

## FOCUS

## Gains in Bangladesh Primary Education

THE 1990 declaration of the World Conference for All (WCEFA), held in Jomtien, Thailand, had reaffirmed the 'right of all people to education.' In 1993, a conference of the heads of governments of the eight most populous developing nations in Delhi, India reinforced the WCEFA declaration by calling for the removal of disparities in access to primary education due to gender, age, income, family, cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences and geographical remoteness. Now seven years since the Delhi conference, a review of the progress made in eradicating, or more pragmatically reducing, inequities in educational access and learning is timely. This article uses recent field level data to examine the levels and trends in selected indicators of primary education in Bangladesh with particular focus on the degree to which equality in education has been achieved for different gender, urban-rural, economic, and ethnic groups.

Although there is often confusion between equity and equality, one is distinguishable from another. According to Robert Malekela (1995), 'Equality is the state of being equal for all members of a group, class, ethnic group, race, society, etc.', but 'equity is fairness of operating environment for all people.' In case of education, equality refers to parity for all population groups in terms of certain educational outcome indicators, such as access, continuation, or quality of learning. But equity refers to the environment which promotes or inhibits the achievement of such quality for these different groups in society. Here is will be shown that eradication or reduction in inequality or disparity in education is taking place in Bangladesh and that is happening because of certain changes in overall policy environment of primary education.

## Background

Bangladesh ranks among the bottom 20 countries in the literacy league table. Between 1980 and 1995, the adult literacy rate rose marginally from 32 per cent with the rate for females at only half of males. Recent government statistics indicate that the literacy rate has reached 56 per cent in 1999. Since in mid-1980s particularly since the Jomtien conference, a number of new initiatives have been undertaken by the public, private, and non-governmental organisation (NGO) sectors to promote primary education in the country. Some of the policies and programmes are:

- Free and compulsory primary education for all children;
- Free education for girls up to grade 8; free text books for all children attending formal primary schools;
- Scholarship for girls reading in rural secondary schools including financial incentives to the schools themselves;
- A food-for-education pro-

gramme that provides a food ration to about 12 per cent of poor children in rural areas; and

e. A proliferation of non-formal education programme by NGOs.

In Bangladesh, primary education has never been equally accessible for all groups in the population. Earlier studies indicated that girls, children living in rural areas and urban slums, children from socioeconomically backward families and ethnic minorities were particularly disadvantaged in access to education. In developed societies like the United States, social satisfaction is found to be increasingly linked to the system of education.

Data for this article comes from *Education Watch*, a civil society initiative in Bangladesh, which is designed to monitor progress in primary education on a yearly basis. While data on enrollment was collected at the household level from 64 districts, information on completion and attendance were gathered from school records.

Quality of learning was assessed by interviewing a group of children aged 11-12 years through a curriculum-independent test called the Assessment of Basic Competencies (ABC) which evaluates as child's competencies in reading, writing, arithmetic and life skills/knowledge. Children attaining a minimum level of competency in all of the above four areas were assumed to have achieved 'basic education.'

## Enrollment and its Change over Time

Bangladesh has a pluralist system of primary education with two-thirds of students enrolled in government-run primary schools. Non-government formal schools (registered and un-registered) constitute 15 per cent of total enrollment while non-formal schools enroll more girls than boys, but in government schools girls equal the boys. In madrasas, only about 10 per cent of the students are girls.

Gross enrollment rates ex-

ceeded 100 per cent for all sub-groups (Figure 1). Nationally, the gross ratio is 107 per cent; the corresponding net rate of 77 per cent indicates that about 30 per cent of all enrollment at the primary level are from outside the official primary age of 6-10 years. Furthermore, the net rate also indicates that

23 per cent of primary school age children are outside the reach of the formal and non-formal school systems. Girls surpassed boys in terms of both gross and net rates of enrollment. When one compares rural and urban enrollment, rural areas appear to have a higher gross ratio than urban areas.

This is reversed, however, in the case of net enrollment rates. While the girls have equalled boys in net rates in rural areas, boys were still ahead of girls in urban areas.

Like most other developing societies, enrollment in Bangladesh increases progressively with decreasing poverty. The gender gap in favour of girls narrows down as affluence increases and poverty decreases; this is particularly true in urban Bangladesh where boys surpassed the girls among 'surplus' households. In the 'deficit' group, in contrast, the gender gap in favour of girls is widest. When the trends in net enrollment at the national level is considered over time, an increase of four percentage points is indicated over a five-year period between 1993 and 1998 (for children 11-12 years old on whom the data at the two points are available) which means that the increase has been less than one percentage point per year (see Figure 2). Furthermore, the increase has been restricted to girls only whose enrollment rate increased by ten percentage points, while boys experienced a slight decline over the same period. In terms of completion rates, girls are found to complete the five-year cycle equally or more often than boys (73 per cent for girls versus 72 per cent for boys).

When the net enrollment rates for four of the country's major ethnic minorities living in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) are considered, three important trends are seen. Firstly, the enrollment rate for each of these groups is far behind the national average; secondly, significant disparities exist between

different ethnic groups; and thirdly, girls are behind boys irrespective of ethnicity.

## Learning Achievement and its Trend

Compared to the high enrollment rates, the learning achievement is low at only 29.6 per cent. This means that less than a third of Bangladeshi children aged 11-12 years attain the minimum level of a very elementary test. Furthermore, female advantage over boys as found in the case of enrollment is not reflected in learning achievement; boys performed better than girls, with male advantage being more pronounced in urban than in rural areas. Overall, urban areas are much ahead (48.6 per cent) than rural areas (26.5 per cent). It has also been found that the proportion of children achieving basic education was highest for non-formal schools (38.3 per cent) and lowest for Ebedayee madrasas (15.2 per cent). The rate for government primary schools was 21.5 per cent. The type of school attended did not alter the trend in observed gender difference in learning achievement; even for non-formal schools which give good emphasis on girl children, the girls trailed behind the boys. The differences in learning outcome that have been found above among different types of school are also maintained even when 'literacy' is considered as an index of learning outcome instead of 'basic education.'

The percentage change in basic educational achievement over a five-year period (1993-1998) is shown in Figure 2. The column percentages indicate an increase (or decrease) over the base of 1993. On average, there has been 11 per cent (not percentage points) increase nationally; the increase is marginally better for girls compared to boys. This increase, however, happened

more in rural areas, and particularly among rural girls. In contrast, the trends indicate that basic educational achievement has in fact declined in urban areas, and the decline is greater among girls than boys.

When the change in basic educational achievement according to economic status is considered a dramatic improvement is shown for children in poorer households (the 'deficit' groups). For those in the 'surplus' category, the achievement rates declined. It is also seen that the improvement for the poorer groups was more pronounced in rural than urban areas. The performance of children in the 'ways deficit' group actually improved nationally by 88.4 per cent over the five-year period, and by 108 per cent in rural areas. In contrast, the achievement of children belonging to the 'surplus' group deteriorated in both rural and urban areas, this being more dramatic among urban children.

## Discussion

In any discussion on equality and equity in education, the difference in literacy rates between women and men is often pointed out. The 1999 Human Development Report published by UNDP provided detailed statistics on gender gap in education for 174 countries. Of the 31 countries which belonged to the 'low human development group,' 30 had female adult literacy rate less than 80 per cent of male. In contrast, all 45 countries belonging to 'high human development' group had female adult literacy rate more than 90 per cent of male. Bangladesh which belonged to the former group had its adult female literacy rate only 55 per cent of the males. In neighbouring India and Pakistan this figure was 59 per cent and 46 per cent respectively. Adult literacy though useful as an indicator of overall education scenario, it somehow is inadequate in re-

flecting recent changes in educational inputs and outputs. Indicators of internal efficiency such as enrollment and learning achievement are more sensitive to recent changes.

Bangladesh has adopted a pluralist system in basic education provision. Dominated by the public sector schools, it also has a large private and an NGO sector. A review of recent changes in targeting educational provision points to some elements of 'positive discrimination' in favour of those who were hitherto considered excluded. Selected incentive schemes to attract more girls and poor children to government schools through secondary school stipends and food-for-education are examples in the public sector. Similarly, the policy to recruit at least 70 per cent girls and children of poorer parents by BRAC and other NGOs are examples in the non-governmental sector.

Such schemes and policies have had tremendous impact in the way parents decide on sending their children to school. As shown above, the gender gap in enrollment has disappeared and poorer parents are sending their girls more often now than before. Such a change in the equity situation is very significant on at least three counts. Firstly, the disappearing gender gap that heralded in several developing countries is now taking place in Bangladesh. The second point, and probably more important, is how sustainable will this improvement be and whether the country can maintain this trend in future. That the increase in girls' enrollment is induced by positive discrimination by the government and NGOs is little debated. The improvement was not or only marginally seen in the groups (such as boys and urban areas) not targeted by the government and NGO scheme bears testimony to this. The financial incentives provided by the State induced demand, and the NGO initiatives streamlined their delivery mechanism in favour

of certain groups. It thus appears that the improvements that have been seen in Bangladesh may well be very fragile and dependent on the continuation of these special schemes for sometime to come until real demand is built up and delivery mechanisms become more responsive to meet the demands of the disadvantaged groups. That the performance of certain groups (such as boys, urban areas, well-to-do) has deteriorated or did not improve demands special attention of policy makers.

The third point is the fact that focused intervention (through incentive schemes and deliberate policies) can have significant positive impact on the equity situation in education. In many societies poverty has been identified as a major reason for inequity in enrollment and other parameters of education. As Bangladesh has shown considerable improvement in the equity situation in education it can be made without significant change in poverty situation.

When one considers the learning outcome a somewhat reverse trend is observed in the equity experience. The girls and children from rural areas are still disadvantaged to a considerable extent. Even the girls in non-formal schools do worse than their counterpart boys. But when the trend over the past half a decade is considered, the picture is not that disquieting. Though overall improvement has not been very encouraging (3 percentage points in 5 years), the improvements that rural girls and children from socioeconomically disadvantaged sections have had are noteworthy. However, the downward trend in overall achievement in rural areas is particularly alarming which is partly due to a dramatic increase of the slum population where the educational facilities have failed to keep pace with population growth.

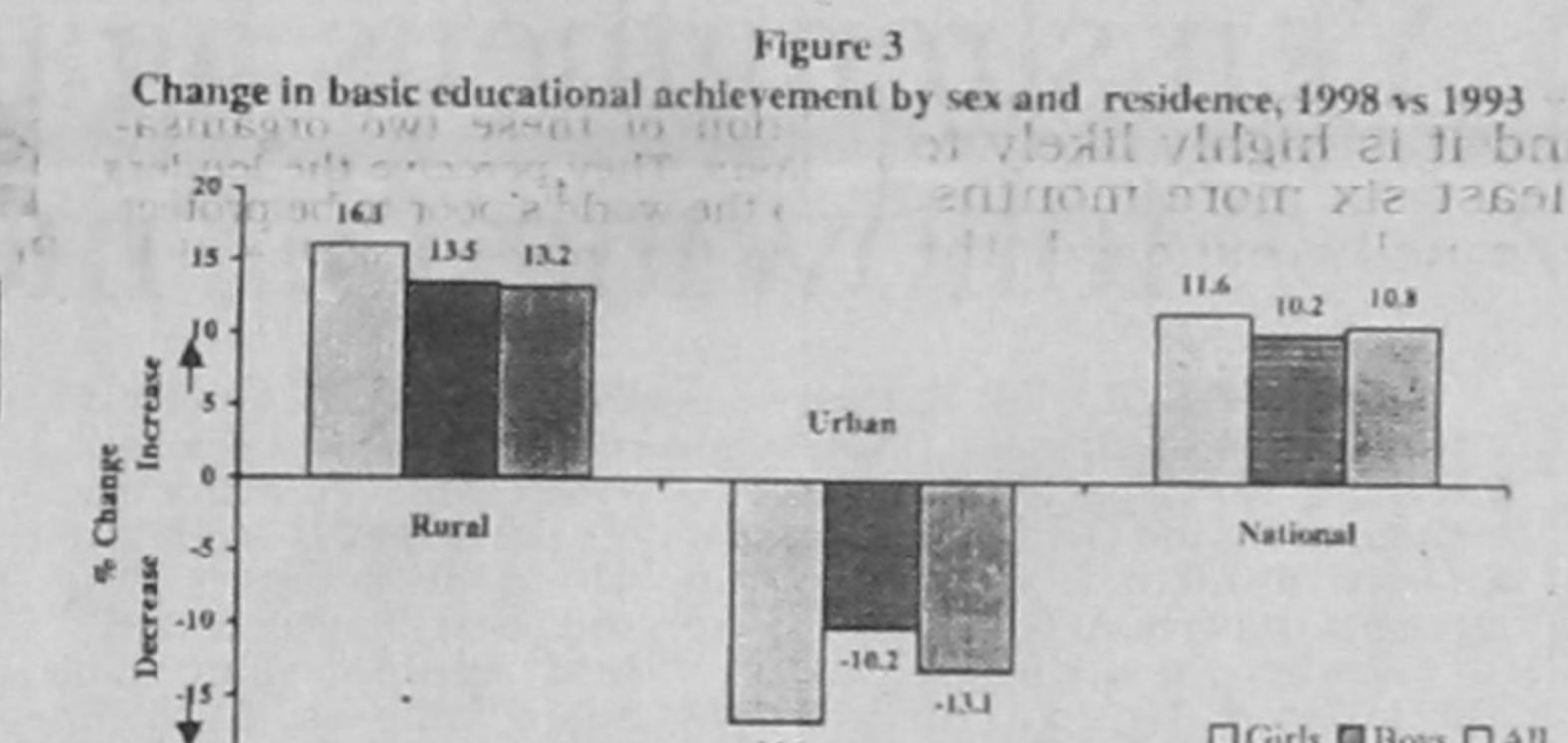
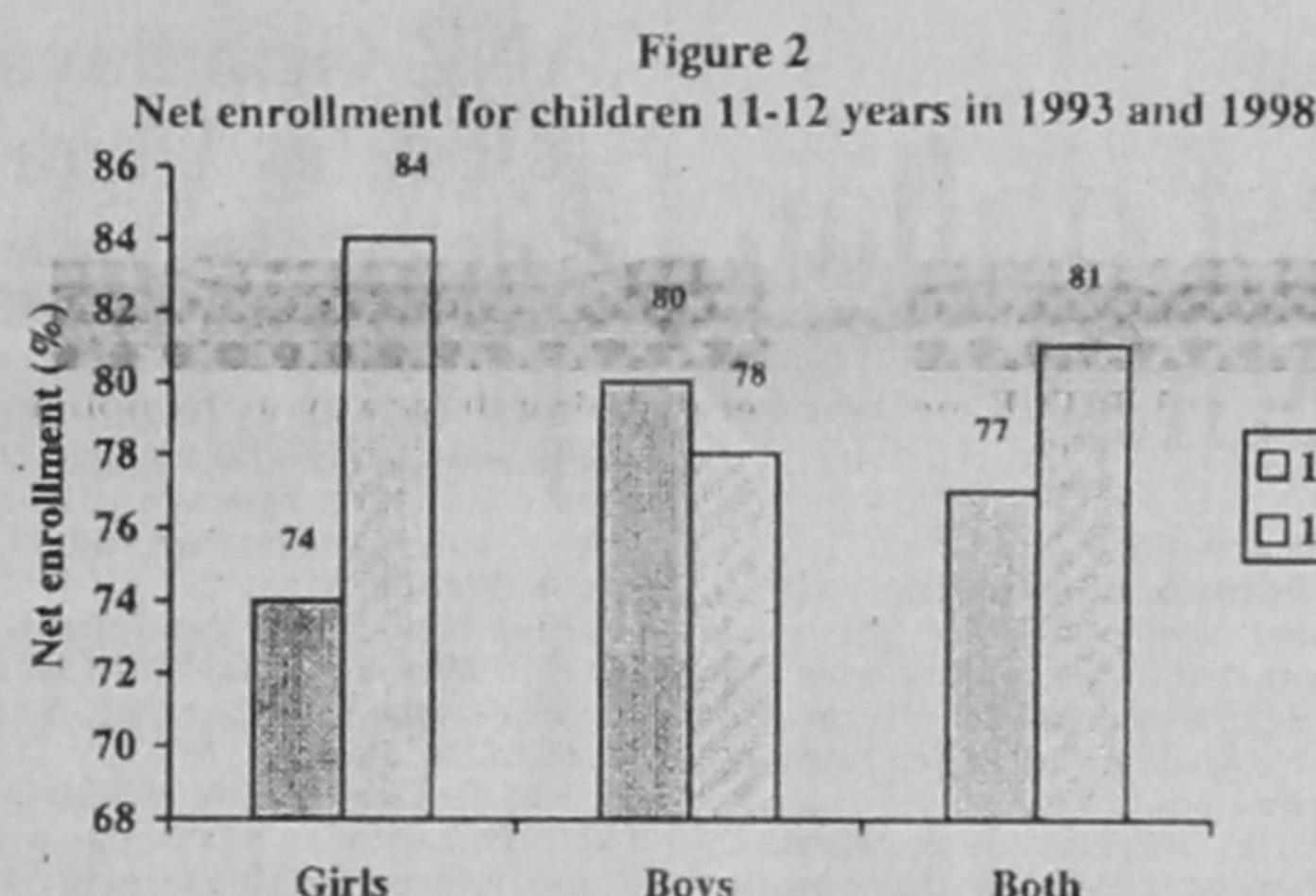
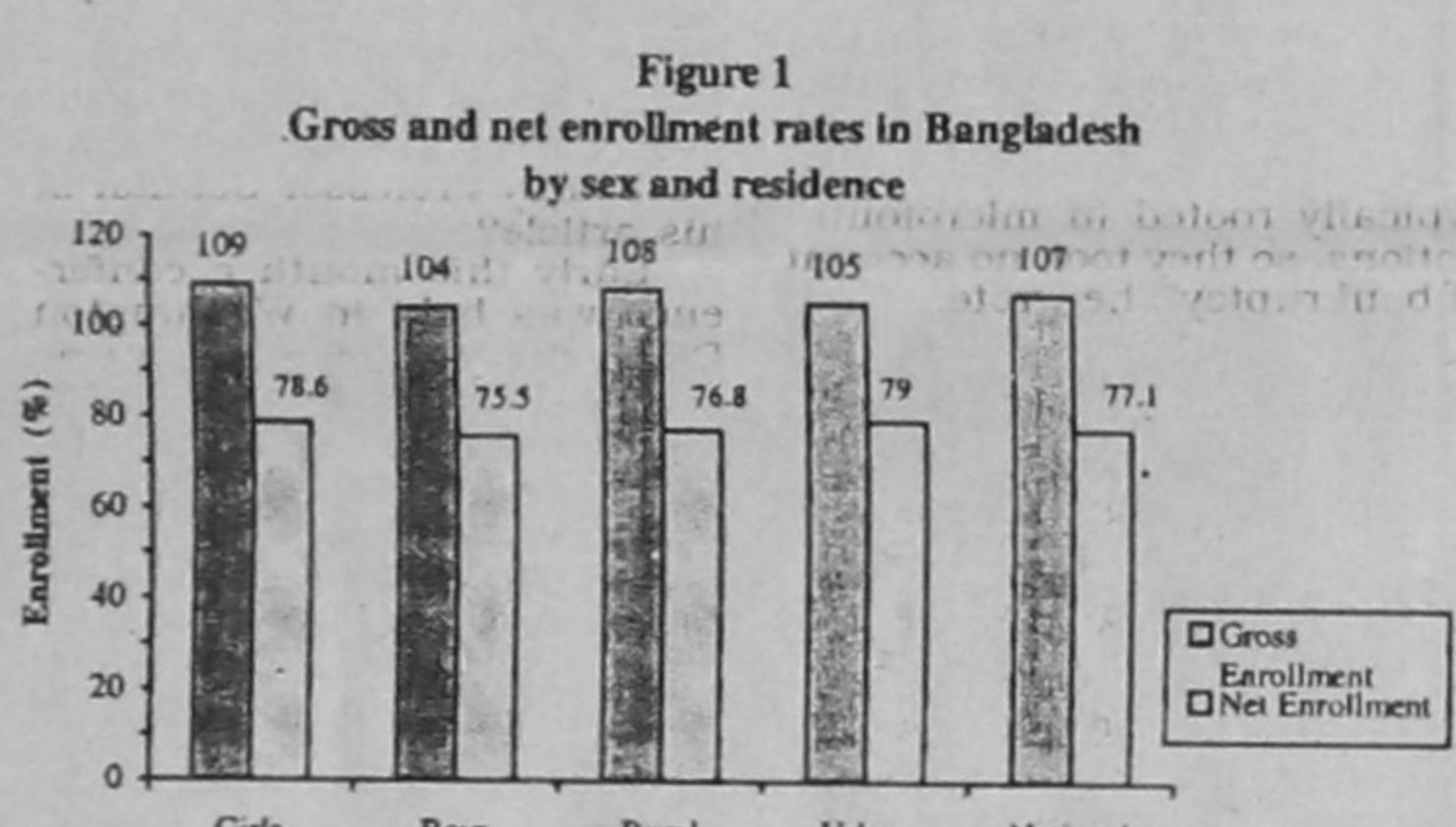
The type of school children have access to and their relative role in learning achievement is a contentious issue. The non-formal (NF) system is generally construed as a poorer option compared to formal schools. The investment in NF system generally is less and the children attending such schools are socioeconomically disadvantaged. Hence they are not expected to perform equally well as formal school students do. However, this article reported better performance by non-

formal students in learning achievement tests. Studies done earlier at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies also reported similar results. The NF schools not only increased the access to schooling by girls and children of socioeconomically disadvantaged families but it seems also contributed to their better learning. Since they constitute only a small portion (8.5 per cent) of all enrollments, the chances of their having a major impact on the national scenario is limited. To have this, either the coverage by NF system has to increase (which is feasible given that the system's capacity increased four folds between 1990 and 1998), or the government schools which enroll two-thirds of all school going children must adopt some of the more interesting features of NF schools or both.

This article is one of the first to report on the situation of primary education in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Although the equity situation in primary education among the dominant Bangladeshi in the country is improving, the situation in CHT demands special attention of all concerned. Overall the area is much behind the national average. The girls are lagging behind the boys, and there is significant difference among the various ethnic groups. Now that peace has been restored, a pragmatic planning with participation of all is essential for equitable development of all ethnic groups. In this task, an important issue will be the medium of instruction. Some of the groups such as Chakmas and Marmas have their own scripts; these are near extinct because of various reasons. A little investment may help revive these for use at least at the primary level. Evidences from Africa suggest that use of language other than the mother tongue at the instruction level perpetuates school inequalities.

In conclusion, it can be said that Bangladesh has made important gains in making primary education accessible to its population. Such access has increased in recent years for particular groups of the population such as girls, children living in rural areas and those belonging to poorer households. This change has happened because of certain deliberate and focused interventions made by the public and NGO sectors. The challenge now is how to keep the change rolling in the same direction with increased velocity. In this task the government, private and NGO sectors will need to work together more closely. The Great Bangladesh scenario will have great implications for the countries meeting for the next WCEFA in Dakar, Senegal.

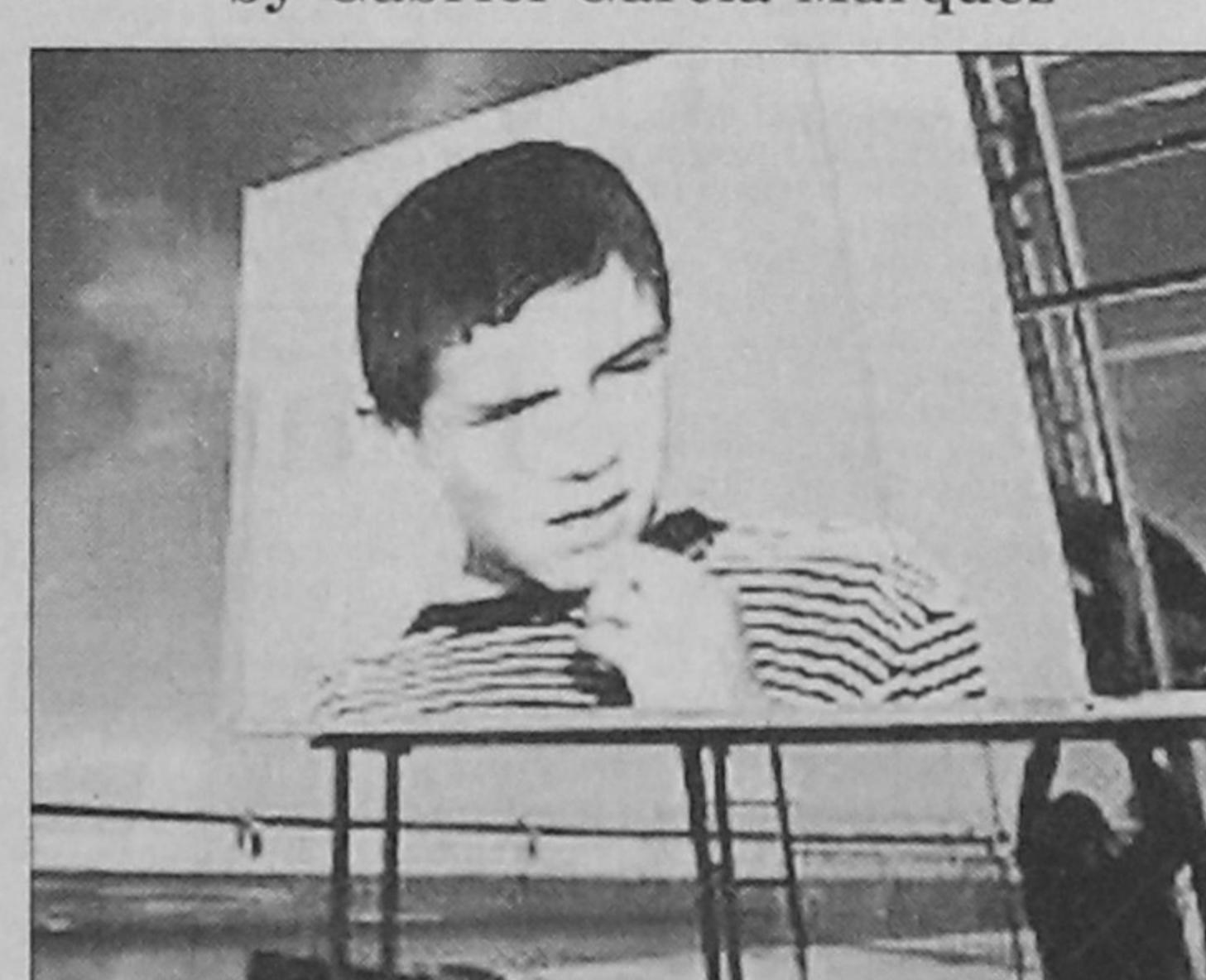
The author is Deputy Executive Director of BRAC. He has written this paper for CAMPE. The World Education Forum will be held in Dakar, Senegal from 26 to 28 April 2000 to review global progress and failures, since the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All, 1990.



## The Story of Elian Gonzales

The real shipwreck of Elian Gonzales, the Cuban boy who was rescued from the sea off the coast of Florida on November 25, did not take place on the high seas, but when he set foot on American soil.

by Gabriel Garcia Marquez



each of them paid \$1,000, three more people came on board: 22-year-old Arianne Horta; her five-year-old daughter, Estefany, and Nivaldo Vladimir Fernandez, the husband of one of her friends.

An infallible formula for being well-received as an immigrant in the US is to be shipwrecked in its territorial waters.

Cardenas is a good departure point: it is close to Florida, and its coves are protected by mangrove swamps. Moreover, the regional art of making small craft for fishing in the nearby Zapata Swamp and Del Tesoro Lagoon provides raw materials for illegal boats, in particular the aluminium pipes used for irrigating citrus groves.

People say that Munero must have spent about \$250 on the motor and the boats' construction. The result was a kind of lifeboat, with no roof and no seats.

Three inner tubes were put on board as life preservers for 14 people. There was no room for more. Before they left, most of the passengers injected themselves with Gravolin to prevent seasickness.

It appears that they set out on November 20 but had to go back when the motor broke down.

They remained hidden for two days, waiting for it to be repaired, while Juan Miguel

thought his son was already in Miami. The boat flipped over on its side, and all the passengers fell into the water. This may have broken the fragile soldering on the aluminium pipes and caused the boat to sink.

It was the end, in darkness. The older people who did not know how to swim probably drowned immediately. The Gravolin, which causes drowsiness must have worked against most of them. Arianne and Nivaldo clutched at one inner tube. Elian, and perhaps his mother, held onto the other. Nobody knows what happened to the third. Elian can swim, but Elizabeth could not, and she may have let go in her confusion and terror.

"I saw when mama got lost in the ocean," the boy later told his father on the phone. What is difficult to understand, though it deserves to be true, is that she had the presence of mind and the time to give the boy a bottle of fresh water.

His information was erroneous, but Juan Miguel had a premonition of the tragedy. He called his uncle several times. Lazar Gonzalez has lived in Miami for years — and asked about clandestine arrivals or recent shipwrecks, but was told nothing.

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