academic achievement and expectation of children (Benner & Mistry, 2007). In this respect, Fan & Chen (2001) noted that parental aspiration has a strong correlation with student academic attainment: parents with high aspiration encourage and help children to attend college while parents with fewer aspiration encourage children to seek rigorous work and consider only the financial benefit.

Parental aspiration for daughters' education is normative. Hannum, Kong, & Zhang (2009) observed that there a pattern of cultural rules generating a system of gender stratification. Parental investment and socialisation decisions for their children are defined by cultural beliefs such as essential abilities, rights, and roles of men and women (Ridgeway and Correll, 2000). Alice Eagly's (1987) social role theory argues that the sexual division of labour and societal expectations based on stereotypes produce gender roles. The author suggests that gender roles are closely linked with gender stereotypes where, traditionally men have been viewed as financial providers. In contrast, women have been viewed as caretakers of the home. These cultural perspectives influence parents in the different investments and opportunities for girls and boys which produce gender disparities in educational attainment. For instance, ethnographic studies and educational research observe that typically parents believe that women are less worthy of education or less capable and competent than men in many workplace related tasks (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Some studies observe that there is a direct link between children's educational well-being and parental son preference in traditional culture. Considering the traditional beliefs, scholars have argued that restrictions were placed on the educational and workplace opportunities available to women (Wolf, 1985). The culture of patriarchy shapes parents' aspiration for the education of children, which affects parental investment and schooling decisions for girls.

Another factor influencing gender disparities in investments in children, is the labour market in which girls and boys are likely to perform differently. For instance, Wilson et al. (1993) observed that the existing gender based division of labour shapes parental socialisation and aspiration for children in the early years, which consequently leads to low educational and occupational trajectories for girls. This extreme situation exists in developing societies when the return for investing in education for boys is seen in terms of increased labour market opportunities, but these increases are almost negligible for girls (Mahmud and Amin, 2006). However, parents make educational decisions considering the best for the family's economic future and this situation is common in rural Asian countries. Several studies on enrolment or attainment disparities in developing countries observed that parents make decisions about schooling of children based on the expectation of future returns to the household (Mahmud and Amin, 2006). For most families in developing societies, sons are the primary source of old-age support of parents while girls typically become a member of another household after marriage. Consequently, parents face strong incentives to invest in sons as long-term insurance (Greenhalgh, 1994). Hence, if a person bears these sort of discriminatory beliefs or attitudes, then he/she might invest less in girls' education apart from the consideration of the direct benefit from their investment.

## Hypotheses

This study tests whether parental traditional gender role attitudes, parental old-age support, parental attitudes toward girls' capability and worthiness, and parental gender biased investment attitudes are linked to educational aspiration for their children. We assume that parental gender

based attitudes may be closely linked to educational aspiration for sons or daughters. From this point of view, we hypothesise the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* Parents who hold more traditional gender role attitudes are less likely to have aspiration of higher education for their children.

*Hypothesis 2:* Parents with more traditional attitudes are more likely to have aspiration of higher education for their male children, but are less likely to have higher educational aspiration for their female children.

*Hypothesis 3:* Parents who hold more gender biased capability attitudes are less likely to have aspiration of higher education for their children.

*Hypothesis 4:* Parents with more gender biased capability attitudes are more likely to have higher educational aspiration for their male children, but are less likely to have higher educational aspiration for their female children.

*Hypothesis 5:* Parents who have more gender biased investment attitudes are less likely to have aspiration of higher education for their children.

*Hypothesis 6:* Parents with more gender biased investment attitudes are more likely to have aspiration of higher education for their male children, but are less likely to have higher educational aspiration for their female children.

## **Methods**

### *Measure of variables*

#### *Parental educational aspiration*

The dependent variable of this study is parental educational aspiration for their children. To determine this, parents were asked, "What is the highest level of education you think your child can achieve?" Responses were chosen from the following scale: 1 = less than high school graduation, 2 = high school education only, 3 = two years' college degree, 5 = graduation degree, 6 = Master's degree or equivalent and 7 = Ph.D., MD., or other professional degrees. We recode parental aspiration into two categories: 1 = below graduation degree and 2 = finished graduation or above.

#### *Parental gender role attitudes*

Parental gender role attitudes were measured using 12 items of Traditional Sex Role Attitudes Scale developed by Scanzoni (1975) and the Social Role Questionnaire (Baber and Tucker, 2006). The items are: (i) A woman's place should be in the home; (ii) Some types of work are just not appropriate for women; (iii) For many important jobs, it is better to choose men instead of women; (iv) A wife's most important task in life should be taking care of her husband and children; (v) Household chores should be allocated by sex; (vi) Boys do not have the same obligation to help with household chores as girls; (vii) A wife should not have equal authority with her husband in making decisions; (viii) If she has the same job as a man who has to support his family, she should not expect the same salary; (ix) A woman is suited for only certain kinds of jobs because of her emotional and mental nature; (x) A wife should give up her job whenever it inconveniences her husband and children and should not mix freely with males in her social relations; (xi) A woman should give more importance to the needs of her family than her personal ambitions and needs; and (xii) Although a woman is highly educated, she should be encouraged to assume a domestic role. Participants were asked to rate their response on the 5-point scale from

1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and high scores indicate more traditional attitudes. We used the mean scores of individual responses of items and the internal consistency of religiosity scale was alpha 0.85.

#### *Parental gender biased capability attitude*

Parental gender biased capability attitude was measured using the items as follows: (i) Girls can perform just as well academically as boys; (ii) Women can achieve career success as much as men can; (iii) Girls should enjoy the same opportunities for education as boys; (iv) Given equal opportunities, women can achieve the same things as men; (v) Parents should encourage girls to think as independently as boys; and (vi) Girls can achieve the same technological ability as boys. Participants were asked to rate their response on the 5-point scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) and a high score indicates a more gender biased attitude. We used the mean scores of individual responses of items and the internal consistency of religiosity scale was alpha 0.78.

#### *Parental gender biased investment attitude*

Parental gender biased investment attitude was measured using the following items: (i) Parents should invest more in boys as parents need to rely on sons for old-age support; (ii) Parents should invest more in boys as education influences boys' future income more than girls; (iii) Parents should invest more in boys as schooling is useless for girls since they marry and leave home; (iv) Parents should invest more in boys as boys can better financially support households than girls; and (v) Parents should invest more in boys as the job market favours males. Participants were asked to rate their response on the 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and a high score indicating a more unequal attitude. We used the mean scores of individual responses of items and the internal consistency of religiosity scale was alpha 0.76.

#### *Parental income and education*

Parental income was measured by the total monthly income and education measured by the total years of formal schooling of parents.

### **Data**

The study is based on a survey carried out in the rural areas of Pirgonj sub-district of Rangpur District in Bangladesh in March 2014 with a sample comprising 435 parents with school going children. We separated the responses of boys' parents and girls' parents in which 52.05% (210) responses were boys' parents and 56.25% (225) responses were girls' parents.

### **Analytic strategy**

We conducted logistic regression analysis as our dependent variable is dichotomous (as we recorded parental aspiration in two categories). Logistic regression was used to determine whether the observed variables significantly predict the odds of parental aspiration for higher education and whether the effect of these predictors significantly differ in parental aspiration outcome according to the gender of children. First, we conduct a set of three models in which model 1 we only include the gender of the child. In model 2, we add parental traditional gender role attitude, parental attitude on girls' capability, and parental gender biased investment attitude. In the full

model (model 3) we add parental background variables income and education. Finally, we run the full model separately for boys and girls.

## Results

### *Multivariate analyses*

Results (Table 1) in the nested model (model 3) show that there is a significant gender effect on parental educational aspiration in which parents of girls are 2.04 times less likely (1/.49) than parents of boys to have higher educational aspiration for their child. Parental traditional gender role attitude has a significant association with parental educational aspiration (odds.53\*\*\*). When the odds are less than one implies that each additional unit increase in the traditional gender role attitude scale is associated with a 47% (= 0.53\*100-100) decrease in the odds of having higher educational aspiration for children. Hence, hypothesis 1 is supported as parents holding more traditional gender role attitudes are less likely to have aspirations of higher education for their children. Parental gender biased capability attitude is also significantly associated (odds 0.69\*\*\*) with their educational aspiration for children in which each additional unit increase in the parental gender biased attitude causes a 31% decrease in the odds of having higher educational aspiration. Hence hypothesis 3 is supported as parents holding more gender biased attitudes on the capability of children have lower aspiration for higher education for their children. We also find that parental gender biased investment attitude is significantly associated (odds 0.64\*\*\*) with the educational aspiration of parents. In this respect, the results show that each additional unit increase in the parental gender biased investment attitude causes a 36% decrease in the odds of having higher educational aspiration for children. Hence, hypothesis 5 is supported as parents with more gender based investment attitudes are less likely to have aspiration of higher education for their children.

**Table 1. Logistic Regressions on Parental Educational Aspiration for Child (Odds Ratio)**

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Boys	Girls
Child's gender					
Male (reference)	---	---	---		
Female	.44** (.08)	.48*** (.08)	.49*** (.08)		
Parental traditional gender role attitude		.51*** (.06)	.53*** (.06)	1.87*** (.07)	.56*** (.10)
Parental gender biased capability attitude		.66** (.11)	.69** (.11)	1.61*** (.06)	.67*** (.11)
Parental gender biased investment attitude		.58*** (.10)	.64*** (.12)	2.11*** (.07)	.54*** (.10)
Parental education			1.11 (.33)	1.16** (.21)	1.10** (.16)
Parental income			1.14. (.31)	1.12** (.31)	1.15** (.31)

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses, \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Finally, we ran the full model separately for boys and girls. In the separate models we observe that parental traditional gender role attitudes significantly increase the aspiration of higher education for the case of boys but significantly decrease for girls thereby supporting hypothesis 2.

Likewise, parental gender biased capability attitude and gender biased investment attitude significantly increase the aspiration of higher education for the case of boys but significantly decrease for girls thereby supporting hypotheses 4 and 6 respectively.

## Discussion

The results of parental traditional gender role attitude shows that parents with a more traditional gender role attitude are likely to have lower aspiration of higher education for their children and this matter is significant only for girls not boys. Parents living in rural areas link their individual household life with conservative and traditional gender attitudes. Consequently, rural parents expect a similar role in the future conjugal life of their children. Parents socialize their daughters to be ideal caregivers in their home similar to their wives, rather than providing higher education to daughters. Hence, our findings on parental traditional gender role attitude support the model of cultural determinants (Sidanius et al., 1991) which accounts that traditional gender roles have differential effects on the socialisation of boys and girls as prescribed by their culture. The results of parental gender biased capability attitude also imply that parents with this type of attitude significantly reduce their educational aspiration only for girls not for boys. Bangladesh is a male dominated society in which men are valued as more capable in every sphere compared to women, and this value is shaped more strictly in lower and illiterate parents of agricultural and rural regions. In this society, parents aim to provide more education to their boys based on the belief that boys are more capable of educational performance and professional roles than girls.

When we consider the relationship between parental gender bias investment attitude and educational aspiration, we find that parental gender bias attitude significantly decreases the educational aspiration of children and this is significant only for girls not for boys. This result indicates that parental investment attitude favours boys not girls. This implies that some external factors such as labour market outcomes or other socio-economic factors, which make higher returns from investment in sons and consequently forms the main motivating factors behind parental investment. In other words, it indicates that parental typical gender bias is important for investment in children, provided that this bias is supported by the labour market. It should be mentioned that in Bangladesh, the labour market is unequal in which the male employment rate is 81%, while only 54% for females. Furthermore, women's earnings are 21% lower than men's of which the pure gender wage gap is 15.9% (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Hence, if the labour market condition reinforces parental bias towards boys, parents are motivated to invest more in sons comparatively to daughters (Qian, 2008).

Besides these labour market forces, economic returns may also vary with gender due to social norms or cultural practices. For instance, in societies like Bangladesh where sons provide old-age support to parents, returns to parents from investing in sons typically become higher than in daughters. In many patriarchal societies including Bangladesh, the marriage system is such that the bride's family pays the dowry and/or bears the major marriage costs. As the woman becomes a member of her husband's family, she has little or no scope to provide support to her natal family which discourages parents from investing in daughters.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrated and supports what other studies have shown, namely, that gender based attitudes of rural parents disadvantage the educational attainment of girls. Since rural parents

are likely to express traditional and unequal attitudes towards gender, it is expected that girls experience less supportive and favourable attitudes to attain education than boys. Parents sometimes find an economic rationale, considering the future returns from their children. Most of the rural parents of developing countries, including in Bangladesh are self-employed and agriculture workers and typically experience lower levels of income and education. Consequently, we expect that parents with lower levels of education and income usually experience less gender egalitarian attitudes which is likely to affect educational attainment. The next step is to determine how the results compare with urban participants. Such will be the future direction of our research.

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