

**POWER WITHIN: EXPLORING CHANGING GENDER
ROLES AND POWER DYNAMIC IN THE
BANGLADESHI HOUSEHOLD**

**THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ARTS
OF
JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY**

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Candidate :
Dated :

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My PhD journey was enriched and supported by many people to who I express my heartfelt gratitude. I am truly thankful to my PhD advisor, Dr. Manabi Majumdar, for her advice, mentorship, feedback, guidance, and support throughout this journey. Her interest and trust in my research were constant sources of motivation for me and her encouragement really kept me moving forward with my work.

I thank Dr Rosinka Chaudhuri, Dr. Tapati Guha Thakurta, Dr Anirban Das, Dr Prachi Deshpande, Dr Priya Sangameswaran and other faculty members of CSSSC for their many conversations, teachings, feedback, and encouragement during my PhD years. I also thank the members of the PhD Research Committee for their suggestions and engagement during my PhD presentation.

I express my gratitude to my parents-Anjali and Kamal Ghosh, sister- Sudeshna Ghosh Pandey, and brother-in-law- Rajiv Pandey. Rittika, Shilpika and Miles Pandey continue to be my source of pride and joy. All of them have not only supported me and cheered me on during the PhD process but also throughout my life - they are my wind beneath my wings.

I am grateful to Sarah Shehabuddin and her family and to Bonani Tanzima Rahman and her family for welcoming me into their families during my research fieldwork in Bangladesh, and providing me with a home away from home. I thank them, along with Riaz Khan, and Rita Das Roy, for not only providing me with invaluable contacts through who I could reach my research participants, but also for many interesting conversations about my work. Many thanks to Israt Jahan, Niru Nahar, Lamiya Morshed, and Minhaz Mohsin Mishu organising the different research sites. I also thank the bank officials, factory managers, activists, and college administrators at the different sites, who went over and beyond to make my research site visit comfortable and my field work very productive. I am sincerely indebted to all my research participants. All of them engaged completely and candidly in the conversations, gave me a lot of their time, and gave me insights that were vital for my research. It was truly inspiring to hear their stories.

Many thanks to all the people working in CSSSC, JU PhD Cell, and JBMRC for all their support over the years. A special shout out goes to Sanchita Bhattacharya, Jayati Yajnik and the library team for never failing to find the book or journal that I needed; to Sreeparna Das for her encouragement; and to Ranjana Dasgupta, Tamali

Guha Roy and others at JBMRC for making my pre-pandemic writing days there so comfortable. I especially thank Kavita Bhowal for keeping track of all the bureaucratic requirements (and for letting me vent about it) over the years. Without her I'd still be drowning in the required paperwork.

Many of my teachers, professors, colleagues, peers and students during my years in academia have been the reason that I choose to remain in the academic world. I acknowledge Angela Ginorio, Becky Aanerud, and Susan Kemp for teaching me how to read theory and Joy Deshmukh-Ranadive for getting me interested in looking at women's empowerment academically. I also thank all the people who were my support systems in JNU, UT Austin, CWDS, UW Seattle and AUW.

I consider myself extremely lucky that I have such a solid community of friends and relatives who have, in various ways, contributed to my work. My PhD journey was a fractured one and I would not have been able to even restart it, let alone complete it, without the active encouragement and support from some people. Rosinka Chaudhuri spent many hours (over many meals) convincing me to give it another shot. My parents, sister and family were delighted when I decided to get back to it again and continue to be my sounding boards and enthusiastic supporters. Sarbari Dasgupta, not only supported this project from day 1 till the very end, but she always senses when I need a conversation or motivation and is there for me. Prabirendra Chatterjee, not only managed to provide me with any reading, academic information, and clarification of concepts that I asked him for (almost like magic) but has been a friend through very difficult times. Heinz Scheifinger has been a rock, especially through the pandemic, listening to me vent, engaging in discussions about my work, and encouraging me to keep going on. Prabir Paul always has come up with solutions for my last-minute problems-from broken laptops to stuck visas. Sudakshmina Mandal has, unwaveringly had my back and is always there, in whatever way I need her. They have had confidence in my work and me, even at times when my own confidence has wavered. My friends, cousins, grandmothers, aunts, and uncles have always wished me the best and celebrated my progress and this inspired me to do better.

If I name all the people and the ways they have contributed to the PhD process and my academic life, this section might exceed the thesis but I would like them to know that I remember them individually and how much I appreciate each and every one of them.

ABSTRACT

Women in most societies in the world have been relegated to a lower social position as compared to men. Their desires and choices have been undermined and their powers and capabilities have been suppressed. The discussions in this thesis have centred around women's identities, choices and desires and their linkages to power, capability, and empowerment. In this thesis I explore how interventions made by development programs that focus on gender empowerment affect lives of women within the private sphere, with a specific focus on developing a sense of 'power within' oneself. The focus is on if and how the process of empowerment endows the woman with a different awareness of the nature of gender roles and power dynamics within the household, of what entails violence, and what her rights are. This analysis is conducted in the context of the developing and patriarchal society of Bangladesh. This research study draws from various bodies of literature, including literature on women's empowerment, capability theory, family justice, patriarchy, social identities, and gender-based violence. One important gap that this research study will potentially seek to fill in is, in the discussion of the many variants of 'power within' and its link with the competing and even contradicting elements of freedom and control in the lives of women. The other examination of complex entanglement of concepts that is highlighted in this research, and is not discussed much in the literature, is that of empowerment and identity. The methodology adopted for this research is a qualitative, feminist research methodology. This methodology is also informed by symbolic interactionism. The data and evidence for this research were collected from primary sources i.e. the participants in the field. The participants for this research project were mainly drawn from a population of women in Bangladesh who are considered to be beneficiaries of one or more development interventions. The data was collected during two one-month periods:

November, 2018 and February, 2019. In this thesis, exploring the linkages between power, empowerment, oppression, agency, identity, and consciousness, has led to many conundrums and complexities in the understanding of ‘power within’ to be brought forth. Some of the contributions to the idea of empowerment of women made in this research are the following: empowerment is achieved through the continuous, daily and very ordinary actions of the women; empowerment is relational and there is no situation of abject powerlessness just as there is no situation of absolute power; empowerment is enhanced through inter-generational interventions; and, the establishment of their own independent identities of individuals is intrinsically linked with their definition of empowerment. I found that reflections on their identities, awareness of the injustices done to women daily, and consciousness of the unfair devaluation of women in their society are the true indicators of ‘power within’ these women. The findings from this research may not only inform policies focusing on women’s empowerment or gender-based violence but also contribute to the designing, implementation, and assessment of development and empowerment interventions.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Interrogating Empowerment

“I like the term ‘empowerment’ because nobody has defined it clearly yet; so it gives us a space to work it out in action terms before we have to pin ourselves down to what it means” (Kabeer, 1999, pg. 436)

Gender-based equality has been a core tenet of international agreements about human rights as given by the United Nations Charter in 1945. Seventy-five years since the adoption of this charter, global issues of gender inequality continue to persist in various forms and degrees all over the world. International resolutions like the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, and Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015, to name a few, all place gender equality and women’s empowerment as central goals of development. The UN 2030 Agenda states that empowerment of women and girls is not only an important goal in itself but it also acts as a catalyst for other development goals on the agenda¹. Yet, despite the centrality of women’s empowerment and focus on gender equality, alleviation of gender oppression seems to be a persistent challenge. According to a UN article titled “Women and Girls - Closing the Gender Gap” (2020), the goal for achieving economic empowerment of women remains unfulfilled for the majority of women around the globe. The findings of the article report that less than two-thirds of women occupy the labour force and that too women mainly work in the informal sector where regulation of work hours and wages is poor, domestic and unpaid labour arenas are feminized and remain largely ‘invisible and poorly supported’, and there is a gender gap in financial inclusion with women less likely to have any bank

¹ Women and Girls – Closing the Gender Gap. (n.d.). In *United Nations: UN75 2020 and Beyond*. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/en/un75/women_girls_closing_gender_gap

accounts than men. While there has been a lot of progress in the field of women's education, half a billion women and girls remain illiterate, women's sexual and reproductive rights continue to be undermined, power and decision-making remain mainly dominated by men, and violence against women remain a massive problem with one in five women globally experiencing abuse. In short, the article reports that "Women and girls have less access to education and healthcare, too often lack economic autonomy and are under-represented in decision-making at all levels." ('Women and Girls - Closing the Gender Gap', 2020). Thus, in practice, the empowerment agenda in gender development initiatives has only been met with moderate success even though it has been adopted almost globally. These challenges of the practice of empowerment both as a process and a goal also extend to the concept of empowerment. The concept of empowerment is hugely contested and many researchers as well as development agencies have attributed a variety of meanings to it. The understanding of the concept of empowerment that is used as a starting point of this research is given by Naila Kabeer's description of 'empowerment' to be the inter-linkages of 'power within' that enables women to articulate their own aspirations and strategies for change, 'power to' that enables women to develop the necessary skills and access the necessary resources to achieve their aspirations, 'power with' that enables women to examine and articulate their collective interests, and 'power over' that change the underlying inequalities in power and resources that constrain women's aspirations and their ability to achieve them. (Kabeer, 1994)

In this thesis I examine the idea of 'power within' that requires women, individually and collectively, to reflect on their choices, aspirations, interests, and strategies for change. I argue that the different and sometimes conflicting identities of an individual as well as the cultural norms that women are expected to follow, inhibit

and assist the process of empowerment to different degrees resulting in the manifestation of the 'power within' to be varied and sometimes even counterintuitive for different women. No matter how counterintuitive some of women's choices and preferences might seem, they are an integral part of the process of empowerment. I also argue that while women constantly negotiate the social norms and expectations that they are required to follow in a patriarchal system, the 'power within' is manifested only when the negotiation is done consciously and reflectively. Conscious reflection on the interaction of the various identities of an individual in different circumstances to adapt to, negotiate with, resist, and transform the spaces and systems that the individuals occupy is an unerring mark of the manifestation of 'power within'. To elaborate on these arguments, I will first briefly examine some of the different meanings attributed to the concept of empowerment, drawing out certain commonalities irrespective of the side of the debate that they come from. Then I will look at some of the other concepts like agency, autonomy, and capability which have been conflated with the idea of 'power within' and are definite indicators of empowerment. In doing so I will be able to also explore certain linkages between freedom, choice, individual and social identities, empowerment, and 'power within' that have hitherto been fleetingly discussed in this research area. One important discussion that this will potentially lead to is the discussion of the many variants of 'power within' and its link with the contradicting elements of freedom and control in the lives of women. Freedom of thought and action; freedom to be and do, 'freedom to' and 'freedom from' are all desired elements of empowerment but the control of these freedoms is not always external or unconscious. Many a times women make conscious and reflective choices to curtail these freedoms. Does the agency of women then to make such choices inhibit the process of empowerment? The other examination of complex entanglement of

concepts that I will highlight in this research is that of empowerment and identity. This is not usually attempted in available discussions on empowerment. However, gender identity and social group identity and their complex interactions are interesting specifically when discussing empowerment that aims to change the structures that constitute the site in which these identities are defined and maintained. As mentioned earlier, women like men are not socially unencumbered individuals and nor are they totally constrained by social norms and thus the identities that manifest in different circumstances become an aspect of ‘power within’. Through this discussion, issues of empowerment like identity assertion, identity growth, as well as identity loss will be highlighted. Many such concepts like freedom and control, identity assertion and identity inhibition, agency and adaptative preferences, resistance to the system and adjusting to circumstances, decision-making that asserts autonomy and decisions that are antithetical to individual well-being, etc, compete, if not conflict, with each other to either embellish or enervate the understanding of empowerment. Thus, this thesis aims to analyse not only the complex nature of empowerment on the ground but also at a theoretical level.

Defining Empowerment

There are several definitions and elaborations of the concept of empowerment. Different scholars and institutions tailor the concept to fit their agendas. Some definitions highlight the expansion of resources and capacities as the crux of the concept. According to Kabeer (1999), the ability that gets transformed during the process of empowerment rests on three distinct but interrelated dimensions that are a) resources, b) agency, and c) achievements. In her definition ‘resources’ include not only material resources but various social resources too that enhance the ability of individuals to exercise choice, ‘agency’ is the ability to define one’s goals and act upon

them, and ‘achievements’ refer to the consequences and outcomes of the exercise of the agency. (Kabeer, 1999) Schuler, Islam, and Rottach (2010) define “women's empowerment as women's acquisition of resources and capacities and the ability to exercise agency in a context of gender inequality.” (Pg. 840) The World Bank (2002)² defines the concept as “Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.” (Narayan-Parker, 2002, Pg. xviii) Some descriptions focus on the specific ability to take control like when the concept is defined as the means by which individuals, groups, and communities are able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals, thereby being able to maximize the quality of their lives. (Mullender and Ward, 1991) Reducing inequalities in existing systems and relations is another salient aspect of empowerment which is also explained as a “process whereby constraints that impede equal participation are reduced so that the inequality starts moving towards becoming equality.” (Deshmukh-Ranadive in Guerin & Palier, 2005, Pg. 132) In Naila Kabeer’s model of empowerment, that I have mentioned above, the central idea of empowerment is the positive power that women (or individuals) have over, to do, with others and most importantly within them requires an elaboration of the ideas of ‘power within’. In *Reversing Realities* (1994), she describes ‘power within’ as “Strategies of empowerment from within provide women with other perspectives. They entail reflection, analysis and assessment of what has hitherto been taken for granted so as to uncover the socially constructed and socially shared basis of apparently individual problems. New forms of consciousness arise out of women’s newly acquired access to the intangible skills, social networks,

² Retrieved from “Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A source book” (2002) published by the World Bank

organizational strengths, solidarity and a sense of not being alone.” (Kabeer, 1994, Pg. 245) Hoagland in Allen’s (1998) article “Rethinking Power”, describes ‘power within’ as the power of ability, of choice and engagement. It is creative and hence it is an affecting and transforming power but not a controlling power. In this power is a capacity. The idea of transformation is at the heart of any understanding of ‘empowerment’, whether it be transformation of individual life conditions or transformation of power structures or social systems. Specifically, the structuralist school of thought that first incorporated the idea of empowerment in thinking about gender, focused on it bringing about a structural transformation to enhance the situation of women. Thus, in feminist theory, to question, destabilize, and transform patriarchal structures is the most important objective of empowerment. (Kabeer, 1994, 1999; Batliwala, 1993) The problem, according to this perspective then, is not that woman had not been integrated into development but that they had been integrated at the bottom of an inherently hierarchical and contradictory structure of production and accumulation. Thus, the social, political, and economic structures have to be transformed in order to redistribute power and resources fairly. (Kabeer, 1994)

Empowerment, Development, and Women in Bangladesh

Since this research study is geographically based in Bangladesh it is important to clarify how the concepts and contexts discussed in this thesis are formulated in the country. Bangladesh is a country that has been internationally recognised for making enormous progress on many gender indicators as given by the United Nations³. Ever since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 the issue of women’s development received emphasis in their economic policies. In the very first five-year plan there was

³ Retrieved from UN Women country profiles. UN Women Bangladesh. (n.d.). In *UN Women Asia Pacific*. Retrieved from <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/countries/bangladesh>

a focus on women in terms of education, health and family planning and attaining economic self-reliance of various nature aimed at ultimate social welfare. Over the decades Bangladesh, as a ratifying and signatory state to various other important regional charters, has expressed commitment to undertake multilateral steps in areas of women's development. For example the areas of women's development that Bangladesh commits to work on, according to the Beijing Work Plan 1995 include: problems of increasing poverty of the women; unequal opportunity in the matter of education and training; abuse of women; limited rights in matter of claims over economic resources; and inequality in decision-making and participation in power, amongst others. (National Women Development Policy, 2011) "The Government, non-governmental organizations, and other key stakeholders, deliberately developed innovative programs such as conditional cash transfers and financial inclusion, stipend programs for girl students, family planning, and micro-finance created opportunities for millions of girls and women from all walks of life." (World Bank, 2021, Paragraph 7)

The international focus on the expanding micro-finance sector in Bangladesh in the eighties and the increasing popularity of the garment factory industry in the nineties in Bangladesh put the country on the international map for being committed to women's development issues. A lot of the economic growth and development in the country in the recent decades have been due to the expanding industrial sector, especially the garment industry. The garment industry too primarily employs women as workers. "Three million Bangladeshi women are employed in the lucrative ready-made garment sector, which is Bangladesh's largest export industry." (Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, 2022, Paragraph 1) Thus, the development in Bangladesh has occurred in tandem with the development of women in the country. However, in Bangladesh too, despite the focus and progress on women's empowerment certain significant gaps

remain in gender issues, especially with regard to family justice and gender-based violence. A World Bank article, published in 2021, reports that only 7% of the millions of entrepreneurs in Bangladesh are women, only 5 % of the top managers are women, only 36% of women have bank accounts and most of the women have zero to little financial control, 60% of women are married off before they reach the legal age of 18, and more women still disproportionately suffer from domestic care burdens and gender-based violence. (Tembon, 2021) These constant contradictions between the tremendous progress in women's development made in Bangladesh and the enormous challenges that women in the country continue to face, makes Bangladesh a uniquely appropriate field for a study on women's empowerment.

Commonalities and Conundrums

Regardless of the different emphases on the different aspects of the concept of empowerment, there are some common assumptions and understandings that are evident in all the definitions of the term. For example, Spreitzer in Rawat's article "Patriarchal Beliefs, Women's Empowerment and General Wellbeing" (2014) lays down some common components of the definition, "First, empowerment is not an enduring personality trait generalizable across all situations, but rather, a set of cognitions shaped by work environment. Second, empowerment is a continuous variable; people can be viewed as more or less empowered, rather than empowered or not empowered. Third, empowerment is not a global construct generalizable across different life situations and roles but specific to work/activities." (Rawat, 2014, Pg. 46) However, within these common understandings lie certain conundrums that render the concept difficult to pin down with an unvarying definition.

Most researchers agree that empowerment is a process and that there is an element of progress from a state of disempowerment to empowerment. In the

understandings of the concept discussed above, whether empowerment is about the expansion of people's abilities to take control over their lives or about the resources they acquire to improve their lives and their well-being, the common assumption is that through the process of empowerment people are able to go from a negative state of being to a positive state. This reaffirms the idea that not only is empowerment a process but that it is a linear process. There are two contentions embedded in this idea of empowerment as a linear process. While it is agreed that empowerment is a process, it is also a goal. In Batliwala's discussion of the concept "women's empowerment is thus the process, and the outcome of the process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources, and challenge the ideology of patriarchy and the gender-based discrimination against women in all the institutions and structures of society". (Batliwala in Daelli, 2018, Box inset 1) This dual role that empowerment plays poses a difficulty in both theory and practice to clearly interpret the concept. The conundrum arises because instead of seeing empowerment fulfilling both the roles simultaneously, there is an assumption that it has to be either one or the other. The debate on which one it is then is taken up by scholars and practitioners. As Chopra and Muller (2016) observe "Women's empowerment has been conceptualised primarily along two lines: as a goal, with aims and targets – mostly by the development industry; or as a continuous process of change in which women empower themselves and challenge patriarchal structures and institutions – mostly by social movements and scholars." (Chopra & Muller, 2016, Pg. 1) The other conundrum that lies in this idea of empowerment being a linear progression is that it is implied that through empowerment people move from an abject state of powerlessness to a state of absolute power, from a hopeless and negative situation to a happy and positive state. This idea that there can be a state where an individual is absolute powerful or powerless is an oversimplification

of the idea of power. The issue, when this notion of empowerment is applied to the lives of women, is that it collapses diverse experiences of women living in the third world into a single category of ‘Other’ characterized by their status as victim – victim of capitalist development schemes, victim of patriarchy, and victim of poverty. The ‘woman as victim’ discourse that is entwined in the analytical construct of the economically essentialized ‘Third World Woman’ overlooks the critical perspectives that poor women bring to their worlds, as well as their own skills, strategies, capabilities, and power. (Mohanty, 2003; Marchand and Parpart, 1995; Klenk, 2004)

Another common understanding of empowerment is that it is multidimensional and thus operates on different levels like individual, household, society, and communities. There is a tendency for a debate to crop up between the socialist theorists of empowerment and the ‘power’ theorist of empowerment polarizing the concept of empowerment as an individualistic process versus a communitarian process. In Amy Allen’s essay, “Feminist Perspectives on Power” (2021) she discusses how social theorists like Hartsock and Arendt focus on the importance of the community or the collective to achieve the kind of transformation that empowerment seeks to enable. They explain the idea of ‘power with’ as the interconnected aspect of empowerment that denotes “a collective ability that is a function of relationships of reciprocity between members of a group” whereas “power feminists endorse a more individualistic, self-assertive, even aggressive conception of empowerment, one that tends to define empowerment in terms of individual choice with little concern for the contexts within which choices are made or the options from which women are able to choose.” (Allen, 2021, Paragraph 60) However, it is important to see ‘empowerment’ to be beyond this polarity and it is only successful when it operates simultaneously across the different dimensions. Rowland (1997) argues that empowerment is personal, relational, and

collective all at the same time. It's personal, in that it aims to enhance individual capacities and diminish internalized oppression; relational as in it aims to build skills that enable the individual to negotiate with and influence other individuals in the family and community as well as adapt to, resist or transform social structures; and, collective, since if individuals act along with others to bring about the transformations in their lives they are likely to have a far greater impact. (Rowland, 1997)

The third commonly agreed upon feature of the concept of empowerment is that it aims to build capacity and ability and this capacity enables individuals to make choices and gives them the ability to take control of their lives and overcome structural constraints. Kabeer (1999) states that since power is linked inextricably with the ability to make choices, in her understanding, empowerment, "...is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability." (Kabeer, 1999, Pg. 437) There are a few conundrums in this feature of choice and control. Firstly 'control' can mean that through the process of empowerment individuals are gaining control over their lives - the 'power to' aspect of empowerment that Kabeer discusses but it may also mean that they are overcoming the controls that obstruct their mobilities and freedoms. Thus, individuals' aim to achieve empowerment successfully means to overcome being controlled both by people who they are in various relationships with and by structures of control like patriarchal structures, and to transfer this control to themselves by taking control over their lives. An indication of this transference of control is the ability to exercise their free choice. Herein lies the most important conundrum of this aspect. The very existence of 'free' choice or choice that is without any kind of bias is debatable. Sen (2007) says that, "The existence of choice does not, of course, indicate that there are no constraints restricting choice. Indeed, choices are

always made within the limits of what are seen as feasible.” (Sen, 2007, Pg. 5) Since individuals are shaped by their circumstances and social systems they occupy, even a choice that might seem unshaped by bias may not be so. This leads to the other conundrum that confuses the link between empowerment and individual choice, and that is the quality of the choice. If the choice that individuals make is not in line with the commonly held idea of an empowered individual, then will that choice be automatically discounted and undermined? However, if certain choices antithetical to the idea of empowerment are not undermined, but celebrated, then will the celebration be of individuals making choices that subvert their own well-being as well as the progress of their families and communities? Khader (2011) elaborates on this dilemma, “We are faced with a puzzle. The empowerment-as-choice discourse assumes that people will pursue their own interests when they have choices about whether to do so. And yet here we have what seems to be a case of women making choices against their interests. Should development practitioners celebrate the success of empowerment programs that result in women choosing to undermine their health, sexual functioning, and status as equals with men?” (Khader, 2011, Pg. 186)

Finally, while this is not apparently explored with reference to women’s empowerment, a common underlying aspect of empowerment is its link to social identities. Women, like men, have various identities that are given by social groups they belong to. While collective identities give individuals the power of solidarity, individual identities give them a sense of self. Sen describes the many roles of identities as, “Everyone has many identities. Being a man or a woman is one of them. Being a member of a family is another. Membership of a class, an occupation group, a nation or a community can be the basis of particular links. One's individuality co-exists with a variety of such identities. Our understanding of our interests, well-being, obligations,

objectives and legitimate behaviour is influenced by the various - and sometimes conflicting - influences of these diverse identities.” (Sen, 1987, Pg. 6) Identities, power and social justice are inextricably linked. As given by the theory of intersectionality coined by Kimberley Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality is a framework that explains how individuals’ various social identities combine to create situations of privilege and discrimination. Collins (2000) adds to this by arguing that patterns of oppression are shaped by interlocking systems of society like gender, race, caste, class, etc - systems that provide individuals with their multiple identities. Thus, if one of the goals of empowerment of women is to alleviate social injustice to overcome gender-based oppression, then an understanding of the concept has to take into account these interlocking systems of social identities. One way of understanding the link between empowerment and identity lies in the fact that if empowerment is aiming towards a transformation of social constructs, then the empowerment has to be an identity-transforming one. So even if the people undergoing the process do not completely change the categories that they identify with, they definitely challenge the way that identity category is defined and performed. Thus, through the empowerment process while identities can be formed, reinforced, challenged, and asserted, as there is a change in consciousness about one’s self there may be certain identities that women feel the need to abandon. Sen (1999) posits that while identities are held to be aspects of human beings that one ‘discovers’ through reflection, in reality the process of choosing to assert or develop an identity itself is an act of agency. ‘Identity’ is discovered when identity groups are considered to be inflexible and fixed, but identities, it can be argued, are socially constructed, in which case identities and how they are performed are a choice. Since empowerment is a process, the different stages of discovering and choosing which identity to perform in different contexts and how to perform them are

different aspects of this process, but the act of reflecting on the different identities and roles are the most salient parts of the manifestation of ‘power within’.

Clarifying the Contexts

The range of contexts in which ‘empowerment’ is applied and discussed is very varied. There are a number of different contexts, spaces, and ways in which the concept of empowerment has been applied and theorized. Thus, it becomes imperative to briefly clarify the contexts in which this concept is discussed in this thesis. I specifically look at how interventions made by development programs that focus on women, such as micro-finance programs, affect lives of women within the private sphere, particularly in terms of incidence of violence, and to explore and deepen the understandings of empowerment with a focus on the idea of ‘power within’. Thus, for the purpose of this thesis, I explore and interrogate these concepts within the context of development, with the individual and familial household as my primary focus.

The idea of empowerment appeared in development literature and interventions related with gender at a particular point in the history of development studies and very quickly got popular as the magic bullet that could solve all issues of gender inequality and injustice that were pervasive in the global south. The Women in Development (WID) approach which was situated at the intersection of the two modernist discourses- the colonial discourse and the liberal discourse, exemplified and embodied the disempowerment of third world women. (Marchand and Parpart, 1995) However even though this approach highlighted the plight of ‘disempowered’ women in developing nations, empowerment discourse was not really a part of the WID approach which was primarily concerned with making women visible in the development arena as a category of analysis. The WID analysts believed that the position and the situation of women could be improved by getting rid of some misconceptions and misinformation about

women in the developing world. (Boserup, 1970; Kabeer, 1994) The focus here was on modernization and growth that tended to be more linked with economics and finances of the nations. It was only the emergence of scholarship from the structuralist perspective or the Gender and Development (GAD) approach that provided the basis of what is known as the “empowerment” approach to women’s development, as according to this approach the social, political, and economic structures have to be transformed in order to redistribute power and resources fairly. (Kabeer, 1994) However, once the idea of empowerment was introduced in the context of development it very quickly got co-opted by neoliberal and neoconservative political movements to be applied as the perfect solution that can be numerically measured and evaluated. Batliwala (2007) traces this co-option and states that, “From these historically, politically, and geographically diverse locations, empowerment was hijacked, in the 1990s, into increasingly bizarre locations, converted from a collective to an individualistic process, and skilfully co-opted by conservative and even reactionary political ideologies in pursuit of their agenda...Management gurus discovered ‘empowerment’ and infused it into the human-resource development and motivational practices of the corporate world, turning it to the service of profit making and competitiveness in the market place.” (Batliwala, 2007, Pg. 558) While this is true of the application of the concept of empowerment, scholars argue that the idea of empowerment theoretically is drawn less from the research of the First World Women and more from the writings and grass-roots organisation of Third World Women and argues for a development that is embedded in the particular experiences faced by men and women in the global South. (Marchand and Parpart, 1995) Thus, in theoretical ways of thinking about women’s development: diversity is welcomed, previously subjugated voices are heard, and dialogue between development practitioners and their ‘clients’ is encouraged. They

suggest the need for a more inclusive, open approach to women's knowledge. An approach to development that accepts and understands difference and the power of discourse, and that fosters open, consultative dialogue can empower women in the global south to articulate their own speeds and agendas instead of simply seeing women as the victim or a disempowered "vulnerable" group in need of salvation by western expertise. Above all, they emphasize the need to situate women's experiences in their specific, historical, spatial, and social contexts. The multiple identities/oppressions of race, class, age, culture, etc interact in complex ways, indicating that women construct their lives in complicated and often shifting material and discursive environments, which are both difficult to understand and to change. (Marchand and Parpart, 1995; Klenk, 2004)

One clarification necessary in this discussion of women's empowerment in developing societies is that the structures and systems in place in these societies are inherently patriarchal. In feminist discourse the term patriarchy has commonly been associated with a monolithic concept of male domination. Rawat (2014) quotes Walby's definition of patriarchy as "a social system in which the role of the male as the primary authority figure is central to social organization, and where males hold authority over women, children, and property." (Rawat, 2014, Pg. 44) Thus, in such a system the masculine and feminine stereotypes are structured and shaped in ways that the gender inequality and women's oppression not only persist, but are thought to be natural and necessary. The hegemonic power is firmly masculine. Women obedient to this system are rewarded with rights and privileges and appear to be powerful and thriving. Yet no matter what classic patriarchy states and expects, in reality women have continuously bargained with and resisted this system. Sometimes the bargain has been to accept the domination in order to reap the benefits that it brings with it and at

other times the bargain has been to resist the oppression. Kandiyoti (1988) argues, “These patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts. They also influence both the potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression”. (Kandiyoti, 1988, Pg. 275) Empowerment of women aims to challenge and transform these patriarchal structures for more equitable gender power relations.

In considering women's empowerment within the context of development the unit of familial household cannot be ignored. Okin (1989) places “...the family as the locus for the development of a sense of justice and self-esteem, of an appreciation of the meaning of reciprocity, of the ability to exercise unforced choice, and of an awareness of alternative ways of life.” (Okin, 1989, Pg.17) In the debates between individual empowerment and collective empowerment, the familial household, where individual identities and personalities consciously and unconsciously interact to bargain, co-operate, adjust, and resist to present a collective front as an indivisible unit, often gets ignored. In my understanding of empowerment, I try to move away from the polarity between individual empowerment and collective empowerment. I aim to look at empowerment within the household since the individual appears to merge so seamlessly with the collective though in reality this merging is often a product of cooperation and conflict and sometimes antithetical to individual sense of self and ‘power within’ specially for women. Kabeer in Chopra and Muller (2016) says that “Women's location as the intersection between production and reproduction, between making a living and caring for the family, makes the organization of gender relations central to the nexus between economic growth and human development and hence central to the development agenda.” (Chopra and Muller, 2016, Pg. 2) Specifically,

within the context of development, when it comes to households, the usual focus of both practitioners and theorists is on low income households, conflating men's and women's interests as the same is problematic. Sen (1987) warns against this when he says that, "...females and males in the same family may well have quite divergent predicaments, and this can make the position of women in the poorer families particularly precarious. To concentrate on family poverty irrespective of gender can be misleading in terms of both causation and consequences." (Sen, 1987, Pg. 3) Finally, if as discussed above individual choices and agency are not free of biases given by socialization then the family is a primary location of individual socialization. Okin (1989) states that, "Scholars have clearly revealed the interconnections between the gender structure inside and outside the family and the extent to which the personal is political. They have shown that the assignment of primary parenting to women is crucial, both in forming the gendered identities of men and women and in influencing their respective choices and opportunities in life." (Okin, 1989, Pg. 10) Thus, in the discussion on empowerment, exploring the flow of power and interactions between power relations within the household becomes of central importance.

A uniqueness of the household unit is that while it is embedded in the societal structures, and thus the power dynamics reflect those of the community and society at large, but it is also a site where the relationships between the individual members of the household are primarily based on love and care. Because of this, familial households are often perceived as harmonious, integrated, and, most importantly, private units. The gendered power structures within familial households thus often become obscured in many different analyses. Yet, like other social institutions, power relationships remain integral to household units too. Patriarchal familial households become primary and central sites where gendered stereotypes are taught and reinforced leading to the

maintenance of the hegemony of masculine power. “The family is therefore at the center of both cultural devaluation and economic dependence which attach to women’s traditional roles. And the predictable result is that men have unequal power in most marriages, power that is exercised in decision-making, work, leisure, sex, consumption, etc...” (Kymlicka, 2001, Pg. 387) This is not to claim that this power asymmetry remains unchallenged but the way it’s challenged or bargained with is different because of relationships of love and caring within the household units. Sen in “Continuing the Conversation” (2003) observes that “... one type of power asymmetry leads to, or helps to facilitate, power asymmetries of other types. Power has a central role in what I call ‘cooperative conflict’ which is central to my understanding of gender inequality within the family and ultimately in the society at large. Women and men have both congruent and conflicting interests affecting family living.” (Sen, et. al, 2003, Pg. 323) Stereotypically the majority share of providing this love and care, and keeping the family unit cohesive and integrated falls on the women. Thus, if women have conflicting interests, they are expected to adjust, and are rewarded for adjusting to maintain the family. This makes women’s positions in these gendered power structures more vulnerable. “In the traditional feminine ethic of self-sacrifice, women had limitless responsibility to provide care but had little power over the conditions under which it was provided or rewarded. In a feminist ethic of care, the responsibility for care is shared more fairly with men, as is the power to shape the conditions under which it is provided.” (Kymlicka, 2001, Pg. 414) If the empowerment process aims to achieve a more equitable and just familial gender structure, then it has to take into account the uniqueness of treatment that is necessary for transforming the power dynamics of relationships that are primarily created, mediated, and sustained by love and care.

Focus on Certain Indicators of Empowerment

There are many indicators of empowerment. While some indicators denote different kinds of power that constitute empowerment, there are others that are a combination of most aspects of empowerment. As evident in the earlier discussion, empowerment is by no means a settled concept - the meanings of the concept are thus always in flux. Given this, there cannot be a fixed set of indicators or operationalizations that are used to measure or evaluate the process of empowerment. With regard to gendered power dynamics within the household, in the development context, among the many indicators that are there, I want to discuss two salient ones - decision-making and violence against women. An increase in women's decision-making roles and a decrease in the occurrence of violence in women's daily lives have been commonly accepted to be good measures of women gaining more agency and are thus related to the empowerment process albeit in different ways. Kabeer (1999), while discussing the direct evidence of empowerment (decision-making and violence) and sources of empowerment (education), says that direct evidence of empowerment includes women's emancipation given by freedom of mobility and belief in daughters' education, shared roles in the household and decision-making given by egalitarian gender roles and egalitarian decision-making, and overcoming devaluation of women given by alleviation of domestic violence. (Kabeer, 1999) These two aspects of women's lives seem to work in opposite ways with decision-making denoting an increase of power for women and occurrence of violence against women indicating an erosion of power and devaluation of women. Yet, seen from another perspective, when women make decisions that reinforce patriarchal structures and norms that diminish their well-being then this kind of decision-making is antithetical to empowerment. Similarly, if women's every day engagement with various incidents of violence that

occur to them as individuals or within their communities is analysed, then the ways that they identify, resist, and deal with these incidents is indicative of empowerment.

Decision-Making: As the development discourse focused on women moved from WID to GAD, and beyond, and women's empowerment became central to this discourse, women's agency started being regarded as one of the salient manifestations of women's power, especially 'power within'. "No longer the passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help, women are increasingly seen, by men as well as women, as active agents of change: the dynamic promoters of social transformations that can alter the lives of both women and men." (Sen, 1999, Pg. 189) Thus women's agency, especially the agency that is demonstrated through choices that reflect attention to their well-being and interests, is an important element of empowerment. "As far as empowerment is concerned, we are interested in possible inequalities in people's capacity to make choices rather than in differences in the choices they make." (Kabeer, 1999, Pg. 439) In "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment" (1999) she analyses various literature to show how the three interrelated dimensions of empowerment - resources, agency and achievement - that she discusses are indicated by a relation between access, control, and decision-making. In fact, decision-making is often used as a concrete measure of control and agency.

Household decision-making reflects all four aspects of empowerment - power to, power over, power with and 'power within' - as given by theorists like Kabeer and Mosedale. Power to is reflected when women take control to decide and make the choices for the household, power over is reflected when these decisions result in the women having control over certain situations as well as over some members of the household though power over can also have a negative connotation since it also implies the ability to override someone else's preference, power with is reflected when these

decisions are not completely arbitrary and take into account the bargaining that constantly goes on in a household as then these decisions are also taken with other members of the household, and 'power within' is reflected when these decisions reflect inner transformation of women to take into account their rights, entitlements, interests, and well-being. Each of these experiences of women with decision-making may also reflect an erosion of powers, either obviously or more subtly. For example, when women make other regarding choices⁴ or decisions sometimes that leads to a detriment of their own well-being. Or when women make decisions according to the interest or preferences of the men of the household, thus preserving the cultural images that define women's roles as to primarily serve men, it may seem disempowering. However, Kabeer (1999) states that though often women ascribed the formal decision-making power to the men in the household or at least as taken in consultation with the men, many qualitative research studies have shown that the women's responses indicate that they took many of these decisions themselves and they did so strategically so as to avoid confrontation.

The inner transformation in women that is sought after in an empowerment process also indicates an awareness of their gendered identity and gender roles and how that impacts the decision-making process. In this context perhaps it is also interesting to think about how the very act of identifying with a gender and with other roles that come with it is a decision, a choice (Sen, 2007) This kind of choice is also integral to the empowerment process. Here what is not as important is the individual choosing a particular identity-say a woman choosing to identify as a woman in general - but the woman choosing to identify as a mother or a wife or a group leader, etc and then

⁴ 'Other regarding choices' are choices that are made, prioritising the well-being of others rather than the well-being of the individuals themselves.

defining that identity category and its roles. Thus, the choice aspect here is to unquestioningly adhere to the idea of a 'woman' that is shaped by hegemonic powers in patriarchal systems or to challenge and even to an extent redefine the very notion of a 'woman'. So, for example if traditionally in the household certain kinds of decision-making falls on the woman like decisions around the kitchen but then she also starts making decisions (perhaps not unilaterally) about household finances or spending (how to allocate majority of the household income, decisions about her husband's spending, etc) then this redefines the traditional, expected gender role of a woman and thus reshapes the stereotype of the gender identity. This transformation is more noteworthy when inter-generational influence is taken into account and the next generation learns these transformed roles and identities.

Violence Against Women: Violence against women or gender-based violence is comprised of integrated categories of direct, indirect, and structural violence that all work together to erode the confidence and agency of women and thus diminish the 'power within'. However, when we explicitly look at the gendered nature of violence, both within the household and without, then this might not be an unequivocal indication of disempowerment. Within these incidents there are seeds of empowerment in the ways women, and in some cases men, some more than others, articulate, interpret, and interrogate violence, and think of resisting it, and in the process suggest that some are more empowered than others, and that there are degrees of empowerment conjuring a broad spectrum. Ideally, empowerment improves women's financial autonomy, bargaining power, and self-esteem thus lowering the risk of violence in their lives. Empowerment initiatives should additionally provide women with the means and

support to be able to deal with and resist incidences of violence⁵. (Jatfors, 2017) Often strategies of empowerment of women tend to focus on the capacities within the women to control their lives, while strategies to alleviate violence against women tend to focus on how women are oppressed. Yet, both empowerment and violence may be occurring at the same time by the same individual or structure or practice in the life of the same woman and discussing this issue from any one perspective leads to a lack of understanding of the women's lived realities.

In the context of women's experience with violence, the gender identity as well as women's membership in other collective identity groups may both aid and abet the empowerment process. Collective action is necessary in the alleviation of violence against women (VAW) but for collective action to take place, one needs to be a member of a collective and for that, one needs a collective identity. To resist violence women might strategically choose certain identities that protect them and abet their resistance. So, collective identity is an important aspect of empowerment too. In true Marxian tradition the theme of collective identity underpins most empowerment strategies. This stress on the collective has a dual rationale. Firstly, recognition of the shared aspects of gender subordination points to its collectively enforced and hence collectively changeable character and forms the basis of strategies for any change. Secondly, given women's disenfranchisement from most sources of institutional power, their collective strength is seen as the most important transformatory resource at their disposal. (Kabeer, 1994) Linking empowerment and alleviation of violence may seem to be obvious aspects of norm change since both aim at changing the gendered norms and structures to be effective. The conundrum here lies in the fact that VAW erodes

⁵ This is from a presentation by Anna Karin Jatfors- Deputy Regional Director- UN Women Regional Office of Asia and Pacific. The topic of the presentation was Women's Economic Empowerment and Violence against Women. It was delivered in Bangkok, Thailand in February 23rd, 2017. Retrieved from [:https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Session%203%20-%20Anna-Karin%20Jatfors.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Session%203%20-%20Anna-Karin%20Jatfors.pdf)

identities, it makes people lose their dignity, and sense of worth. Thus, the inner worth that empowerment seeks to increase gets diminished.

There is a problem that arises with identifying women in developing societies as women who require empowering to pull them out of the cycle of violence and misery they find themselves in. Sometimes development and empowerment interventions may end up collapsing diverse experiences of women living in the third world into a single category of ‘Other’ characterized by her status as victim – victim of capitalist development schemes, victim of patriarchy, and victim of gender-based violence. The ‘woman as victim’ discourse that is entwined in the analytical construct of the economically essentialized ‘Third World Woman’ overlooks the critical perspectives that poor women bring to their worlds, as well as their own skills and strategies. (Mohanty, 2003; Marchand and Parpart, 1995; Klenk, 2004) “That ‘other’ women are silenced as much by being relegated to the margin of experience as by total exclusion. Tokenistic, objectifying, voyeuristic inclusion is at least as disempowering as complete exclusion” (Crenshaw, 1991, Pg. 1261)

Roadmap for the Thesis

There are six chapters in this thesis, including the introduction, research methodology and conclusion. The chapter following this introduction, chapter two, is on the research methodology where I elaborate on the research methodology and approaches used in this study, describe the sources of the data and the process, as well as methods, of data collection, data interpretation and analysis, and finally discuss the trustworthiness of the research, reflections on the research process and field work, and the ethical standards of this research study.

In chapter three, I aim to explore the linkages between agency, decision-making and choices, and how these linkages inform the idea of ‘power within’. I also examine

how the choices that women make then perpetuate some of the gendered norms as well as redefine the traditional, expected gender role of a woman and thus reshape the stereotype of the gendered identity. I argue that to be able to understand women's agency and decision-making patterns and their choices and preferences, it is necessary to study how women themselves perceive their interests and how they negotiate their lives and relationships through these choices. The analysis in this chapter focuses on everyday household decisions as well as major life-changing decisions in the lives and experiences of the participants. I further analyze the inter-generational impact on freedom of choices, how autonomy and agency get shaped by and in turn shapes identities and identity roles, how women's agency gets constructed and coopted by neoliberal agendas, and finally, the dilemma of false consciousness. "Gender inequalities are multi-dimensional and cannot be reduced to some single and universally agreed set of priorities." (Kabeer, 1999, Pg. 23) Likewise, there is no one magic way for increasing women's choices and agency and making them empowered. This needs to be achieved with constant negotiations that sometimes take women two steps forward and one step back and employing multiple ways of transforming oppressive systems.

In chapter four, I look at the linkage between women's empowerment and violence to examine whether and to what extent their 'power within' enables them to prevent or forestall violent actions against themselves either through counter-threat to the perpetrators or through other resources such as influence, contact, or socio-economic group solidarity resources at their disposal and their bargaining abilities that dissuade their partners from perpetrating violence, or even better, by persuading their partners to become more sensitive to issues of violence leading to a structural change through a greater awareness and behavioural change on part of the perpetrators. I argue that women's attitudes towards violence, whether they passively accept or even justify

such acts of violence, disapprove of them, protest against them, or even engage in some kind of ethical evaluation and moral indignation reflecting on the incidences of violence in their lives, denote the relative levels of empowerment of these women and the extent of a conscious articulation of their agentic voice. In this chapter I start with a brief description of the dynamic idea of empowerment and how violence against women (VAW) and empowerment are intertwined. Then I focus on the impact of VAW and the different forms and ways VAW plays out in the lives of women. Then through an analysis of the conversations with the research participants I discuss how VAW and empowerment operate in interlinked and complex ways in the lives of these women. This discussion addresses different levels at which ‘power within’ may develop and the attitudes of these women towards VAW. The impact of gender-based violence within the families of these women, with respect to identity formation and identity adherence of these women in the face of violence, and the impact of violence on their self-esteem are the main lenses through which this complex relationship is analysed. Finally, I discuss how the occurrence of and resistance to gender-based violence are a complex and continuous process. Thus, even though there are vested interest groups that consciously and unconsciously work to maintain the structures that give them hegemony and power, there are several examples from the experiences and thoughts of these women, who were participants in this research study, to show that changing these structures, which is a significant aim of the process of empowerment, might be difficult but not impossible.

In chapter five, I analyze two interventions popular in Bangladesh for development and empowerment of women: micro-finance and education, to understand how and to what extent they are effective in enhancing the inherent capabilities of the women or the ‘power within’. I argue that interventions that do not train and immerse

their beneficiaries in leadership and activism manage to achieve empowerment of their beneficiaries at a superficial level only. It is only when the interventions use combined strategies of professional skill building, development of critical thinking, and practical experience of being in leadership roles that we see the conditions for achieving empowerment, that make it possible for ‘power within’ to develop, being fulfilled. In this chapter I discuss the positive impact of micro-finance interventions on the empowerment process, the critiques of such interventions, and the barriers to the realization of the positive potential of these interventions. I then discuss the reasons why education for women is so important for improving the lives of women, and the various aspects in which it impacts their lives. I also analyse the attitudes of the participants towards the values of these two interventions. Finally, I focus on The Grameen Caledonian College of Nursing (GCCN) which is an education initiative that combines this literacy and skill development targeted education with an education that targets enhancing the students’ leadership and critical thinking skills, and employs experiential learning, to analyse the impact of such a curriculum on women’s empowerment. Initiatives such as a skill based education project like GCCN or micro-finance initiatives that involve their clients in actions for social justice by including them in activism or giving them roles of group leaders lead the way to the development of a critical consciousness that enables them to take transforming actions, leading changes to social structures, in their favour.

Finally, chapter six is the concluding chapter where I return to the main arguments and aims of the thesis. Here I summarize some of the main findings of the research study. I also point to some of the issues that are important for this topic but were not addressed in this research due to time or methodological constraints. I suggest some of the ways that this research may be taken forward. I finally discuss the

contributions that this research makes to the theoretical understanding of empowerment of women as well as its potential contribution to policies related to development of women and gender-based violence not only in Bangladesh but in any patriarchal developing society.

Conclusion

If one is assessing gender inequality not in the mental or psychological scale of utilities, but primarily in terms of the real ‘capabilities’ that women and men respectively have (which is how I formulate the problem), the powers they respectively have – to do or be what they value – are constitutively important. This can vary from such elementary powers as not being subjected to physical abuse or violent assault, and the freedom to lead unsubjected lives (where power can enter in a very crude form), to having the opportunity to develop one’s talents and to achieve self-respect and the respect of others (where power can take more sophisticated forms). So power is directly involved in the “assessment” of gender inequality. (Sen et. al, 2003) Capability is thus a kind of freedom, a substantive freedom, to achieve alternative functioning combinations. Thus, the capability approach given by Sen and Nussbaum not only considers the inherent abilities of the people but also the freedoms and the opportunities created by these abilities and a person’s social, political, and economic environment. Nussbaum (2011) calls these substantive freedoms as combined capabilities that she distinguished from a person’s internal capabilities. These internal capabilities that include intellectual and emotional capacities and skills of perception and movement, are not innate features but are “...trained or developed traits and abilities, developed, in most cases, in the interaction with the social, economic, familial and political environment”. (Nussbaum, 2011, Pg. 21) An understanding of empowerment that diminishes some of these discussed contradictions and expands these substantive

freedoms will enable a theory and practice of empowerment that contributes to a balanced and just development process.

CHAPTER TWO

Reflections on the Research Process

This research study aims to gain a deeper understanding of how the process of empowerment endows a woman with a different awareness of the nature of gender roles and power dynamics within the household, of what entails violence, and what her rights are. The methodology I adopted for this research is a qualitative, feminist research methodology. This methodology is also informed by symbolic interactionism. This enables me to capture the nuances of issues like empowerment, identity, violence, freedom of thought, and household power dynamics, as demonstrated in the reflective narration of the women. This research study seeks to explore, understand and build theory with respect to these following questions, a) To study if for women being beneficiaries of gender focused interventions leads to a change in their decision-making *agencies and autonomy* and if this change in agency and autonomy leads to a change in the sense of ‘power within’ oneself. b) To study if the process of empowerment of women leads to a change in their awareness about and reflection on their *social identities, specifically their gender identities*, and how this is linked to a change in gender roles and power dynamics within their households. c) To integrate the first two aims and study if changes in their agencies and recognition of gender identities lead to a change in their awareness and experience of *oppression and violence* within the household, and if this change is mediated by their participation in the process of empowerment. Within the broad scope of qualitative, feminist methodology I use methods and techniques that encompass a mix of elements from three overlapping approaches: Symbolic Interactionism, and Narrative Analysis, and Grounded Theory.

The applicability of using this methodology is discussed in detail in this chapter. The following sections in this chapter include a discussion of the relevance of these different approaches in my research, description of the field of research, accounts of the techniques used for collecting, interpreting and analysing my research data, evaluation of the trustworthiness of this research, reflection on my positionality as a researcher in the field, and a discussion of the ethical concerns in this research study.

The Methodology Used

Qualitative research may be multidisciplinary and includes a wide range of research techniques and practices but the ontology (what is reality?) and the epistemology (how is the knowledge produced?) of all the approaches used in qualitative research are essentially the same. In qualitative research, reality or ‘Truth’ is not considered to be single and absolute but it is considered that there are multiple realities or ‘truths’. “The truth is not absolute and ready to be “discovered” by “objective” researchers, but rather it is contingent, contextual, and multiple.” (Leavy, 2014, Pg. 3) In my research, since I examine the idea of ‘power within’ (an integral aspect of empowerment) that requires women, individually and collectively, to reflect on their choices, aspirations, interests, and strategies for change, the ontology of my work is in line with that of qualitative methodology. Epistemologically in qualitative research, the positions of the researcher and the researched participants are more equal and assumptions like the knowledge that is produced through the research can be completely free of bias or the researcher knows the research subject better than the participants are rejected. “Research participants are valued and positioned as knowledge bearers and co-creators. This position rejects a hierarchical structure between the researcher and research participants or the idea that the researcher is the sole authority.” (Leavy, 2014, Pg.3) Since my research relies solely on the perceptions

and reflections of the women who are beneficiaries of different empowerment processes, the epistemology of this study is also in line with that of the qualitative methodology. “Qualitative approaches to research can be used across the disciplines to study a wide array of topics. In the social and behavioural sciences, these approaches to research are often used to explore, describe, or explain social phenomenon; unpack the meanings people ascribe to activities, situations, events, or artefacts; build a depth of understanding about some aspect of social life; build ‘thick descriptions.’” (Leavy, 2014, Pg.2) Since this research study aims to explore, understand, and explain connections between social phenomena like empowerment, development, and gender-based violence, and unpack the meanings and linkages between freedom, choice, individual and social identities, empowerment, and ‘power within’, qualitative methodology is the most appropriate choice for this research.

Like qualitative methodologies, feminist methodologies also encompass a wide range of research processes used to understand a variety of social problems across different disciplines. At the heart of feminist methodologies lies the argument that for a long time in academic research women’s issues were not centralized and women’s voices were either ignored or paid less attention to. “They (feminist research) developed in part in response to prevailing ideas that more traditional scientific inquiry tended to exclude women from inquiry and deny women epistemic authority.” (Spencer, Pryce, Walsh, 2014, Pg.92) In feminist research, women’s experiences get primacy and this is the key element of feminist methodology. “Epistemologically, feminist theories privilege women’s experiences as not only legitimate, but also as important and revealing bases of knowledge.” (Spencer, Pryce, Walsh, 2014, Pg.92) In my research study not only is the aim to study changes in household power dynamics as women, who are beneficiaries of gender focused development interventions, negotiate the social

norms and cultural expectations of a patriarchal society, but also this study is based on the experiences and the narrations of the women alone. Thus, women's experiences of power, identity, violence, freedom, agency, etc is the source of knowledge in this research. Besides the centrality of women's voices and issues in feminist research, Reinharz & Davidman (1992) identify other important elements of feminist research which are that, it is guided by feminist theory; it may be transdisciplinary; it aims to create social change; it strives to represent human diversity; and that it frequently includes the researcher as a person. (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992) This research study spans across several interdisciplinary subjects including development studies and gender studies and is heavily based on feminist theories. While there is no explicit aim for social change, there is an underlying assumption that this research will contribute to a better understanding of gender focused development interventions which in turn will positively contribute to more equitable gender power dynamics within the household. Thus, given that this research keeps the three commitments of feminist research - "to struggle against coercive hierarchies linked to gender (and other statuses); to revolt against practices, values and knowledge systems that subordinate and denigrate women; and to promote women's freedom and empowerment" (McHugh, 2014, Pg. 138) - it is appropriate that the methodology used for this study is also feminist methodology.

Ontologically, symbolic interactionism is based on the idea that every aspect of society is socially constructed through social interactions at multiple levels. "...symbolic interactionism is based on the overarching premise that all aspects of society are socially constituted. From macrolevel power structures to microlevel daily interactions, all are created through social interactions at various levels. Embedded in this perspective is the notion that meanings (about these power structures, interactions, etc.) are derived from social interactions." (Spencer, Pryce, Walsh, 2014, Pg.86) In this

research study, the aim is to analyse experiences of the women who are beneficiaries of empowerment interventions to explore the social meanings that women attach to different aspects of power in their daily family lives. Thus, it is appropriate to also consider their social interactions that shape their experiences, thought processes, and identities. “Symbolic interactionism ‘stresses that people create, negotiate, and change social meanings through the process of interaction’ (Sandstrom et al., 2006, p. 1). The key point here, for Blumer and others, is that meanings are constantly evolving.” (Spencer, Pryce, Walsh, 2014, Pg.86) Using symbolic interactionism methodology is suitable for this study because one of the important areas that this research study seeks to analyse is the linkage between empowerment and identity, and identity formation, both social and individual, occur through social interactions and are constantly shifting,

Approaches Used

The two main approaches which I use for this research are commonly held to be suitable for qualitative and feminist research studies. The two approaches are Grounded Theory and Narrative Analysis. There are several elements of these two approaches that I use during different stages of the research process including collecting and analysing data, field research behaviour, self-reflection as a researcher, etc. In ‘The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research’ (ed Leavy, 2014) several authors deem that both these approaches are fundamentally in line with qualitative, feminist research.

Grounded Theory in qualitative research is an approach which moves from individual knowledge to collective knowledge. This methodology, created by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, promulgates methods where theory is created from the data. (Spencer, Pryce, Walsh, 2014; Bryant, 2014) “They (Glaser & Strauss) argued that the work of theory generation could not be complete and that all human experience was unlikely to be captured and accounted for by the existing grand theories of the time.

They put forth grounded theory as a systematic approach to qualitative data collection and analysis to be carried out with the explicit purpose of discovering new theory from data or building new theory from the ground up, rather than by logical deductions from a priori assumptions.” (Spencer, Pryce, Walsh, 2014, Pg.85) This research study aims to understand social phenomena like empowerment of women, power dynamics within the household, women’s multiple identities, processes of development, etc and build theories on these based on the interpretation of the experiences of the women. Thus, it is appropriate to choose a methodological approach that moves iteratively between the empirical data and the emerging analysis.

During the data collection stage of the research process for this study, some of the participants narrated their life experiences while reflecting on issues like decision-making, importance of education, status of women, domestic violence etc. In the Narrative Analysis approach these stories or narratives become the raw data to be analysed. Analysis of those narratives and stories is fitting for a feminist research study. “Storytelling is seen as a way of including women’s experience, of breaking the silence of women, and as a way of giving women a voice for the expression and analysis of their own experiences (Romero & Stewart, 1999). They argue that social transformative work is done through the telling of previously untold stories and through women’s naming and analyzing their own experience.” (McHugh, 2014, Pg.151). One of the aspects of Narrative Analysis that is useful for this research is that this approach has been particularly used to study and analyse identity. In Butina’s (2015) *A Narrative Approach to Qualitative Inquiry* McAdams explained narrative identity as: “Stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the social contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity,

religion, gender, social class, and culture writ large.” (Butina, 2015, Pg.191) In this research some of the issues that are highlighted are issues of empowerment like identity assertion, identity growth, as well as identity loss. Specifically, for this aspect of the research I chose to use the Narrative Analysis approach.

Research Participants

The participants for this research project were mainly drawn from a population of women from Bangladesh who are considered to be beneficiaries of one or more development interventions. “A “good” field site is made, however, not only by considerations of funding and clearance, but by its suitability for addressing issues and debates that matter to the discipline.” (Gupta and Ferguson, 1977, Pg.10) The expanding micro-finance sector in Bangladesh since the eighties and the increasing popularity of the garment factory industry since the nineties in Bangladesh put the country on the international map for its commitment to women’s development issues. Thus, Bangladesh is an interesting and appropriate site, culturally, to explore issues of empowerment and development of women.

There is a total of fifty-two women who are formally regarded as participants in this research project. There are three participants out of fifty-two who are activists and educationists and thus may be considered as involved with development and empowerment projects but not beneficiaries. The development interventions included micro-finance, education projects, training projects, and jobs that employ women mostly. Some of the women who are clients of a micro-finance institution and are also activists in their communities, some work in garments factories and are also members of self-help groups under a micro-finance program, and some were students of a training program and also worked in the factory. So, most of the participants benefited from more than one intervention that could lead to their empowerment. Some of the

participants of this research are direct beneficiaries and some of them are inter-generational beneficiaries.

All the women were above the age of eighteen but their ages varied, ranging from eighteen to the mid-sixties. The education levels varied greatly too from some women having no formal education to women who had completed their master's degrees. However, most of the participants had never attended college with the exception of the participants from the nursing college, the activists and one self-help group leader's daughter. The marital status of the participants ranged from never been married, separated from their spouses, newly married, to married for many years. No one reported as being widowed. With the exception of the activists and some of the students, all of them identified as belonging to low-income socio-economic groups to middle-income socio-economic groups. The households that they were a part of also varied greatly in number and relationships between members. Some of the married women among the research participants lived with their in-laws, some lived in nuclear families, and some lived with their sons and their families. Some of the husbands of the married women worked and lived in a different city or country. None of the women with children had their married daughters living with them. Among the unmarried women most of them lived with their natal families with the exception of the students of the nursing college and two of the women who worked in the garment factory, who lived in hostels or shared housing. With three exceptions all of the participants were Muslims. All of the participants identified as women and as Bengalis.

The participants were recruited through my social networks but mostly through institutions. The institutions that the participants were recruited through were a micro-finance institution, a garment factory, a non-profit training centre for women working in garment factories, and a college for nurses. Seven participants were recruited through

a self-help group leader in a village, who is also one of the research participants, and not through any institution. The micro-finance institution organized three different research sites - rural, semi-urban, and urban, with the urban site being in Karail, which is an informal settlement or 'slum' with over a 200,000 population in Dhaka. Both the rural and semi-urban sites were over an hour, by public transport, away from Dhaka and the rest of the research sites were in Dhaka. For the nursing college the point of first contact was an executive board member, for the garment factory the first contact was the owner, for the training centre the initial contact was a founding member, and for the micro-finance organisation the initial contact was a senior officer. While for the institutions I did not have to submit any formal applications, for each of them I first approached the initial contact with my research proposal and a sample set of research questions and then met with them or with a person designated by them to discuss my research plan and answer any questions that they had. The institutions organized the sites for my research aligned with my research purpose but the individual participants themselves volunteered to be participants.

Data Collection

There were three types of methods used for data collection for this research project: interviews, focus groups, and case study. There were thirty-seven interviews, two focus groups, and one case study conducted for this project. All conversations with the participants were conducted primarily in Bengali unless the participant chose to respond in English. All conversations were recorded electronically using a voice recorder. Keeping in line with the Grounded Theory Approach, where "...one of the key aspects of any truly grounded method study is the way in which the processes of gathering, sorting, and analyzing the data continue simultaneously and iteratively" (Bryant, 2014, Pg.120), the data collection was done in two phases that were three

months apart. The first phase of research was conducted during November, 2018, and the second phase was conducted during February, 2019. The themes that emerged from the data that was collected during the first phase became points of enquiry during the second phase of data gathering for this research study.

Interviewing is a popular qualitative method to get access to the thoughts and experiences of the research participants. Brinkmann states "...that qualitative interviewing is, in fact, the most objective method of inquiry when one is interested in qualitative features of human experience, talk, and interaction because qualitative interviews are uniquely capable of grasping these features and thus of being adequate to their subject matters." (Brinkmann, 2014, Pg.278). The interviewing method was semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews were more convenient for this type of qualitative feminist research since they gave me (the researcher) more control, than unstructured interviews, over the process to be able to guide the conversations to not deviate greatly from the themes important for this study and at the same time there was sufficient room for the interviewee to introduce new but relevant directions to the conversation that led to the production of new related themes, keeping in line with the Grounded Theory Approach. Though I had prepared a set of interview questions (attached as appendix) that I added to when necessary, I used this set of questions solely for my own guidance. The participants were asked very open-ended questions and often asked about their thoughts on certain topics rather than specific questions. However, the first few questions during the interview were demographic questions requiring definite answers like number of years working, family structure, their own and children's educational levels, etc. This was done intentionally, not only to get this information, but also to ease the participant into the conversation and to help them feel comfortable sharing their thoughts. Once the conversations started flowing the

questions changed into prompts like thoughts on importance of education, value of women in the society, violence against women, etc. These prompts often led to the respondents narrating different experiences as stories that made it possible for me to also apply Narrative Analysis methods in my research. None of the interviews were time-bound and the length of the interviews were determined by the participants' time and involvement in the conversation.

The two *focus groups* were both of participants who knew each other and had worked or studied with each other prior to my interaction with them. Thus, there was already a familiarity and comfort established within the groups. One of the focus groups was with ten women, all of whom were garment factory workers and were trainees in the program organized by a non-profit to enhance their skill sets and values. The other focus group was with five students of the college of nursing. They were all in their third year of the program at the time of the focus group. Brinkmann (2014) describes the functioning of focus groups to be where "... the interviewer is conceived as a "moderator" who focuses the group discussion on specific themes of interest, and she or he will often use the group dynamic instrumentally to include a number of different perspectives on the give themes." (Brinkmann, 2014, Pg. 289) Similar to the interviewing process, I as the moderator started the group discussion with a few rounds of demographic questions that every one answered in turn. Once the group dynamics were comfortable, prompts that led to a more free-flowing discussion were introduced to the group. I also ensured that everyone got a chance to speak and voice their opinions or narrate their experiences for each of the prompts. The length of group discussion was decided by the participants. The students of the nursing college were assigned an hour and a half for this focus group by their institution but as they wanted to continue the

discussion, they requested and were granted permission from the institution to go beyond the originally allotted time.

The only *case study* that I used for this research project was the college of nursing as an educational program that primarily enrolls students who are daughters of micro-finance borrowers and trains them in a profession. The reason for choosing this program as a case study was because it is an initiative that combines literacy and skill development targeted education with an education that targets enhancing the students' leadership and critical thinking skills and experiential learning. Other than the on-record focus group discussion with the students and interviews with the teachers, I conducted off-record conversations with the principal and one board member and researched their website to understand the formal functioning of the institution. The conversations and narratives about their perceptions on how they were impacted by the program and the changes in their lives and themselves that they reported were brought about by being in this nursing program, contributed to the data.

Data Interpretation and Analysis

Spencer, et al, (2014) state some of the general features of the Grounded Theory Approach that include, "... (a) simultaneous data collection and analysis, (b) the development of codes from the data rather than from theory, (c) constant comparison of data at all levels of the data collection and analytic process..." (Spencer, et al, 2014, Pg.85) Thus, following this method, interpretation and analysis of the research occurred throughout the research process, not only starting from the first interview but before that when I met with my initial contacts for each research site and discussed the research topic, usefulness, and viability of this study. Throughout the research process all moderating, transcribing, and translating were done by me alone. There were two stages of translations, first when the set group of questions were translated from English to

Bengali and second when all the recorded conversations were translated from Bengali to English. The transcribing was done in English. For the transcribing, all recorded conversations were heard multiple times for the final version. In the transcripts while translating I have retained the verb contractions (e.g. do not - don't; will not - won't, etc) in the interviews to denote the conversational tone of the interviews.

Simultaneously with transcribing I started coding the data. The idea behind coding the data for analysis is so that the data can be divided into small manageable chunks and to be able to see new emerging patterns that enhanced and informed the later interviews. In short it is a way to sort, define and organize the data applicable for the research study. The founders of the Grounded Theory Approach method, Glasser and Strauss, propounded coding the transcripts in three phases to both prevent too much focus on any one aspect of the data in the initial stages and to be able to go through the data thoroughly by analysing and reanalysing it. (Bryant, 2014) These three phases are 'open or initial coding' which is when the data is coded line by line and the key aspects of small chunks of the data emerges, selective coding which is another level of abstraction of the data when the open codes are coded into selective categories, and theoretical coding which is when relationships are found between the different codes and categories that emerge which in turn lead to the emergence of theory. (Bryant, 2014) Another aspect of analysis that I conducted was to let some of the emerging narratives in the transcript emerge as stories. Bochner and Riggs (2014) describe that story telling for Narrative Analysis needs to have some common elements and development patterns that include, "1. People depicted as characters in the story 2. A scene, place, or context in which the story occurs 3. An epiphany or crisis of some sort that provides dramatic tension, around which the emplotted events depicted in the story revolve and toward which a resolution and/or explanation is pointed 4. A temporal

ordering of events 5. A point or moral to the story that provides an explanation and gives meaning and value to the experiences depicted.” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, Pg. 202) This was particularly important for the purpose of being able to conduct Narrative Analysis as a part of this research. The ways in which these stories or narratives were analysed were thematically, through assigning codes, patterns and themes, and structurally or analysing the way the story was told, on what the narrator placed emphasis on, emotions of the narrator, the flow determined by her, placement of her own self within the narrations, etc. All the coding was done manually.

Reflection - The Researcher

“In contrast to traditional research, feminist research has paid special attention to the role that the values, biases, and assumptions of the researcher has on all aspects of the research process. Selection of topics and questions, choice of methods, recruitment of participants, selection of the audience, and the potential uses of the research results are choices made within a sociohistorical context that ultimately influence what we “know” about a topic or a group of people.” (Mc Hugh, 2014, Pg.145) Thus, in a qualitative, feminist research like this study it is of utmost importance that I, as the researcher, reflect on my positionality, as well as capabilities to undertake this project.

I have experience in the field of gender studies with a focus on gender-based violence for 17 years. I have worked in the field as a student, as an educator, as a researcher, and as a counsellor. My experience as an educator, as well as a counsellor, makes me capable of creating safe spaces for participants to voice their thoughts, listening to people and moderating conversations, both individual and group conversations. This also enables me to detect triggers and discomfort in body language during the process of interviews. I have taken three different classes on qualitative

research methods, participated in several related workshops and colloquiums, taught two qualitative methodology classes and served on a university Institutional Review Board for three years. This gave me the skills and experience to conduct an ethical feminist qualitative research project.

The geographical field of research for this study was in Bangladesh which, as an Indian, is a foreign country to me. However, I have lived and worked in Bangladesh for five years prior to doing my field work there and am familiar and comfortable with the culture and traditions of the country. Moreover, because culturally I identify as a Bengali and speak the language fluently there were minimal barriers for me to approach the participants. This is not to suggest that there were no differentials in my position and that of my participants. I was regarded as both an insider and an outsider simultaneously, evidenced by the fact that they asked me a multitude of questions about Kolkata and India and yet also talked to me about life in Bangladesh with an underlying assumption that I understood the culture. Perhaps the most common difference that some of the participants themselves identified was that of my role as a researcher. Some implied that my education level put me in the position to ask them questions but this difference was pointed out positively when discussing the value of education and not to imply that my position in any way intimidated them.

Personally, I found the research process empowering for me. Traveling alone to areas I have not been before using public transport in a culture where a woman doing so is not common felt empowering. Being able to talk to so many different people and having them give me so much of their time was humbling. I was welcomed in each of the research sites by not only the participants but also the managers or program leads with a lot of warmth and friendliness which in my prior experience is typical of Bangladeshi culture.

Trustworthiness of the Research Process

Unlike quantitative or positivist research, in qualitative studies there is not a similar emphasis on objectivity, finding an absolute truth, and applicability of that truth universally. This is not to say that qualitative research is not valid or does not lay any emphasis on the rigor and trustworthiness of research. The trustworthiness and validity of qualitative research is evaluated based on different parameters than that of quantitative research. Epistemologically, since qualitative research believes in truth being subjective and multiple and that any research cannot be completely free of bias, it focuses more on the research process being true to the spirit and ethics of qualitative research rather than on objectivity. This makes qualitative research valid and credible.

In 'Evaluating Qualitative Research' (2014) Cho & Trent say that for internal validity of the research, credibility is important and for external validity of the research, transferability is important. To achieve credibility in research, they say that the researcher has to ensure representativeness of the data as a whole and that their interpretation of the data is an accurate representation of the participants' voice, and for transferability it is necessary for the researcher to provide the readers with detailed contextual information. (Cho & Trent, 2014) To ensure representativeness of data in this research study I used triangulation of data both at the time of data collection as well as analysis. During data collection I sought the perspectives of students, teachers, activists, factory workers, borrowers from different micro-finance institutions, group leaders, and community social workers (some categories overlap). There were a lot of differences in the participants in terms of age, educational levels, household types, marital status and other socio-economic factors, as discussed above. These different perspectives were sought to capture differences in their narrations and experiences. Since all the participants were in one way or the other involved in different

empowerment programs, these differences made the data more representative. As discussed in previous sections of this chapter, there were multiple methods and approaches used both during collecting and analysing the data. To capture the meanings that the participants assign to their experiences was central for this research. Thus, in the research analysis, not only have I used methods that make this possible but I have also used their voices (narrations) in my analysis extensively. This is to ensure that the voices of the participants do not remain unheard and my interpretation is not projected upon them. “These methods more readily address the question of how people make meaning out of experiences in their lives and do not allow the researcher’s assumptions and own set of meanings to dictate the findings that emerge from the data.” (Spencer, Pryce, Walsh, 2014, Pg. 87) This ensured that the voices of the participants were accurately and adequately represented. During the data collection stage, I maintained detailed notes and drew from there not only when writing this chapter but also to provide descriptions of the context in the rest of the chapters. Thus, the internal and external validity of this research study was enhanced.

A potential limitation of the research process in this study may be the use of translations. The narratives were recorded in Bengali but transcribed in English. Usually there may be many issues with translations in research when the researcher is not fluent with either of the languages used and a third person is hired as a translator. (Ho, Holloway, Stenhouse, 2019) However for this research study, since I am fluent in both Bengali and English, I translated all the questions and data myself. This dual role of the researcher too may lead to questions about the researcher’s objectivity of the analysis and thus, the dependability of the findings, but I aimed to mitigate this by providing detailed descriptions and excerpts from the interviews and also by providing the reader with some of the terms in Bengali along with my translations for them. This

was done for the terms and phrases that are harder to translate. During the interviews when the questions were translated from English to Bengali, again by myself, I ensured that I asked the questions in various ways so that the respondents understood the questions. However, if the researcher plays this dual role then there are also some advantages for the research process. The involvement of the researcher in translation of the data can enhance a deeper understanding of the data, facilitation of cultural nuances and protection of sensitive data. (Ho, Holloway, Stenhouse, 2019)

Ethics of Research

During the entire research process ethics remained a top priority for me. The ethical standards that I followed for this research are informed by the Belmont report⁶ (1978). The ethical standards for collecting data for academic research with human subjects, are given by this focus on three aspects - respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

Respect for persons includes two ethical convictions. First, that all individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, and second, that individuals with diminished autonomy need to be protected. (Belmont Report, 1978) All the participants in this research process were legally able adults and citizens of Bangladesh. Thus no one had diminished autonomy. All the participants gave informed consent to be a part of this research. The goal and nature of this research and the role and representation of the participants in this research were explained to the individuals and I answered any question they had about my research prior to asking them to participate. Only after they had agreed after fully understanding my research purpose and process were their conversations recorded. I took their permission to record the conversations, kept the

⁶ The Belmont Report- United States Department of Health and Human Services- <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/read-the-belmont-report/index.html>

recorder visible throughout the interviews, and switched off the recorder if the participant wanted to talk about something off the record. They were free to not answer any question if they wanted and they had full liberty to end the conversation and leave at any point during the process. Thus, decisions about participation, length of the interviews, the questions answered, and what was put on record were solely taken by the participants.

Beneficence is ensured by not only respecting the decisions of the participants and protecting them from harm but also by trying to maximize their well-being. (Belmont Report, 1978) One way of protecting the participants from potential harm through this research was to protect their anonymity and ensure privacy. The records of the conversations are protected and all particular information that may make the participants recognizable are erased from the transcriptions and writing of the research. The only exception to this is the case study, but for that all the information I have provided is public knowledge and within the organization the anonymity of all the individual participants is maintained. I also had permission from the relevant authorities to name the organisation. I ensured privacy by, in most cases, having the conversations in spaces where there was no one else present. In the few cases that this was not possible due to logistics, the participants were aware of who was listening in and they had the freedom to not talk about anything that may cause them discomfort. In such cases no sensitive question was asked. In the interviews, the participants' comfort with me, where we were having the conversation, and the questions, were paid attention to at all times. In case the participant seemed triggered by any question I stopped the recording, gave the participant time and space, and made sure that she wanted to continue the conversation before proceeding. They were free to move to another topic if they so decided.

Justice, according to the Belmont Report (1978), is to ensure that the benefits and burdens of the research are distributed equally and fairly. In case of selection of the participants I ensured that the procedures and outcomes of the process was the same for all of them. Since I approached the participants through some institutions initially, I had long conversations with the representatives to make sure that the research process best suits the participants. Once I had selected the area in which I conducted my interviews, I did not select the participants, they volunteered. No one was penalized for deciding not to participate. At the end of some of the interviews the participants also commented that they enjoyed the interviews and felt they had the space to think about issues they had not reflected on before. For both the focus groups, the participants found the discussions interesting and participated enthusiastically.

Conclusion

“Feminist research has emphasized the importance of exploring the day-to-day experiences of marginalized groups, particularly women. Qualitative approaches are particularly well-suited to capturing the “messiness” of these daily experiences because these methods can account for emotions, as well as for other less tangible aspects of experience, in data collection. Often, feminist theories invite more traditional forms of qualitative data collection (e.g., interviewing, focus groups, ethnography) to be adapted to be more consistent with feminist ideology.” (Spencer, Pryce, Walsh, 2014, Pg.93)

Thus by using a feminist qualitative methodology to recruit participants, collect and analyse the data, and follow ethical research practices, this research study aimed to be informed through the perspectives and thoughts of women who are beneficiaries of empowerment interventions and enhance the theoretical and practical understandings of development and empowerment of women and its relation to household power dynamics.

CHAPTER THREE

Linking Agency, Choices and Decisions

*“The core idea is that of the human being as a dignified free being who shapes his or her own life in cooperation and reciprocity with others, rather than being passively shaped or pushed around in the world in the manner of a ‘flock’ or ‘herd’ animal”
[while discussing the concept of Central Human Capabilities]
Martha Nussbaum, Women and Human Development*

Any discussion on power, especially with regard to the idea of women’s empowerment, is bound to bring up a discussion on the concept of ‘agency’. Agency in these discussions ideally denotes an inherent confidence and independence that individuals seek during the process of empowerment, which provides them with the ability to take control of their lives and circumstances to achieve their well-being [or well-being of others]. Amy Allen’s (2021) comprehensive analysis of the different feminist theories of power denotes that liberal feminists view power as a positive social resource that needs to be fairly distributed across all genders; feminist phenomenologists understand power in terms of domination - a tension between transcendence and immanence by self-conscious human beings - man who becomes the ‘Subject’ while the woman is relegated to the ‘Other’; the radical feminists understand power in terms of relations of domination/subordination, very much like master/slave relationships; the socialist feminists critique the understanding of power from the position of the socially dominant, the ruling class, and men, and seek “to reconceptualize power from a specifically feminist standpoint, one that is rooted in women’s life experience, specifically, their role in reproduction” (Allen, 2021, Para 27); and the poststructuralist feminists, line with Foucault and Butler, seek to “understand how the category of ‘women’, the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought”. (Allen, 2021, Para 42) The common underlying idea in all these notions of power is

that women, to overcome oppression and domination, need to create and own their identity as an independent subject in society.

This process of obtaining power to overcome oppression and to ideally aim towards one's well-being aligns closely with the notions of empowerment discussed by various scholars. There is an aspect of empowerment of women that is common in Kabeer's (1999) description of the term as "... the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 1999, Pg. 2); in Batliwala's (2007) claim that an important aspect of empowerment is the transformation of the relations of power between individuals and social groups; in Sen and Nussbaum's explanation of the capabilities approach as that "commits itself to respect for people's powers of self-definition" (Nussbaum, 2011, Pg. 18); and in Rowland's (1997) argument that empowerment includes aims to enhance individual capacities, diminish internalized oppression, build skills to negotiate with others, and to resist and transform oppressive social structures. This common aspect is that during the empowerment process there occurs an inner transformation, a fundamental change, in women that enables them to identify their interests and welfare and make choices to improve their situation and perhaps even the situation of others. This inner transformation may also be explained as an acquisition of agency by individuals. However, it is important to differentiate between one's agency and one's well-being; one can be agentic without necessarily being self-regarding. For example, one may assert their agency in advocating against female feticide, even though they are childless, thus contributing to the well-being of women as a group. The matter becomes more complex when a woman asserts her agency in a way that erodes the well-being of the group. For example, when a woman becomes complicit in championing female feticide; in this case there is individual agency, in at least some cases, but which has a self-

denigrating character and hence violates women's well-being as a group. Thus agency, which is often indicated with choices that individuals make and is measured by the amount of decision-making power that they have, needs to be scrutinized closely for it forms a crucial aspect of the idea of empowerment but is indeed a complicated concept.

As researchers and practitioners have had many debates to agree upon a clear definition of 'empowerment' as both a concept and an application, the concept of agency or specifically women's agency within the context of development, which is inextricably linked with women's empowerment, is a much-contested term. Yet, there is no doubt that women's agency remains one of the most popular indicators of women's empowerment especially within the context of development. It was in the 1970s that women first started to be included in the field of development both academically and in practice. Before this, women were merely considered to be needy beneficiaries of the development agencies. WID scholars like Boserup and Gita Sen placed women as active participants right in the heart of development practice. Since then, women's agency has been inextricably linked with the idea of women's power. In "Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity" (2014) a World Bank publication, 'agency' is defined as "the capacity to make decisions about one's own life and act on them to achieve a desired outcome, free of violence, retribution, or fear." (World Bank, 2014, Pg. 1) Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) hypothesize that agency is clearly associated with the degrees of empowerment that individuals experience since 'empowerment' is defined as the "...capacity to make effective choices; that is, to translate their choices into desired actions and outcomes"(Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005, Pg. 6) and 'agency' is defined as "...an actor's ability to make meaningful choices; that is, the actor is able to envisage options and make a choice." (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005, Pg. 6)

In this chapter, I aim to explore the linkages between agency, decision-making and choices, and how these linkages inform the idea of ‘power within’. In doing so, I will highlight some of the contradictions that are inherent in conflating agency with decision-making since some of the choices that people make sometimes are antithetical to their well-being and their agency. While the aspirations of the development agenda are to ensure women have complete freedom to make choices, there are instances when women make conscious and reflective choices to curtail these freedoms. It’s then important to examine if in certain cases women obtaining agency to make such choices results in inhibiting the process of empowerment. However, this is not to suggest that agency is not an important aspect of empowerment and that development practitioners should be wary of setting an agenda to increase the agency and decision-making power of their participants. Acquiring agency can definitely be a crucial factor in the process of empowerment and an aspect of ‘power within’ as long as it is clarified that in this discussion the meaning of the term ‘agency’ includes reflection, freedom of choice, and the act of choosing along with decision-making. The process of obtaining agency also includes a growing awareness of self for women and as an extension of that, of their gendered identity and gender roles. I also examine how the choices that women make then perpetuate some of the gendered norms as well as redefine the traditional, expected gender role of a woman, and thus, reshape the stereotype of the gender identity. I will examine different aspects of agency, decision-making, and choices as well as their linkages with empowerment, ‘power within’, and identities through an analysis of the narratives and experiences of the women I interacted with and interviewed during my field research – these women are participants in the process of empowerment themselves. These analyses focus on everyday household decisions as well as major life-changing decisions in the lives and experiences of the participants. Thus, to be able

to understand women's agency and decision-making patterns and their choices and preferences, it is necessary to study how women themselves perceive their interests and how they negotiate their lives and relationships through these choices.

An interesting case that demonstrates some of the complexities inherent in individuals making certain life choices was narrated by a feminist activist who has worked in this field in Bangladesh over four decades. She narrated the story of a twelve-year-old girl who was a sex worker and lived in a brothel in Dhaka. When asked by the activists how she came to the brothel and who brought her there she told them that she came there on her own because she figured living in a brothel was better for her. She used to live on the streets and had no family before she came to the brothel and she told them: 'okhane lokera amar shathe ja kore ekhane tai kore...ekhane toh taar jonyo poisha daye' (What men used to do to me there, they do to me here... at least they give me money for that here). In this example, the girl definitely took some control over her situation and made a strategic choice that in her perspective contributed positively to her well-being. Thus, in a way, this may be regarded as an example of a person who demonstrates agency and independent decision-making in very limiting circumstances. However, in this situation the unjust structure of society does not get altered and neither does this girl's life situation alter drastically. So, while one cannot necessarily claim that the girl is now empowered but there is some alteration in her life circumstance due to her exerting a small amount of power against a social system that otherwise imposes various constraints on her well-being. Thus, reflection on this situation demonstrates the complexity of concepts like power, agency, decision-making, autonomy, and empowerment. Agency is not merely taking control over a specific choice but as in Kabeer's words "...it encompasses a much wider range of purposive actions, including bargaining, negotiation, deception, manipulation, subversion, resistance and protest as

well as the more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. Agency also encompasses collective, as well as individual, reflection and action.” (Kabeer, 2001, Pg. 21)

“Options, choice, control, power, ability to make decisions, control over one's own life and over resources, ability to affect one's own well-being and make strategic life choices are some defining terms in women's empowerment.” (Mishra & Tripathi, 2011, Pg. 59) Agency works critically both at individual levels as well as a group or collective action. Many of the respondents touched upon the idea of collective action and the agency derived from this when talking about sexual harassment in public places. Specifically, during a focus group discussion with ten women working in the garment factories, they pointed out that the fear of harassment on roads curtails the freedom of movement for women. They are restricted from going out and going about their jobs or other activities. If they collectively protest against this, support individuals who have the courage to raise their voices against this, or even strategize to move around in groups, then they can reclaim the freedom of movement. One respondent said, “They (women) should stand up for their rights. I can't do it alone; I need others to do it with me.” As one of the respondents who is a feminist activist in this field points out, “No one can be brave alone. To resist, to revolt, to turn around and challenge society you have to have some support.” The link between individual agency and empowerment is evident during my research when two of the respondents in a joint interview were reflecting on what being empowered means for them - “I think empowerment is I will take my own decisions, I will not go to anyone else for financial help, I will be able to support my family, I will be able to do what I want. The most important thing is (the other respondent agreed with this emphatically) that I will have an identity and I will have independence. Sometimes we see that a woman has a job but she has no

independence in her household - she is dependent on her husband for decision-making - so I think she is financially empowered but she is not personally empowered. Empowerment, in my opinion, as a whole, should be both financial and psychological independence.” In aiming to raise their voices against systems that do not benefit them, reclaim certain freedoms hitherto denied to them, make decisions that improve their lives, and establish an identity that provide them with self-respect and confidence, these women are seeking agency both collectively and individually.

Decision-making is regarded as a concrete manifestation of agency. In the context of women’s development specially, decision-making is an important feature since it is something that can be measured and apparently objectively evaluated. In patriarchal societies, historically, women have been considered to be incapable of making decisions and most decisions, especially financial decisions, are taken by the men. As women have started entering the workforce and earning their living, it is assumed that they should and do have more control over their own finances and also over decision-making in the household. Decision-making is regarded as an easy to measure category and thus increase in women’s decision-making instances can be counted and presented as an increase in women’s agency. However, the issue in doing this is that not all decisions are of equal value and nor are all decisions empowering. For example, there may be decisions like the decision to demand dowry that maintains the patriarchal status quo and is disempowering for women collectively. Women having more of a role to play in decision-making does not automatically mean that all the decisions that women make challenge the patriarchal hegemony. In fact, it is also seen that even when women who are beneficiaries of development programs contribute economically to the household, they do not necessarily have more control over their finances as is assumed. One of the respondents pointed this out when she claimed,

“Most borrowers (from micro-finance institutions) are women but we see that mostly men are the decision makers in the background. They do business but they get their wives to take the loans.” However, the objective of women gaining more decision-making roles in their everyday lives remains an important aim for the process of empowerment since decision-making is considered to be closely associated with ‘power to’. Kabeer claims that ‘power to’ defines “power as the capacity of an actor to affect the pattern of outcomes against the wishes of other actors and asks the question ‘who prevails in decision making?’” (Kabeer, 1994, Pg. 224) She also suggests that decision-making may also be associated with power in a negative way in terms of ‘power over’ where it implies the capacity of an actor or category of actors to impose their decisions on others against their wishes.(Kabeer, 1999) However ‘power over’ may also mean the power that women obtain over their situations and circumstances through increased decision-making power. Two of the respondents talked about how being required to make all the household decisions, because their husbands lived in another city, instilled in them the confidence and courage to also live more independently. One of them said, “amar sansarer guardian ami (I am my family’s guardian) ... My husband ordered me to take on this role (of being the primary decision maker of the family) so at his order I got the courage since I had to. Now we don’t feel scared. We don’t feel scared to run the house alone or to go out and about alone.” It is interesting that the women were not really given a choice in this situation but this forced role did build up their agency and bolster their confidence. They both were proud to be ‘guardians’ of their households. This is an example of the different ways that agency may be built and instilled in people’s lives.

While discussing decision-making one has to also look at the choices that the individuals are making - their actual preferences. The notion of choice too has to be

qualified in many ways. Some of the qualifications given by Kabeer (1999) clarify that, a) choice necessarily implies the possibility of alternatives - in this process the individuals must have the ability to have chosen otherwise; b) the state of being able to choose also implies a state of being choiceless- to link ability to choose with empowerment a state when individuals did not have this capacity and during the process of empowerment acquired this ability; and c) that some choices have greater significance than others in terms of impact on people's lives. She says, "We therefore have to make a distinction between first and second order choices, where the former are those strategic life choices which are critical for people to live the lives they want (such as choice of livelihood, whether and who to marry, whether to have children, etc). These strategic life choices help to frame other, second order, less consequential choices, which may be important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute it's defining parameters." (Kabeer, 1999, Pg. 437) This leads to the question though - who decides which of these choices are more important than others? It should also be kept in mind that there are very structural obstructions to women acquiring the ability to choose and then being able to make decisions freely. "Women are often at a systematic disadvantage in their ability to make effective choices in a range of spheres, from making decisions at home, to deciding what kind of work to do, to choosing whether or when to get married and how many children to have, to becoming politically active." (Klugman et.al, 2014, Pg. 3) A pattern to be noted is that a lot of the women I interviewed, who borrowed money from the micro credit banks, theoretically had the independence to decide what to do with the loan amount, and many of them chose to set up their husband's business with it. This is often because the kind of business that they spend the loan amount on (opening a shop, driving an auto rickshaw) is seen as work that women cannot do. However, this meant that the income at least apparently

was still being earned by the husband though the woman remained solely responsible for paying back the loan. Thus, the contestations and debates about the concept of agency arise from these aspects- the ability to make decisions and the idea that individuals make these choices freely and independently. In the very definition when it's clarified that the choices have to be 'meaningful' and 'effective', it raises the question - meaningful according to whose perspective and effective for whom?

Schuler, Islam and Rottach in their article "Women's Empowerment Revisited: a case study from Bangladesh" (2010) lay down a set of empowerment indicators within the specific socio-cultural context of Bangladesh. According to them, the indicators of women's agency include mobility, involvement in major decisions, and freedom from domination from the family. They highlight education as another important indicator of empowerment. Women's sense of 'power within' is also given by 'self-efficiency' which is described as confidence to speak to people outside one's sphere, confidence to speak to people of authority, belief in one's ability for various tasks, and belief in one's ability to be effective in solving problems within the family and/or within the community (Schuler et al, 2010). The freedom to make choices and decide instils a confidence within women that may be considered to be an indicator of 'power within'. One of the respondents interviewed during my field work, whose husband lived and worked in a different country for twenty years, spoke about how the fact that she was given the freedom to make decisions as a young woman enabled her to run her household and make most major decisions without any input from her husband. She said, "I learned this (giving children the freedom to make their own decisions) from my father. He would encourage me to make my own decisions so now I have the confidence and I know how to move about freely and make my own decisions." In Sen's theory of Capability Approach, he describes 'functionings' as 'beings and doings' which are the

potential states and activities that constitute an individual's being and 'capabilities' as the resources as well as the freedom to potentially achieve these 'functionings'. Thus, capabilities not only refer to the opportunities that an individual has, to fulfil their potential, but also the freedom to use these opportunities. In this, Sen also introduces the idea that individuals are the agents who choose which of the 'functionings' they value enough to pursue. (Nussbaum, et. al, 1993). Thus, in development theory, a combination of this agency and capability is what constitutes an individual's 'power within'. Based on this understanding of 'power within' as well as the indicators of women's agency, an analysis of the narratives from the field show that these women are often strategic about their life choices and their well-being. They are likely to challenge and resist some of the social norms. However, it is also seen that given their socio-cultural context they do accept certain norms without questioning them. They can also undermine their own well-being for the greater good of the family and they do so without reflecting on their choices. This makes it difficult to reach a clear conclusion about the levels of empowerment that have been achieved. To better understand these interlinkages between agency, decision-making and choices as well as how these linkages contribute to the process of empowerment and development of women, I will analyse the patterns of decision-making and choices evident in the narrations of the women in my research within four different domains - day to day (relatively minor) decisions within the household, major life changing decisions, inter-generational impact on freedom of choices, and decisions about identity and identity roles.

Day to Day Decisions within the Household

While discussing the ability to make strategic life choices Kabeer (1999) says that this ability can be thought of in terms of three dimensions which are resources, agency, and achievements where 'resources' do not imply just material resources but

also those that "...in this broader sense are acquired through a variety of social relationships conducted in the various institutional domains that make up a society, including the domains of family, market, state and community". (Kabeer, 1999, Pg. 437) She goes on to survey the literature on measuring 'resources' beyond material resources available to women and finds that several scholars like Kishor, Jejeebhoy, Sathar, and Kazi equate access and control with 'say in decision-making' especially within the household. (Kabeer, 1999) In *Development as Freedom* (1999) Sen says, "Empirical work in recent years has brought out very clearly how the relative respect and regard for women's well-being is strongly influenced by such variables as women's ability to earn an independent income, to find employment outside the home, to have ownership rights and to have literacy and be educated participants in decisions within and outside the family." (Sen, 1999, Pg. 141) Thus women having a say in household decision-making is an important aspect of building her capacity and increasing her agency. Increased say in everyday decision-making may also be regarded as a consequence and indicator of increased agency. However, it is not sufficient to know whether these women have a say in household decision-making or not, but one also needs to understand the variety of ways and parameters this say in decision-making encompasses.

The regular day to day decision-making areas on the surface might seem relatively less significant or what Kabeer (1999) calls second order or less consequential choices and hence, if the woman has a say in this process it is regarded to be contributing to her gaining some power and agency. At most what is usually looked at is the extent of independence the woman has in making these decisions. However, the decision-making process even for the apparently simple decisions can be very nuanced in terms of power and preference that is often missed if only whether they have a say

in decision-making or not is considered to be significant and sufficient. For example, one of the women said that she is the sole decision maker when it comes to the kitchen and more specifically to what will be cooked. So definitely she has a say in a regular household decision-making aspect. The shopping for the kitchen is done by her husband or her son, the actually preparing and cooking of the meals are done by her daughter-in-law, and what is cooked is decided by her, but she gives most preference to what her grandchildren like to eat. Thus, there is no doubt that that she has control over the kitchen, but this control is not independent of other members of the household. Another interesting point here is since the focus is on women's agency, the other woman in this household - the daughter-in-law - in this aspect has no apparent control over this domain. She is required to take on all the labour, but act solely under the control of her mother-in-law.

The women interviewed during my field work had a variety of responses when asked about the decision-making pattern in their households. Though most of the women said that they are actively involved in making decisions for the family, the extent of involvement and the areas of involvement varied greatly. Some women are sole decision makers of the family, though this in majority of the cases is when the husband or an adult male is absent from the household. Some women claim they make joint decisions. In this case usually the woman discusses all major decisions with the husband. Sometimes if there are adult sons in the household, they are also consulted during the decision-making process. Very rarely are daughters who are married and daughters-in-law included in this process. Some of the women claimed that while they were not the primary decision makers, they were consulted during the decision-making process and their advice was given adequate importance. Most of the women said that decisions about the kitchen were their domain, though some of them relied on the men

for buying the actual commodities. Major expenditures were usually done in consultation with each other. One woman during the focus group said that though she lives with her brother and his wife is also earning, her word is given a lot of importance because she has a 'temper'. An older woman who has been working for fifteen years said that she takes all the decisions whether it is about their children's schooling, family members' health, or purchases. Thus, while the patterns of every day decision-making are varied for the different women, the common aspect was that they were all aware that having a role in decision-making was a positive aspect. They considered having a greater role in regular, day to day decision-making as being important and progressive. One respondent, when asked if there has been a change for the better in women's status in society over the years, said, "Now women can take their own decisions. Before women used to listen to whatever her husband told her. Now husbands also listen to their wives."

The impact of empowerment interventions on the experiences of the women beneficiaries is evident in day to day decision-making when it comes to decisions about household finances. The impact of development on a change in women's decision-making power may be indirect as in case of men migrating to a different city or country for work opportunities and women are forced to become the heads of household, or may be direct when women are included in decision-making roles because they are able to bring in loans for the household. In his theory of 'cooperative conflict' Sen (1987) states that "Members of household face two different types of problems simultaneously, one involving co-operation (adding to total availabilities) and the other conflict (dividing the total availabilities among the members of the household). Social arrangements regarding who does what, who gets to consume what, and who takes what decisions, can be seen as responses to this combined problem of co-operation and conflict. The

sexual division of labour is one part of such a social arrangement, and it is important to see it in the context of the entire arrangement.” (Sen, 1987, Pg. 12) He states that three features –“(1) the respective well-being levels in the case of breakdown of cooperation..., (2) the perception (including illusions) about personal interests in a family setting, and (3) the perception of ‘contributions’ made respectively by different members and the ‘claims’ arising from these contributions”(Sen, 1987, Pg. 43) - have a profound impact on these social arrangements. He especially highlights one parameter in relation to women’s agency and that is the involvement of women in productive activities and having a source of income to contribute to the household. This not only increases the women’s well-being in case of a breakdown in cooperation as they will not be left destitute if they have to exit the household, but also increases their perceived contributions since financial contributions are most visible. (Sen, 1987) The importance of financial contributions to the household in terms of having the members’ views counted in the household is manifested when adult earning sons’ opinions are sought and included in making decisions. One of the respondents said that decisions are taken by her, her husband and her youngest son. Her older two sons do not get involved in their household matters. “They have their own families and do not also contribute much financially to this household.” Similarly, when the women start working, or are beneficiaries of micro-finance programs that only lend to women to fulfil their aim of women’s empowerment, they start being regarded as ‘valuable’ members of the household. This is evident in the narratives of some of the women as, for example, one respondent, while expressing her dissatisfaction about her husband’s saving habits said, “He didn’t save then. I told him to save but he wouldn’t listen to me then... He’d listen to other people’s advice. Now he listens to me because the income is mine and so he has to listen to my advice.” Another woman who has used her entire loan amount to

buy a van for her husband's business said that she takes the decisions in the house, unless it's a major decision and whatever her husband and son earn, they hand it over to her.

Kabeer, (1999) along with other feminist scholars of empowerment theory have stated that for empowerment to occur not only does there have to be a significant change in societal structures, including gender relations, but also significant changes need to occur in their daily lives. "Feminists have stressed changes at the level of individual consciousness and everyday lives, as well as changes in the overarching structures of women's subordination, such as the abolition of gender divisions of labour, the recognition of women's full citizenship, equality in property rights and so on." (Kabeer, 1999, Pg. 13). Through the process of decision-making within the household, some of these changes in the everyday lives of these women, as well as changes within themselves, are manifested.

Major Life-changing Decisions

All choices have a link with agency and empowerment but not equally. Some choices and decisions have a greater significance and lead to more long-term consequences in individuals' lives. These are termed as first order choices by Kabeer. (1999) Decisions about marriage, education, work, children's future, health, are all included as first order choices - decisions that can change not only the life of the individuals, but also the lives of other members of the household. As the narratives of the women I met during my field work unfolded, there was almost a contradictory pattern in their decision-making behaviour. It was a contradictory pattern in the sense that when it came to the more strategic decisions of their lives like marriage or decision to work outside or pursue an education, they tend to follow more of the traditional

pattern of decision-making - relying on the elders in the family, parents or husbands - rather than demonstrating individual agency.

In Sen's (1987) theory of "Cooperative Conflict" while applying his theory of cooperation and conflicts in the household setting, he states that the men and women in the household are bound by familial and emotional relations, and live together sharing cares and concerns which then colors gender conflict within the household with a unique characteristic. He says, "One of these characteristics is that many aspects of the conflict of interest between men and women have to be viewed against the background of pervasive cooperative behaviour. Not only do the different parties have much to gain from cooperation, their individual activities have to take the form of being overtly cooperative, even when substantial conflicts exist." (Sen, 1987, Pg. 42) One of the aspects of their lives which has strategic importance in the long term is the decision to work outside their homes. Usually this kind of work is salaried work, either in a factory, office or someone's house, and does not mean work in their husband's shop or land or even if they run their own business. Women hardly ever make this decision to work outside unilaterally, in fact most of them needed permission from their parents or husbands to work outside. In this aspect, the women have to face some opposition from usually the male members of the household. One of the students who I interviewed claimed that men actively stop women from working to stop them from gaining agency; she said, "If a woman works in some one's home (domestic labour for pay) she earns an income and she can be self-reliant but the husband will not let her work. They will tell her - "why do you need to work, I can feed you, I will take care of you, my income will be sufficient for the household" - this stops her development." The reality of this claim plays out when another older, married woman narrated how her husband did not let her work - "My husband didn't let me work in the factory when I got married - he

said he'll take care of everything, he'll work hard and provide for me, but not let me put myself in a situation that will harm my honour." It is interesting to note that the apparent reason for the husband deciding to not let the woman work is for her benefit, i.e. not to sully her honour in the event that she faces the unwanted attentions of other men. Another woman who used to work before her marriage was stopped from working after she got married until she was able to prove that she was of 'good character'. However, all the women realize the freedom and agency they obtain if they do work outside. Some of them consider the withholding of permission as a barrier to women's independence and development, as they state, "A woman who is educated, wants to work in a good job, but we see her husband is not letting her or the in-laws are not letting her; then she is not really independent is she. She is bound by her husband. So, women have some freedom but not a lot." Thus, as Sen claimed, there is a lot of conflict surrounding this aspect of decision-making but overtly, women bargain over their preferences either by seeking permission and trying to convince their husbands or fathers, or by proving that they will conform to their 'normal' gender roles if allowed to work or sometimes by accepting the decision that it is 'better' for her not to work outside the house.

"Explicitly feminist concerns with empowerment stem from the recognition that, in all societies, women have been denied choice to a far greater extent than men for any given social group and have consequently had less say in strategic areas of their lives." (Kabeer, 1999, Pg. 12) Another very strategic area where women are rarely given a choice is the decision of choosing their life partners. In the narratives from the field, a striking point was that while the women claimed that they have an adequate role in the decision-making process in their households, most of them claimed that the decision of choosing their life partners and when they get married will be taken by the

elders of the family. One woman, for example, has a year's ultimatum from her family to repay her loans and they will arrange her marriage after that. She said, "My parents don't want me to work after marriage because I have worked so hard all my life. They want me to get married to someone who has his own property or job. But I told them that I want to work after marriage. Now my father laughs and says okay, whatever she says is right." She hopes that they will keep her preference in mind when they look for a husband for her. Most of the married women who were interviewed had arranged marriages and often their preference to study, instead of getting married, was ignored. This pattern, though, is getting altered over the years. Firdous Azim and Maheen Sultan (2010) write that "Tradition and modernity are perhaps the two poles against which women in South Asia are pitted... Women are still envisaged as protectors of tradition, but are no longer 'stuck' in traditional roles and have access to a new discourse of modernity and rights." (Azim & Sultan, 2010, Pg. 7) The impact of this access to modernity through obtaining agency is reflected in some changes in the pattern of decisions about marriage. There seems to be an extent of independence in choosing one's partner or when they get married, among the younger women and specially women who are from urban areas. One respondent said that her daughter has married the person she had a relationship with but only after they (her parents) have found the man suitable. However, she added that, "...everyone has some hope and dreams that they will look for their children's partners but when we found out that they had a relationship then we thought that when the children like each other we have nothing to say" This almost reluctant compromise of giving up their right to decide on their children's partners as long as they find the partners suitable, is echoed in another woman's opinion about her children not having arranged marriages -"aaj kaal kar zamana kharap na? (the society is not good nowadays) Do they listen to their parents'

wishes? We didn't have this. Our guardians first saw the guy and found out about his family - his parents, grandparents, caste, community, household, jobs etc and then they fixed the marriage and we got married. Our daughters like someone and they bring them home and we accept as long as they are alright". This shows that, to some extent, some autonomy is being granted to the 'modern' generation while still retaining some of the traditional aspects of the society where the autonomy can be exercised only subject to parents' permissions and approvals.

Another area in which women tend to give up some of their autonomy and share their decision-making power with the male members of the household is the area of financial decisions regarding the money they bring into the household. As explored in the previous section, a lot of the women who take loans use them to start their husband's businesses. Thus, deciding what to do with the loan amount is often done in consultation with the men in the family, even though many development-oriented banks lend exclusively to the women to further women's empowerment. One respondent pointed this out, "When it's time to get the money (from the loan) then we have to do it (since they only lend it to women) but we have no control over it." In fact, she said that her husband shows his temper if she does not give him detailed accounts and the full loan amount. So, though she borrows the money, her husband has full control over it. Another woman buys cows but her husband and son look after the cows. Even with regard to the loan, even though she takes the decision to take the loans, she consults with her husband and son to see what is required. An interesting case was of this woman who decided to buy a plot of land for her parents with a loan she had taken, but when it came to actually deciding which plot of land to buy and concluding the actual transaction, she relied on her uncle and chose not to have any say in that. Thus, in this part of the decision-making process she gave up her agency completely to a man.

Razavi and Miller (1995) argue to understand social relations and the patterns of negotiations and bargaining within the household one has to give primacy to ‘moral economy’ that “...involves relationships that entail loss of status and autonomy in exchange for some measure of security. For women, the gender relations of family and kinship frequently embody a trade-off between security and autonomy.” (Razavi & Miller, 1995, Pg. 30)

In the experiences of the women who are the primary beneficiaries of many development and empowerment programs, they do not necessarily demonstrate individual agency in many situations of strategic importance in their lives and often subvert their interests for the well-being of the household, but what is also evident is sometimes, through seeking and fighting for some permissions and being participants in a shared decision-making process, their feeling of being empowered and of being an individual agent is increased. The process of decision-making not only is an indicator of agency, but also contributes to increasing agency by instilling within the beneficiaries confidence and a sense of self-worth, both of which are important aspects of ‘power within’.

Inter-generational Impact on Freedom of Choices

One primary reason why many development agencies target women in developing societies as their ideal clients and beneficiaries is because of the assumption that when a woman is empowered, she looks after the well-being of her entire family, and as a consequence, the process of empowerment continues and gets strengthened over generations. The World Development Report, 2012 shows that while gender equality in the society impact women’s individual well-being in various ways resulting in gains such as increased labour force participation and improved health outcomes, gender equality also imparts benefits to future generations as women and their children

may become more educated or have access to more resources, such as health services. (World Bank, 2012). In “Development as Freedom” (1999) Sen explores the interrelations between women’s agency and well-being and discusses the far-reaching contributions that women’s agency has on the development of a society. Thus, it is expected that increasing agency of one generation of women will have a positive impact on the freedom of choices and their support of the next generation. This is also believed by the women who are beneficiaries of these development programs themselves. This is evident in the case of the respondent who bought the land for her parents. She registered the land in her mother’s name instead of her own because she believed that if her mother has this asset it will increase her mother’s position in the family, and then she and all her siblings will benefit equally. The direct clear impact of the development interventions on communities collectively might be the most apparent when inter-generational impact is considered.

For a woman, in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, where historically women have been known to maintain the purdah system, to break out of the private domain and occupy a space in the public domain, demonstrate agency in multiple spheres of their lives, and sometimes even fulfil roles that are commonly considered to be masculine, is a path that is difficult and ridden with obstacles. The courage and the ability to break out of the private sphere are not obtained without support. In the collective, women find the strength and solidarity necessary to resist and question the patriarchal system that then leads to them discovering their capabilities. During the interviews, in most cases I found that this support was inter-generational - specially between mothers and daughters. Some of the unmarried women who were working in garment factories said that while their fathers disapproved of their working outside the house, they were able to because they were supported by their mothers. This support

may not be only a verbal support but also physical and emotional support as claimed by one of the respondents who said that apart from drawing her strength from her mother to be able to work in the factory, she is practically supported by her mother on a daily basis since she does not have to do any housework because she lives with her mother. This support gives her the time to focus on her own tailoring business when she is not working in the factory. The mothers I interviewed, talked about supporting their daughters' education, delaying their marriage, being able to give priority to their preferences, and, in general increasing their strength and confidence. One woman said, "There is a lot of difference in the way I was brought up and my daughters are being brought up. They have grown up wearing what they want and eating what they want. We haven't denied them their little wishes because we are poor or because there's a lack of finances. (This pertains to little wishes - so if they wanted new clothes or to eat something fancier - they weren't denied) I have suffered and worked hard. I won't let my children suffer." It is important to note that the women who discussed their determination to support their daughters in a way that the daughters are able to live their lives more independently were all women who were clients of micro-finance institutions and had themselves benefited from the empowerment programs and policies of these institutions.

In a survey done by Schuler and Rottach in 2010, they showed that mothers very clearly fostered their unmarried daughters' empowerment in the domain of education. This holds true in the responses from my field research. Many of the women stated that they wanted their daughters to go into higher studies and become established in a profession. One woman wants her daughter to fulfil her dreams of being a doctor, while another wants to support her daughter's wish to become a police officer. The support they provide is not only emotional but also financial. They save money from their

businesses or loans to be able to support their daughters' education. One woman talked about her financial plan for her daughter, "I have started saving up for my daughter and when I get the chance to earn some income, I keep some apart for my daughter." She started a saving fund for her daughter ever since her daughter was in class 4 and sets apart 2500tk every month for her daughter. As long as she can, she will not touch this accumulating money saved for her daughter. She said, "when I see that I need a lump sum of money for my daughter (when her daughter needs it for higher studies) only then will I withdraw this amount." The difference in the narratives from the findings of Schuler and Rottach (2010) was in the support given by women to their daughters' delay in marriage. Schuler and Rottach found that "Despite wanting to educate their daughters and despite their knowledge of the disadvantages and risks of early marriage and childbearing, most of the empowered women in our sample had recently gotten a young daughter married or recently married a son to an underage girl" (Schuller & Rottach, 2010, Pg. 384) However most of the women I interviewed talked about thinking about their daughters' marriage only after they had finished their education and become established in a profession. One woman said, "She'll get married only after she stands on her own feet. Her exams are close by. She wants to become a doctor and wants to appear for the medical entrance exam." Another woman waited to arrange her daughter's marriage till she had become a lawyer. Another woman said that her older daughters were not interested in studying, so she arranged their marriages, but her youngest is sincere about her studies, wants to study, and is good at it, so she along with her husband have decided to let her study as much as she wants without pressuring her to get married. Even in the case of married daughters some women support their education after marriage. One woman said that her daughter's husband says he will let her study, but she has not let her daughter go to her marital home so that she can

continue with her studies because she fears that once her daughter goes to her marital home she will be unable to continue as is seen in the case of many women. Though most of the support that the women talk about are about their daughters, some also talk about supporting their daughters-in-law. One woman talked about how her daughter-in-law is a graduate and she wanted her to study further or work and was willing to financially support her education but her daughter-in-law was not interested. Another woman said the same thing but she also added that she has given her daughter-in-law the freedom to choose what she wants to do, “My daughter-in-law is Inter pass and she doesn’t want to work outside. I don’t put pressure on her. If she wanted to study more or work, I’d make arrangements but she doesn’t want to so I don’t put any pressure on her.”

In the process of decision-making perhaps the contradictions between tradition and modernity are very evident and social relations are constantly balanced between the two. However, while negotiating between these traditions and modernity, that women do consciously and unconsciously on a regular basis, they are very aware that there has been an increase in the decision-making capabilities over the generations and this they find to be more just. One woman said about supporting her daughter’s decision to study and get a job before getting married, “They (their neighbours and friends) say what will she do studying so much? If you get a good guy you should get her married. That will be better for her. I tell them, I have educated my daughters and now it’s their decision who they get married to and when they get married. Why should I tell them what to do? Odero ekta decision aachhe (They too have an opinion/choice)” Women also fulfil their dreams through their daughters, they hope that their daughters will have the freedom and choices that was denied to them. One of the nursing students talked about fulfilling her mother’s incomplete dreams - “My mother had many dreams when

she was young that she'll be a teacher, but she had to get married. She was forced to get married to her cousin. She wanted to study further, but she couldn't as she had to work very hard at her in-laws. So, she has a lot of dreams for me." Another woman said, "Confidence, courage, and strength - I was always interested in these issues. Growing up in the village, where I followed whatever my parents decided for me, I felt that I would like my daughters to grow up in a way where they can decide for themselves" and thus, she supports her daughters to be able to be independent. When explaining the concept of 'power within' Kabeer (1994) writes, "New forms of consciousness arise out of women's newly acquired access to the intangible skills, social networks, organizational strengths, solidarity and a sense of not being alone." (Kabear, 1994, Pg. 245) These new forms of consciousness are formed by and subsequently enables the kind of solidarity and support that makes empowerment and development sustainable over generations.

Decisions about Identity and Identity Roles

Autonomy and agency get shaped by many factors like class, caste, gender, nationality, etc. No individual makes decisions in a vacuum but these decisions inherently reflect their beliefs and values that are shaped by the multiple social identities that people occupy. While individuals may reflect on these multiple identities that they occupy, they often consciously or unconsciously choose the identities that they prioritize in different situations. Within this choice itself is a sense of agency. The lack of this choice leads to a feeling of helplessness, as expressed by a woman who identifies with a higher economic class but because of her husband has to live in a low-income neighbourhood. She said, "Apa, it's my luck that I live in the slums but my family and relatives stay in better environments. I have nieces (sister's daughters) who are studying BA, MA. I tell my daughter to follow them and not the kids she sees around in the

slums. My husband came here and I had to follow him and live here too but I want to bring up my children according to my values.” As Sen says in his book, “Identity and Violence” (2007), “The freedom to determine our loyalties and priorities between the different groups to all of which we may belong is a peculiarly important liberty which we have reason to recognize, value and defend.” (Sen, 2007, Pg. 5) This freedom works in two ways, firstly, the act of being able to choose itself instils a sense of confidence that is crucial for ‘power within’ especially when individuals make this choice deliberately, and secondly, it gives individuals the freedom to choose which collectives that they will draw their strength and support from, and as we have seen from the discussion in the previous section, the support is important to nurture agency in individuals. Many of the women I talked with drew their strength from being identified as a working woman, an educated woman, a business woman or from their group affiliations to certain development projects. For example, when the students from the nursing college claim that they feel capable and independent being nurses, this professional identity not only gives them a monetary strength, but also, they also claim to derive strength from the fact that their job is to help people and thus they are blessed by many. Another woman who works on social projects of the UNDP also feels empowered by the respect that this affiliation brings. She said, “It’s more important for me to have this respect and recognition than money. Money won’t last. But the respect I get will last me forever.”

These same social identities might pose several constraints on the women’s agencies by perpetuating certain ethics and norms associated with some of these social identities and especially the gender identities. Sen in “Reason before Identity” (1999) writes that, “There are strong influences of the community and people with whom we identify and associate in shaping our knowledge and comprehension as well as our

ethics and norms. In this sense social identity cannot but be central to human life.” (Sen, 1999, Pg. 5). Thus, women believe that some of the tasks and decisions are exclusively the domain of men and this impedes their freedom in exercising their agencies in those domains. One woman said, “My husband goes to the market and I cook what he brings. This work is a man’s work. I can’t go to the market”, and another echoed this when she said, “Decisions on what to actually cook is taken by the women. ‘oita to mohilader kaaj’ (that is women’s work).” It is evident that the domains are divided based on their gender identity and this idea that is expressed by one of the respondents- Jamai chhara to kichhu kora jayena. Mohila manush ki shob kichhu pare - sheta bojhen na? (Nothing can be done without the husband. A woman won’t be able to do everything, don’t you understand that?) -impedes the idea that women are capable of living and flourishing without men taking care of them, that women can be individual, rational agents. This also reflects a gendered assumption that men are better at dealing with finances and the outside world than women. This gender stereotype also plays out when the women depend on the male managers in the micro-finance institutions to advise them on their financial dealings and savings. Kabeer (1999) argues that, “Their adherence to social norms and practices associated with son preference, discrimination against daughters in the allocation of food and basic healthcare that compromises the survival chances of the girl child, promotion of female circumcision, and the oppressive exercise of authority by mothers-in-law over their daughters-in-law (a problem often identified in the South Asian context) are examples of how women’s behaviour may undermine the well-being of other female members of their family.” (Kabeer, 1999, Pg 7). Gender identity intersects with multiple other identities like class/religion/culture for a set of norms to be constructed that in various ways obstruct women’s choices and freedom. An instance where the intersection of class identity with gender identity forms a

deterrent to women's agency and freedom is discussed by one of the respondents when she said, "The ones like us who are middle class, we have more self-respect (middle class morality - higher sense of family honor/name) - In our bongsho (family) when women want to do something (and they often dream of doing big things), the people in our families who belong to the previous generation, like grandparents or uncles, say "women of our family will work outside?" That hurts their family honor. Due to such an attitude, women can't achieve much."

However, recognizing their gender identity and becoming aware of the actual value of that identity group in society and how the perceived value is unjust increases their self-respect and self-valuation as members of that identity group (women) and as a consequence bolsters the process of empowerment. All the women I interviewed feel that women are given less value than men in their households, communities, and society in general. They do not think women are inferior to men, in fact, during the focus group, most of them agreed that women are in many cases more hardworking than the male and thus regarded this inferior status unjust. One of the women in the focus group said "In general women are valued less than men in society. Society says it's because men are stronger or men work more but women work too. In a household or a family there is so much work that a woman does. Men just work outside - one work in the office or farm but women have to do household work and have to work outside." Many of the respondents are aware of the contradiction that while women are essential to society, they are valued much less than men - "Everyone thinks women are nothing- they have no value. But society can't do without women"; "In society women are needed more. In society a lot of people say that women have no value but women have more value than men in the society." They recognize that this inequality in the value of gender identity translates to consequences in the kinds of choices women have in life - "Men

always get more priority and preference. We see this inequality when there is a job that both a man and a woman are capable of doing - we often see that the job will go to the man instead of the woman, despite both being equally capable to doing the job - just because he is a man- that is his plus point.” This recognition of both the intrinsic value of their identity in society, and the injustice in the ways that higher respect and value are denied to them through norms and structures, is not only in itself empowering but it also propels women to take control of resisting and challenging these norms.

Sen (1999) in ‘Reason Before Identity’, argues against the idea that identity is something individuals discover but says that identities are chosen by individuals but this choice too is influenced by the social positions they occupy. “The alternative to ‘discovery’ view is not choice from positions ‘unencumbered’ with any identity... but choices that continue to exist in any encumbered position one happens to occupy” (Sen, 1999, Pg. 23). However, he also contends that an adult and a competent person has the ability to question what has been taught to her and thus is capable of challenging the structures and norms that impede her growth and well-being. Thus, women have a choice to unquestioningly adhere to the idea of a ‘woman’ that is shaped by hegemonic powers in patriarchal systems or to challenge and even, to an extent, redefine the very notion of a ‘woman’. In the narratives we see that these women go out to work despite the discomfort of their family members (specially the male members), they dream of working in professions that are traditionally considered to be male domains, they speak out despite being socialized that women don’t when men are present, they decide and successfully bring up their children as single parents, and they also support other women to break the norms. These are all examples of women exhibiting agency to challenge the structures and systems that subordinate them and, in these challenges, lie the potential for change. This is a key aspect of empowerment.

Agency in the Neoliberal Development Agenda

There is no doubt that the confidence, dignity, and self-worth that women accrue through both individual and collective agency do contribute to the process of women's development and empowerment but, as argued by scholars like Batliwala, the very concept of empowerment might be coopted by a particular kind of development agenda that seeks a quick fix to solve inequalities and injustice in society, and in the process, fails to make possible sustainable and just development. Batliwala (2007) "Meanwhile, in keeping with the insidious dominance of the neo-liberal ideology and its consumerist core, we see the transition of empowerment out of the realm of societal and systemic change and into the individual domain - from a noun signifying shifts in social power to a verb signaling individual power, achievement, status." (Batliwala, 2007, Pg.264)

Agency, in the neoliberal narrative, then becomes this individual power that women seek to achieve which not only isolates them from their familial and broader communities but also pitches women in competition with each other. Wilson (2008) points to "a basic contradiction in the notions of agency and 'empowerment' as they are applied within the context of development. On the one hand, empowerment is supposed to be achieved by women themselves (in contrast to earlier 'top-down' approaches to development) through the exercise of agency, but in practice it is expected to take place through development interventions which take place within a framework with its own dynamics of power." (Wilson, 2008, Pg. 86) Often these narratives construct women as more 'efficient' and 'sincere' than the men in their jobs, in repaying loans, and in working harder for the well-being of their children and family. This construction then creates additional burdens for women who then are expected to not only fulfil their traditional domestic roles, but also take on public roles successfully while simultaneously resisting and overcoming all the oppression and injustice they

face. So, the ideal woman is one who balances perfectly both her home front and work front. One respondent wanting to prove her efficiency said, “If I only worked outside and didn’t keep control of my household (let loose the reins) then perhaps my children would be spoiled too but I balance both the outside and the inside.” Women do feel burdened by this need to shoulder all these responsibilities by themselves, and would like to share them with other members of the family - especially their partners. One of respondent, who is the sole breadwinner of her family, expressed her frustration with her husband’s lack of contribution in the household. She said, “I decide by myself. What my children will study or do, their marriages, renting out the rooms- all decisions big and small are taken by me. He has no interest in any of these things. I get angry that he makes all these decisions for other people and does all this work for other people (as his role in projects or politics and not for his family) - he’ll take interest to help other people and other families. I ask him but you can do all this for outsiders why not for his own (family and self).” She has had to struggle very hard to support her family. Thus, insidious to this construction of the ‘enterprising, efficient woman with limitless capacity to cope’ is the benefit of these neoliberal development institutions. Some of the women recognize this when they point out that, “nowadays it’s difficult for a man to get a job but it’s easy for women to get jobs. This is because women can be paid less. If men are paid less then they revolt. They are hot blooded and they are more aggressive. It’s easier to control women. A woman can tolerate a lot more than men. When a woman goes out to work when they need to, they will bear a lot more from their employers without fighting.” This implies that women in the name of being empowered are further controlled by the very institutions that are supposed to pave the way for their empowerment. Even in giving loans they feel that women are considered to be ideal clients because “If they give it to women, they can track them down...men hardly stay

at home, also men find it easier to run away. With women it's not that easy so they are easier to get a hold of when they default." As we have seen in our previous analysis, most often these loans are used by the men in the household, but the pressure of paying back these loans and the consequences of defaulting are shouldered by the women. As Wilson (2008) says, "Recognising poor women's agency can thus be understood here as 'making poor women responsible for development' – without questioning the neoliberal status quo and its devastating impact on their lives". (Wilson, 2008, Pg. 86) This particular kind of agency that makes women 'enterprising' individuals is antithetical to the kind of community solidarity that empowerment theorists propounded as necessary to actually challenge and change the structures that sustain women's oppression. Thus, in linking agency and choice with the process of empowerment it is important to be wary of propounding this kind of individualistic notion of agency that keeps the power structures in place and causes more harm to collective well-being as well as individual well-being in the long run.

The Dilemma of False Consciousness

Any discussion on agency, decisions, and choices is incomplete without talking about decisions and choices that do not contribute to women's well-being. While extolling the contributions of women's ability to make choices to the process of empowerment, scholars often struggle to explain the choices that women make that go against their long-term well-being. For example, some of the young working women I interviewed reported that post marriage they would like to give up their jobs because they are tired of taking on the burden of the family and would like their future husbands to take on this responsibility. This choice would in the long run put them in a more vulnerable and dependent position to her husband which might curtail her agency and power. Even in the instances where the women have given up their agencies of choosing

their life partners or making financial decisions to preserve the traditional norms can be viewed as kinds of decisions that do not question or resist the patriarchal status quo and are patriarchy preserving decisions. It is easy to then explain such choices as a result of ‘false consciousness’ meaning the inability of women to recognize the structures of oppression and exploitation because of their socialization. Kabeer (2001) discusses this as women’s internalization of their own inferior status in society. She uses Bourdieu’s concept of ‘doxa’ to explain this. “One way of conceptualising this deeper reality is to be found in Bourdieu’s idea of ‘doxa’, the aspects of tradition and culture which are so taken-for-granted that they have become naturalised. Doxa refers to traditions and belief which exist beyond discourse or argumentation, ‘undiscussed, unnamed, admitted without argument or scrutiny’.” (Kabeer, 2001, Pg. 27) However, giving up certain benefits and freedoms in the short term to achieve greater benefits in the long run might be a strategic choice that women make and terming this as false consciousness might be doing a great disservice to the women as then it negates their lived experience of balancing the family peace and the choices they make to further what they perceive as their interests and well-being. A woman talked about how, though she feels she is better at making decisions than her husband, she makes sure to involve him and let him make decisions to avoid familial conflict –“If I decide alone later he may blame me that this was my doing so I give him the ideas (buddhi ta di aami), we discuss it, and I let him decide. A lot of times even with small decisions like day to day cooking or shopping I have to ask him.” Khader (2011) in her analysis that “people with adaptive preferences⁷ are simultaneously active choosers whose deeply held conceptions of the good deserve respect and participants in their own deprivation whose

⁷An adaptive preference is a preference that (1) is inconsistent with a person’s basic flourishing, (2) was formed under conditions non conducive to her basic flourishing, and (3) that we do not think a person would have formed under conditions conducive to basic flourishing. (Khader, 2011, Pg. 52)

deprivation-perpetuating behaviors should be questioned.” (Khader, 2011, Pg. 5) sets a way out of this dilemma by acknowledging that even self-subordinating choices may have some selective empowering effect but the structures and systems that keep their oppressions in place needs to still be questioned and challenged.

Conclusion

“Women in much of the world lose out by being women. Their human powers of choice and sociability are frequently thwarted by societies in which they must live as the adjuncts and servants of the ends of others, and in which their sociability is deformed by fear and hierarchy. But they are bearers of human capabilities, basic powers of choice that make a moral claim for opportunities to be realized and to flourish. Women’s unequal failure to attain a higher level of capability, at which the choice of central human functions is really open to them, is therefore a problem of justice.” (Nussbaum, 2001, Pg. 298). Thus, the notion of women’s choice and agency is not just a matter of women’s well-being and development, but of social justice too, and to realise this vision of a just society, a structural change that dismantles systems of oppression is crucial. In Butler’s theory of agency, the “iterable and repetitive character of performatives makes the structure of norms vulnerable and unstable because the reiteration might fail, be resignified or reappropriated for purposes other than consolidation of norms.” (Mahmood, 2012, Pg. 162)

The experience of a former nursing student who now teaches in the same institution shows how she negotiated with several patriarchal norms to be able to gain a position in her family through which she can challenge these very norms.

“So, after I get the letter (for admission to the nursing program) a meeting (with the family members) was called and my uncle started telling me what will we do educating girls (daughters) because once they get married all the money invested on her goes with her. So, when my uncle said that I got very angry. I said from class 8 I have studied with my own money so no one should be

bothered who is spending what on me and where my earning goes. I will spend my own money and support myself to do this. I am not asking anyone. At that point I became a 'rude' girl who argues with her elders. At that point of time my mother was completely heartbroken and my older brother only earned 7k and I couldn't (they wouldn't) even be considered to be a decision maker so there was no real decision maker (head of the family) in the family other than them (her uncles.) I had to beg and plead with my grandfather to come here and he reluctantly gave me permission. After that no one said no to me and after I came here, I haven't even once asked those people for anything. Now (that she is successful and has gone abroad etc) those people are completely silent. In fact, now they ask me when they have to take decisions. When I got the scholarship for BSc or for the Masters they've commented why are you going for that now, for now is the time for you to get married. Aami shob shomay damn care korechhi oigula (I haven't cared at all about them). I don't ask them for decisions on my life choices I don't even want suggestions from them. My mother and my elder brother supported me a lot - they've never said no you can't do that. They respected my decision."

"Gender inequalities are multi-dimensional and cannot be reduced to some single and universally agreed set of priorities." (Kabeer, 1999, Pg. 23) Likewise, there is no one magic way for increasing women's choices and agency and making them empowered. This needs to be achieved with constant negotiations that sometimes take women two steps forward and one step back and employing multiple ways of transforming oppressive systems.

CHAPTER FOUR

Violence against Women and Empowerment of Women

“Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation, and it is perhaps the most pervasive. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development and peace”

Kofi Annan

The relation between empowerment and violence in the lives of women is complicated and convoluted both at the individual and structural levels. On one hand the primary aim of the empowerment process within the development context is to increase the capabilities, power, and self-esteem of women so that their position in society, families, and communities is such that they will be able to evade and resist being victims of violence. On the other hand, violence against women (VAW) erodes the capabilities, power, and self-esteem of women by negatively impacting their physical, mental and emotional health and as a result becomes a major deterrent in the empowerment process. Thus, the conundrum lies in the fact that the very process that is supposed to alleviate the incidences of violence in the lives of the women gets obstructed by the violence occurring in their lives. An estimate that one in every 3 women around the world experience gender-based violence in some form makes envisaging the development and empowerment of women without addressing the issue of violence against women a futile task. Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the United Nations that aims to achieve gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls by the year 2030 includes eliminating all forms of gender-based violence from the lives of all women and girls in both the private and the public spheres as one of their primary

targets.⁸ Thus, an understanding and analysis of the complex linkages between empowerment of women and VAW become imperative.

The issue of violence against women is not only a global issue but one that occurs across all class, caste, race, religion, and education groups. It is a persistent and pervasive problem. In the declaration made at the Beijing Conference in 1995 the UN Women defines Violence against Women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”. Levy in her work, ‘Women and Violence’ (2008) extends this definition of VAW further with Liz Kelly’s definition of VAW that involves - “behavior that is violent, uses physical force or threat, (and) is intimidating, coercing, (or) damaging to women”; it includes “physical, verbal, visual or sexual acts that are experienced by a woman or girl at the time, or later as a threat, invasion or assault” and “acts that have the effect of hurting or degrading her and/or taking away her ability to control contact (intimate or otherwise) with another individual.” (Levy, 2008, Pg. 3) Some of the key aspects of VAW that are given by these two definitions are that manifestation of violence is not limited to physical violence alone but also encompasses verbal, emotional, psychological violence and includes not only the actual occurrence of such violence but also the threat of violence. They also point out that this depends on the experience of the survivor of violence. Thus, any act is violent when the victim of the act feels violated. They allude to the loss of control that is felt by the victim making this an issue of power and control of the perpetrator over the victim. Finally, both the definitions talk about the harm and

⁸ This is given by one of the UN sustainable development goals. Retrieved from: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-5-gender-equality>

humiliation that is felt by the victim due to the action, and that this diminishes their liberty, control, and ability.

The number of women impacted by VAW worldwide is staggering. Both UN Women and the World Bank claim that 1 in every 3 women in the world are affected by gender-based violence. The percentages and numbers of women who have experienced and been impacted by different forms of VAW are likewise daunting. The World Bank states that 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence, 7% of women in the world have been sexually assaulted by someone other than a partner, and at least 38% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner⁹. In figures these percentages are broken down in a UN report on “Gender Killing of Women and Girls”, where it is stated that “the 87,000 women who were intentionally killed in 2017 globally, more than half (50,000 - 58 per cent) were killed by intimate partners or family members, meaning that 137 women across the world are killed by a member of their own family every day. More than a third (30,000) of the women intentionally killed in 2017 were killed by their current or former intimate partner.” (UNODC, 2018, Pg. 10)

The statistics related to VAW in Bangladesh is similarly staggering. The Deputy Director of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Md. Alamgir Hossen, interprets the results of VAW Survey 2011 to identify that 87% of currently married women have experienced some type of violence by their current husbands in their lifetimes and that 77% of these women reported that some type of violence they faced occurred during the past 12 months from the time of survey. A lot of the violence was attributed to psychological violence but 65% of these married women reported that they had

⁹ The statistics have been retrieved from a World Bank article- Gender-Based Violence (Violence Against Women and Girls). (2019). In *The World Bank*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/socialsustainability/brief/violence-against-women-and-girls>

experienced physical violence committed by their current husbands during their lifetime¹⁰. While there is not much discussion in the report about VAW perpetrated by non-partners, he does mention that a third of the women reported violence against themselves by non-partners in the last year (at the time of the survey), and 23.8% of all the women surveyed reported that they had experienced physical violence perpetrated by non-partners in their entire lifetimes.

As women negotiate the social norms and expectations that they are required to follow in the patriarchal systems, violence in varied forms is evidenced in their lives. Within these incidents there are seeds of empowerment in the ways women, and in some cases men, some more than others, articulate, interpret, and interrogate violence, and think of resisting it, and in the process suggest that some are more empowered than others, and that there are degrees of empowerment conjuring a broad spectrum. In this chapter I interrogate and analyse women's attitudes to gender-based violence to understand not only the complex relationship between empowerment of women and violence against women, but also the different levels of 'power within' that may impact the incidence of violence occurring in their lives. 'Power within' as defined by Kabeer (1994) is the power that enables women to formulate and reflect on their choices, aspirations, interests and strategies for change. One of the main cruxes of this complex relationship is that though both empowerment interventions and interventions to alleviate gender-based violence focus on empowering women to decrease the incidence of violence in women's lives, these different forms and categories of violence that are working simultaneously are eroding the sense of self-respect and self-confidence of women, thus eroding the empowerment of women. This is not to suggest that women

¹⁰ These statistics have been retrieved from Hossen, M. (2014). Measuring Gender-based violence: Results of the Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey in Bangladesh. Retrieved from https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/Mexico_Nov2014/Session%203%20Bangladesh%20paper.pdf

do not gain ‘power within’ at all, but that this idea of ‘power within’ may be diminished by the occurrence of violence against women. In many situations the women, directly and indirectly, resist against the violence they experience. The interventions against VAW focus, overwhelmingly, towards the more direct forms of violence against women. Though there is some recognition of the indirect and structural forms of violence the action taken is mostly against the direct forms and this aggravates and maintains the complex relation between empowerment of women and violence against women (VAW).

There are several ways in which the linkages between empowerment and VAW may be examined and analysed. In this chapter, one way I look at this linkage between women’s empowerment and violence is to examine whether and to what extent their ‘power within’ enables them to prevent or forestall violent actions against themselves either through counter-threat to the perpetrators or through other resources such as influence, contact, or socio-economic group solidarity resources at their disposal and their bargaining abilities that dissuade their partners from perpetrating violence, or even better, by persuading their partners to become more sensitive to issues of violence leading to a structural change through a greater awareness and behavioural change on part of the perpetrators. Another way I potentially explore the entanglement between empowerment and violence is to examine closely how women interpret their situation and their experience with violence in their lives. Examining whether the women passively accept or even justify such acts of violence, disapprove of them, protest against them, or even engage in some kind of ethical evaluation and moral indignation reflecting on the incidences of violence in their lives, will lead to an understanding of the relative levels of empowerment of these women and the extent of a conscious articulation of their agentic voice. I will start with a brief description of the dynamic

idea of empowerment and how the VAW and empowerment are intertwined. In this I will explore the ideas of capabilities and well-being as theorised by Sen and Nussbaum that are inherent in the concept of empowerment and the linkages between these ideas and VAW. Then I will focus on the impact of VAW and the different forms and ways VAW plays out in the lives of women. Then through an analysis of the conversations with women from Bangladesh who are beneficiaries of various empowerment programs I will discuss how VAW and empowerment operate in interlinked and complex ways in the lives of these women. This discussion will address different levels at which 'power within' may develop and the attitudes of these women towards VAW. The impact of gender-based violence within the families of women who are beneficiaries of empowerment interventions, with respect to identity formation and identity adherence of these women in the face of violence, and the impact of violence on their self-esteem will be the main lenses through which this complex relationship will be analysed. Certain caveats that need to be considered are that firstly, conceptually it would be incorrect to look at people, including women, who suffer at the hands of others or due to the social structures, as necessarily devoid of power, as they are certainly disadvantaged due to social and structural forces, but not necessarily disempowered, and secondly, the methodological challenges of gathering accounts of women reporting incidences of violence that they themselves have directly experienced are great. Keeping these in mind for this chapter, I mainly focus on the attitudes of the women I interviewed towards gender-based violence. The attitudes of the respondents towards incidents and issues of gender-based violence, as well as their reflections on the same, are good indicators of empowerment of women.

The idea of empowerment is a complex, dynamic and conflicting idea. Batliwala (in Sardenburg, 2008) points out that the process of empowerment is a non-linear

course, often unrolling in a spiral form, as the participants of the process are acted upon “...changing consciousness, identifying areas to target for change, planning strategies, acting for change, and analyzing action and outcomes, which leads into higher levels of consciousness and more finely honed and better executed strategies” (Sardenburg, 2008, Pg. 24). Empowerment is a relational process and can be a conflicting process. Since during this process the participants continuously engage with other actors and are constantly shifting and challenging the existing power relations, the process of empowerment is relational and conflictual. “Indeed, conflict and coalition must be considered as part of the process of liberating empowerment, particularly when thinking in terms of ‘women’s empowerment’”. (Sardenburg, 2008, Pg. 24) This non-linear course of empowerment is clearly evident when we consider how violence against woman and women’s empowerment are linked.

In a presentation given by the Deputy Regional Director of the United Nations Women Regional Office of Asia and Pacific¹¹, she discusses how empowerment improves women’s financial autonomy, bargaining power, and self-esteem, thus lowering the risk of violence in their lives. (Jatfors, 2017) She also points out that empowerment initiatives should additionally provide women with the means and support to be able to deal with and resist incidences of violence. However, she points out, at the same time, in culturally conservative settings, where gender norms are rigid and rates and acceptance of VAW are high, there is a risk that there is a backlash to these empowerment initiatives for challenging and disrupting the gender norms, and as a result, there is also a risk of increased incidence of violence in the lives of the beneficiaries. One of the arenas where this backlash is most obvious is in cases of street

¹¹ Anna Karin Jatfors- Deputy Regional Director- UN Women Regional Office of Asia and Pacific. Presentation on Women’s Economic Empowerment and Violence against Women. Bangkok February 23rd, 2017-<https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Session%203%20-%20Anna-Karin%20Jatfors.pdf>

harassment of women. Empowerment strategies often lead women to reclaim public spaces, by going out for work or to the market or even using public transport, that are traditionally occupied by men. Harassment of women in the streets is often a backlash against women transgressing the boundaries of their traditional spaces. As one of the respondents during the interviews pointed out, even though women have got independence to a certain extent and they can go out, it is not without barriers. She said, “Now women get eve-teased regularly if they are dressed a little unconventionally. Nowadays still women can’t get out alone late in the night.” Thus, though on the surface it seems like women have the freedom and the power to go out more in comparison to women in the previous generations but incidences of violence or harassment are hindrances to them being able to do so in actuality. Coomaraswamy (2005) clarifies that the backlash to empowerment of women is especially true in patriarchal societies - “Patriarchal societies where men control all decisions result in greater violence when women seem to question or go outside the framework of such decisions. If a society resolves conflict through the use of violence then violence in the home is also on the increase. The lack of economic independence on the part of women and their inability to move out of a violent situation and state inaction against perpetrators of violence perpetuate an ideological belief that violence may even be justified and if it is not, it is not a terrible matter that requires concerted action.” (Coomaraswamy, 2005, Pg. 4731) Thus it is evident that the patriarchal structures exacerbate the circular relation that exists between VAW and empowerment of women.

In order to understand the conflicting feminist theories of power, Amy Allen argues that the feminists have discussed power in two conflicting but mutually exclusive ways. She says, “feminists have traditionally talked about power in one of two ways: either by focusing on the ways in which men have power over women- that

is, on power understood as domination - or by concentrating on the power that women have to act - that is, on power understood as empowerment.” (Allen, 1998, Pg. 22) Both these groups, the group that focuses on ways that men have power over women or the ‘domination theorists’, and the group that focuses on the power that women have or the ‘empowerment theorists’, present a one-sided view of the working of power in the lives of women. The empowerment theorists tend to neglect to regard the different ways that women are dominated and suppressed, and that there are obstacles to them changing their circumstances and the domination theorists tend to neglect the capacities and the power that women have to change their life situations. Thus, as Allen points out, “Neither of these one-sided feminist conceptions of power can do justice to the complex ways in which women can be both dominated and empowered at the same time and in the context of one and the same practice, institution, or norm.” (Allen, 1998, Pg. 22) If strategies of empowerment of women tend to focus on the capacities within the women to control their lives, strategies to alleviate violence against women tend to focus on how women are oppressed. Yet, both empowerment and violence may be occurring at the same time by the same individual or structure or practice in the life of the same woman. Thus, it is important to analyse the way empowerment and VAW work in the lives of women without focusing on just one aspect.

Impact of Violence on Empowerment and Development of Women

Violence against women has a tremendous impact on state and society both in the short and long terms. Rowland (1997) argues that empowerment is personal, relational, and collective, all at the same time. It’s personal, in that it aims to enhance individual capacities and diminish internalized oppression; relational as in it aims to build skills that enable the individual to negotiate with and influence other individuals in the family and community as well as adapt to, resist or transform social structures,

and collective, since if individuals act along with others to bring about the transformations in their lives they are likely to have a far greater impact. The issue of VAW affects women at all these three levels of the personal, relational, and collective. In Sen and Nussbaum's idea of capabilities, instead of questioning what resources individuals have available to them, they look at what they are actually able to do or be, which significantly increases their quality of life. (Nussbaum, 2001) Thus capabilities are the abilities and opportunities that individuals have to be who they want to be and do what they want to do and functionings are what they actually achieve to be or do. (Nussbaum, 2001). These, combined, denote what Sen terms as 'substantial freedoms' that form the core of the idea of 'power within'. Both capabilities and functionings get negatively impacted when economic freedoms and social opportunities for women get undermined by incidences of violence and oppression in their lives. At an individual level the most significant impact is that of trauma. This trauma induces several long-term symptoms in individuals including sleep and eating disturbances, depression, feelings of humiliation, anger and self-blame, fear of sex, and inability to concentrate. (Heise, 1994) The other individual impact is the shame and stigma that the survivors experience. This often times make them feel vulnerable and ostracized. This also leads to them being unable to resist peer or societal pressure. Heise points out that "as "damaged goods" they do not feel worthy or capable of undertaking self-protective behavior, such as contraception." (Heise, 1994, Pg. 140) Among other things this can lead to health and wellness issues such as unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and spread of other infectious diseases. When, at an individual level, the survivors experience this kind of trauma and stigma that undermines their confidence and takes away from their energies along with compromising their health, this then impacts the participation of women in the economy and society. While describing an

incident of marital violence that one her young neighbour experienced, one of the women I interviewed narrated, “Next day (after the narrator and others intervened to talk about the marital violence occurring to the violence survivor’s husband and in-laws) the girl did not come back from her work, so her marital family called us again. Then her husband went looking for her and found that she had stayed at her supervisor’s house. The girl said she had informed her in-laws but they said she had not, so there was an argument about it. They created so much drama about this in front of the supervisor’s house that the girl lost her job because of it.” Thus, not only did the violence that she experienced hinder her economic freedom by costing her, her job, but also hindered her social opportunities by isolating her from the support she received from her supervisor.

The World Bank estimates that the cost of VAW can go up to 3.7% of the GDP of a nation. Heise argues that, “Women cannot lend their labor or creative ideas fully if they are burdened with the physical and psychological scars of abuse” (Heise, 1994, Pg.135) Violence against women has also been shown to interfere with women’s participation in development projects. One of the primary reasons women have cited for dropping out of projects was the threats and violence by husbands who disapproved of their wives’ empowerment (Heise, 1994). While discussing the impact of VAW on women’s participation in development and empowerment programs, we need to keep in mind that VAW both shows up the limits of effectiveness of such programs, as well as hinders participation of women in those programs. Amartya Sen argues that there are five instrumental freedoms that are necessary for any development progress, not only for individual development but also national and societal development. These are protective security, economic facilities, social opportunities, political freedoms, and transparency guarantees. (Agarwal & Panda, 2007) The threat of violence and

incidences of gender-based violence hamper all these instrumental freedoms for women. For survivors of VAW, their personal safety and security are threatened not only in public spaces but in their own homes that are supposed to be a haven of security; their economic, political, and social opportunities are impeded when their income earning opportunities or job seeking capabilities are curtailed by the violence and when the trauma inflicted upon them erodes their mental, emotional, and physical health, and stops them from fully participating as social and political beings; and finally the normalisation of gender-based violence and thus the relative silence around it both in the society and in popular and news media reaffirms the failure of the transparency guarantees for the women. Thus, as Purna Sen (1998) argues violence is an offence against human development, and therefore all forms of development and empowerment programs must address the issue.

There are various kinds of harmful behaviours that are targeted towards women and girls that all fall under the gamut of violence against women. Heise (1994, Heise et al. 2002) lists wife abuse, sexual assault, dowry-related murder, marital rape, selective malnourishment of female children, forced prostitution, female genital mutilation, and sexual abuse of female children as some of them. In Coomaraswamy's (2005) typology, she shows how throughout the lifespan of a woman she might be subjected to one or more of these forms of gender-based violence. She says that, "even before birth women suffer from sex selective abortion, at infancy they may face female infanticide, as young children they will have to put up with incest and son preference, as adolescents they may be sexually abused or trafficked, as young women they may suffer rape, sexual harassment, acid attacks as wives they may experience domestic violence, dowry related violence, marital rape or honour killings, as widows they may be required to self-immolate or be deprived of property and dignity." (Coomaraswamy, 2005, Pg. 4)

In this chapter the focus will be only on the types of VAW that the respondents have experienced or have thought about significantly enough to discuss while reflecting on the process of empowerment in their own lives. These forms of VAW include child marriage, sexual harassment and sexual assault, domestic violence or spousal conflict or intimate partner abuse, dowry related violence that is related to violence within the household or to domestic violence, abandonment by their husbands, and consistent and daily neglect and social exclusion that is experienced by these women by virtue of being women in their communities. Based on the attitudes of the women who were interviewed during the research process towards VAW and narrations of their connections to VAW, to understand the relationship between empowerment and gender-based violence we need to interrogate the concept of ‘power within’ at two different levels: within the family, and within the individual. At both these levels the power dynamics shift and change in relation to VAW and simultaneously impact women’s oppression and experience of violence.

Love and Violence within the Family

The family unit is the space where commonly not only are children raised but is the space where individual members should be able to find themselves, grow, heal, and connect with each other under the assumption that this unit is the safest space in society. Thus, it is rightly termed as the basic structure of society. Nussbaum (2001) says, “...life, health, bodily integrity, dignity and non-humiliation, associational liberties, emotion health, the opportunity to form meaningful relationships with other people, the ability to participate in politics, the ability to hold property and work outside the home, the ability to think for oneself and form a plan of life – all these things are at stake in the family and the shape of the family institution influences all these capabilities, for both women and men.” (Nussbaum, 2001, Pg. 145) Yet, families have been seen to also

be sites of oppression. While love, care, and nurturing exist with families, so do domestic violence, unequal power and privileges between genders, marital rape, and other violations of agencies and personhoods. In terms of empowerment and gender-based violence, it is a site where both these processes may occur in tandem with each other. This makes it imperative to understand how these dynamics play out with the family for as Kymlicka (2001) states, “Investigating the justice of the family is important, therefore, not only as a potential site of inequality between adult men and women but also as a school for the sense of justice in boys and girls” (Kymlicka, 2001, Pg. 402). The reason why, when the family is considered to be the unit of analysis, it’s harder to untangle the different threads of oppression and empowerment, love and violence, positive power and negative power, individual freedoms, and self-sacrificing love, is because, as Nussbaum (2001) points out, there are certain assumptions about the features and nature of the familial household that are defective. These assumptions about the family play a big role in complicating the relationship between VAW and empowerment. These assumptions are that the family is a ‘private’ sphere and thus to be protected from any outside or ‘public’ interference; that the family is a natural and organic unit and not shaped by custom or society, and moreover, not acknowledging that this unit is formed through and governed by a social contract; and finally, within a family women are considered to be the primary care givers given “...women’s propensity to give love and care as existing ‘by nature’ rather than recognizing the role of custom, law, and institutions in shaping the emotions.” (Nussbaum, 2001, Pg. 252)

The family unit is formed and governed by a social contract and thus, as is true in case of any other such societal units, both cooperation and conflict between the members are inevitable for the sustenance of the family. However, Amartya Sen (1987) points out that one of the key differences in case of a family unit from that of other

societal units is that the men and women in a family have to live in the same household and exiting this social contract is difficult both practically and, especially, emotionally. He says, “One of these characteristics is that many aspects of the conflict of interest between men and women have to be viewed against the background of pervasive cooperative behaviour. Not only do the different parties have much to gain from cooperation, their individual activities have to take the form of being overtly cooperative, even when substantial conflicts exist. This is seen most clearly in the parts of the gender divisions that relate to household arrangements, in particular who does what type of work in the household and enjoys what benefits. While serious conflicts of interests may, ...be involved, the nature of the family organization requires that these conflicts be moulded in a general format of cooperation, with conflicts treated as aberrations or deviant behaviour.” (Sen, 1987, Pg. 42) The issue here lies in the expectation that conflicts are unnatural within a family. Conflicts are natural, but only when the power dynamics within the household get skewed, that these conflicts become abusive. “In a healthy relationship too, partners constantly negotiate power about childcare, household finances, household decisions, etc but the negotiations are such that the power is more or less evenly distributed. In abusive relationships the power imbalance is huge with one person demonstrating so much power that the other feels threatened, scared or even imprisoned. What they call torture.” (Hill, 2020, Pg. 26) Interestingly, when discussing the issue of domestic violence, the respondents themselves are aware that conflicts are a part of their everyday lives and not all conflicts are abusive. One of the women while talking about domestic violence and family conflicts said that, “In the family, if outsiders get involved in the conflict, they worsen the matter instead of helping. If you live in the family, there will be conflict - one backs down, it gets solved, but if others get involved it creates a mess - they aggravate the

situation. Another of the respondents, during the group discussion, explained the potential and common trajectory of these conflicts, “Madam, this conflict is violence. One day there is a fight and it continues for days without getting solved. As a result, they torture the wife. Sometimes the marriage ends up breaking. Beating is violence. This is how much a conflict can grow.” This expression of what constitutes as domestic violence in their lives includes not only the actual incidence of physical violence such as a beating, but also the threat of violence which too is considered to be an act of domestic or intimate partner violence. Levy (2008) defines intimate partner violence as, “IPV occurs when a person uses force or the threat of force to gain control in an intimate heterosexual or same sex relationship. IPV is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon that includes physical aggression, sexual abuse, stalking, emotional/psychological abuse- isolation or monopolization, economic abuse, degradation/humiliation, rigid sex role expectations, psychological destabilization and withholding emotional nurturing and caring.” (Levy, 2008, Pg. 3) Thus, when these conflicts turn into abuse or when the women are threatened by it, they seem to be resigned that this abuse is something they need to tolerate every day, as long as it does not cross certain limits of abuse, to maintain the appearance of a united cooperative family. While this resigned acceptance of their ‘fates’ might seem indicative of ‘powerlessness’ of the women, but in reality this is a coping strategy that the women choose to adopt and for many of the women, this resignation turns into protest action when the lines of their tolerance are crossed, implying that at no point are these women completely powerless but are always negotiating their familial situations.

Another issue that exacerbates the oppression of women within the family unit is the idea that the family unit is private and to be shielded from the interference of the state and outsiders. Kymlicka shows how this image of the family as a private sphere

actually works against the safety and well-being of women. “This family based conception of privacy fails women in two ways – 1) it has failed to protect women’s desire for privacy when threatened by abusive husbands and fathers, 2) it has condoned the ‘involuntary’ privacy of women - i.e. it has condoned the unwanted seclusion or forced modesty of mothers and daughters who desired to escape from confinement of domestic roles to participate in public life.” (Kymlicka, 2001, Pg. 396). However, unlike a lot of western societies, in the Bangladeshi cultural context, this aspect of privacy is relatively less strict. If a conflict occurs between a married couple, other family members and close friends - especially if they are older in age do have the allowance to intervene. Privacy is maintained till a certain point, and if the conflict gets excessive, then not only do community members intervene but often the woman too appeals for the advice of others, most often the senior members of the community. One respondent said, “First I should try to control my husband (if his behaviour towards me is bad) then if that does not help, I should make sure the elders like his parents or guardian and my parents or guardian know that his behaviour towards me is bad. They will make him understand or discipline him and the matter can be solved then and there. People go to them (neighbours or extended family –since they are older) for advice in such situations. They try and advise the best ways to deal with the individual situations. We tell them to sit together and try figure out a solution with the elders in their families.” Others too echoed this when one said, “It’s when a man assaults (haron) a woman that’s nirjatan (violence)...when I hear there has been violence (beating) first I try giving them advice and then scold them. But when family conflicts (minor conflicts) happen then other people shouldn’t say anything or interfere. Small conflicts should be controlled so that they don’t turn into violence.” And another respondent said, “As neighbours we should interfere, but if they say this is their private matter then I’ll stay

away in the beginning but if we see injustice, we should intervene.” Culturally in the Bangladeshi context this advice is to mitigate the conflict but not to break the marriage. In this respect there are two conundrums in the relation between empowerment and VAW. Firstly, while the women do get the strength and power from the collective community support, but these are only available as long as the conflict reaches a stage of abuse that is commonly defined as violence by the majority and this often seems to exclude abuses like marital rape, financial abuse, emotional abuse, and severe neglect. Also, this support is withdrawn if the victim of violence wants to take steps that goes against the community norms or challenges the societal structures, especially if she wants to leave and end the marriage. Secondly, with the perceived influence of ‘western’ cultures, specially in the more urban areas, families become more individualistic and start adopting stricter privacy norms. While this might empower women in some respects, they also feel that this complicates the situation and these complications disempower the woman. A woman reports, “when husbands torture the woman, in-laws torture the women and they torture her emotionally and physically”- that is violence (nirjatan). In such cases people in the neighbourhood should definitely intervene. When couples fight in the neighbourhood or within the family, we go talk to them. No one says that it’s their private matter and why are others interfering. Such a strict public/ private divide exists in cities. No one looks out for others there. In our village there is not such a strict divide. Perhaps that is why such complications are less in the village (her opinion).” Interestingly this account ties in with the first conundrum that women are penalised when the family norms deviate from the customary social and cultural structures. Thus, there is an implicit social pressure to keep certain structures of power and oppression in place, including structures that maintain patriarchy.

Finally, the family is seen to be a site of emotions where love and care govern the relationships and this love, care, and comfort are mostly expected to be provided by the women of the household since they are ‘naturally’ supposed to be more loving and emotional than men. The issue that this poses on women within the family is that they are expected to tolerate injustice in the form of neglect or abuse meted out to them in the name of love and for the sake of family harmony. Thus, even when they are aware of their oppression and they have the means to protest against the injustice, they choose to downplay their power and use a different strategy to ease tensions in the household. For example, one of the women I interviewed talked about using compliance as a strategy to maintain peace, “when the husband gets angry, I keep quiet and then when he calms down, I make him understand. Then there is less conflict in the family. The woman has to maintain the peace and understand how to react (or not to react).” The complexity of the entanglement of love, power, and violence against women in the marital family is well demonstrated through the unique aspect of domestic violence in South Asia related to the exchange of dowry. Dowry is the age-old practice of exchange of gifts between the families of the bride and groom though predominantly the tradition signifies the gifts that are from the bride’s family to the groom’s family. Coomaraswamy (2005) explains the changing nature of the dowry system, “While dowry in certain communities was linked to land and immovable property, giving women some sense of security, it has, in the modern world, become a morbid symptom of a customary practice. Today a dowry consists of first, gifts to the bride in terms of clothes, jewellery and household gifts.” (Coomaraswamy, 2005, Pg. 4732) This ‘gift’ of large sums of money, jewellery, cash, and other goods in reality is not to the bride from the bride’s family anymore but from the bride’s family to the groom’s family. In many situations these ‘gifts’ are not voluntarily given but demanded. If the demands of

the groom's family are not met, then the bride is shamed, taunted, tortured, and, in extreme cases, even killed. (Coomaraswamy, 2005; Chowdhury et. al, 2015) As one of the women interviewed points out while discussing the dowry she had to pay when her daughter got married, "They don't directly ask for dowry. They ask for the daughter or her household or the Son-in-law's business. My son-in-law's cousin (not even his direct family) told me if I give dowry then it is for my daughter...amar meyeri thakbe (it will remain for my daughter). For my daughter's happiness I will have to do so (give the dowry) or else my daughter will not be happy." Thus, not only can the system of dowry lead to potential abuse of the bride, but it also creates a tremendous pressure on the families of the bride which, in turn, leads to daughters being regarded as burdens for their natal families. Chowdhury et. al (2015) discusses this specifically within the context of Bangladesh and claims that this system increases the vulnerability of women in Bangladesh, turning them into liabilities for their families. In such cases, even if the women who are about to be married, or are newly married, or other women in the brides' parental families, know that these demands are unjust and illegal, and they are reluctant to follow the system, they are forced to remain silent for reasons like harmony in the new family, earning the love and respect of their in-laws and husband, and for the happiness of the new bride. Thus, various degrees of empowerment might fall short in the name of love and peace.

'Power Within' the Individual: Identities, Self-Worth and Violence

In this examination of 'power within' while looking at power dynamics within families is important, understanding the growth of 'power within' individual women is also crucial. Though in the discussion in this chapter we have discussed 'power within' in the family and in the individual separately, we should keep in mind that the two - the family and the individual, are enmeshed together. There are two aspects that are at play

with respect to 'power within' the individual, one aspect is identity and the other one is self-reflection or how one thinks about oneself.

Identities, power, and social justice are inextricably linked. Women belong to several social groups and each of these groups shape different identities within them. While they may derive different strengths from these multiple identities, failure to stick to the norms of some of these identities may also be disempowering. Sen (2007) points out that "...violence is promoted by the cultivation of a sense of inevitability about some allegedly unique - often belligerent - identity that we are supposed to have and which apparently makes extensive demands on us (sometimes of a most disagreeable kind)." (Sen, 2007, Pg. xiii) For example, while collective identities give individuals the power of solidarity and individual identities give them a sense of self, failure to perform the hegemonic gender identity role given by the patriarchal structures might make her a victim of violence which, as we have seen, hinders her capabilities in several ways and are essentially disempowering. Balzani (2009) states, "The ways both dominant and subordinate groups stereotype others in order to justify their own actions and behaviours, creating an artificial divide between 'us' and 'them', help us to understand the ways in which some individuals may find themselves enabled or constrained, depending on the context in which they find themselves and how they construct their own identities (Tarlo, 2005). Identity construction may serve to promote self-respect but may leave the same individuals in marginalised positions, with little room for manoeuvre." (Balzani, 2009, Pg. 84)

Like in many cultures, in the South Asian culture too, traditionally women are seen as the element that holds the family together. They are the ones who are responsible for care of the children and the elder members of the household, the cleaning of the household, and the unpaid and often unacknowledged labour that goes

in keeping the household running. “These roles have been associated with some important moral virtues, such as altruistic concern, responsiveness to the needs of others, and a willingness to sacrifice one’s own interests for those of others.” (Nussbaum, 2001, Pg. 242) Women in the patriarchal South Asian culture, who follow these expectations and norms given by their gender identity feel they should sacrifice themselves for the others. Thus, then, these norms and expectations become the primary tools for the exploitation and oppression of women. The link between gender-based violence, power, and identity is not only limited to the construction of a woman’s identity but also the construction of the hegemonic male identity. Hegemonic masculinity in the South Asian culture dictates that men have to be strong and aggressive, the primary earner, the leader, and the decision maker. Due to the changes in the societal structures that are brought about by empowerment and development of women, when this hegemonic masculine identity is threatened, they perform their given roles more aggressively to retain the identity.

One of the best ways to understand the linkages between gender identities, empowerment of women and gender-based violence is to look at the concept of ‘honour’ in the South Asian culture and the violence that is meted out to protect that ‘honour’. Hasan in Balzani states that, “...we are witnessing a new pattern in the murder of women for the sake of family honour – one in which men who enjoy significant privileges under patriarchal rule attempt, through violent means, to bring stability to a world that is continually changing before their eyes, seeking more and more fervently to defend their traditional status vis-à-vis women.” (Balzani, 2009, Pg. 88) Often the family ‘honour’ is linked with the actions and behaviour of the women members of the family and maintaining her ‘honor’ and women have to pay a severe price if they are viewed to decimate the family ‘honour’ through their behaviour.

The women who I interviewed during the field research discussed the societal pressure that is put on them to be 'good' and 'pure'. Some even felt that if they did transgress the lines of acceptable behaviour for women, then disciplinary action is justified. One respondent said, "There are husbands who beat up their wives. Till date I have not even got a slap from my husband. Other people ask me how this is and I tell them that I have earned by husband's love through my own capability and behaviour. Today if I behaved badly with him or wasted money obviously, he'd beat me up. I have earned his love and respect with my capability." To protect and maintain the 'izzat' or honour of the family and the individual, that are often held to be inscribed in the bodies and behaviour of their women, women are expected to toe the line of a good, pious, pure, and submissive woman. However, it is also interesting to note that this woman gains strength in the belief that her behaviour 'earns' the respect of her in-laws and husband and she credits herself for the lack of violence in her life. On one hand this is a problematic view since as Gill points out this puts all the onus of the violence that a woman faces on the woman herself. "The socialization of young women in such societies revolves around notions of family honor and cultural norms that become so deeply internalized that women often find it difficult to break away from these values. As a result of this socialisation, many women feel that they are to blame for the emotional and physical abuse they suffer and so become complicit in their own subjugation." (Gill, 2009, Pg. 478) On the other hand, that she gains confidence in herself and feels respected from this belief is also empowering.

Gill (2009) argues that the idea of honour is not as important as how the idea of honour is used by the hegemonic groups in a patriarchal society. One of the interviewees said that her daughter never gets male friends home implying that while she agrees that if one goes out to work or to study, they will have to interact with both

men and women but there has to be a difference in the kinds of friendships and interactions specially for a woman. The reason for this is because people in the neighbourhood will say the woman is bad if she has male friends. Another woman agreed with her and adds that for a married woman, not only do the neighbours talk, but also the husband thinks that the woman is bad for having male friends. Thus, there may be conflict in the household due to this. In both the cases we see the mother and the husband protecting the woman's reputation, but that result in constricting her mobility and independence. Thus as Gill says, "Honor is actually less important as a concept than the desire on the part of male leaders within these patriarchal social groups to retain their political and cultural authority by reinforcing established gender roles and expectations... Fears about the loss of personal or family honor shape how individuals act within these contexts; shame is therefore an effective tool for curbing individual impulses that exist as a threatened sanction imposed by communities on individuals." (Gill, 2009, Pg. 477) This perceived norm, that a woman needs to protect her honour, acts as a barrier to a woman obtaining an education or continuing with any employment, both of which are important contributing factors in a woman's path of development and empowerment. The woman actually becoming educated or employed is not what erodes a woman's honour but the threat of violence that she faces in the public space is a threat to her and her family's honour. For example, when talking about street harassment and sexual harassment a respondent observed that "It's difficult for women to continue their education for this (incidence of harassment) too. When the girl turns 15 she'll go to school or college - the girl is fine, but the boys she'll be studying with might not be and they can harm her honour (izzat), or if the young girl goes to work in a household or a factory and a man there keeps tempting her she might give into the temptation and do something that harms her honour. Then (with the power differentials) even if you decide

to take legal steps or go to the court they can kidnap or even kill your daughter. They have money - they can afford to buy the law- if they bribe the legal people - if they give them a case of money, then my case is over. I lose my case and money, and also don't get back my daughter. These kinds of fear are always working within people like me.” Protecting their daughters' honour is a motivating factor for the occurrence of many child marriages. UNICEF's research on child marriages shows that even young girls are held responsible for maintaining their family's honour. Parents often arrange the marriage of their minor daughters to protect their purity and chastity because they “feel a real or perceived fear of sexual violence at onset of puberty.” (UNICEF, n.d.) If the girl is either sexually assaulted or chooses to begin sexual activities outside of marriage, then her reputation is ruined and she is considered 'stained'. This is another way of controlling a woman's body and actions because a woman choosing to have male friends or engage in sexual activities outside marriage is viewed as a threat to social norms and the patriarchal structure.

This way of controlling a woman erodes her capabilities because, in order to protect her own honour and her family's honour a woman has to give up on her own choices and mobility. One respondent was accompanied by her husband during an interview and though he did not say much, when the topic of women traveling unaccompanied out of their homes came up, he expressed his disapproval. The respondent had just started saying that when their daughters come to visit them, someone accompanies them to and from their marital homes. Her husband interjected at that point to say that the women in his family - wife, daughters or daughter-in-law - do not travel unaccompanied. Here, there was an underlying implication that it is not desirable or honourable for a woman to travel outside alone. She again starts saying that nowadays women do move about alone but again he interjects to say it does not happen

in their family. If it was allowed for women in his family to move around without any one accompanying them then he would allow them to do a job - “tahole to chakri korte ditam, chakri korte di ni ei karone”. It is noteworthy that he not only feels that his family honour, and in turn, his pride will be depleted if the women in his family go out alone or go out to work, but also family dynamics that is evident here is that he feels entirely in control over the actions of women members of his family, even though his wife was not only a client of the micro-finance institution but also a group leader who educated other women borrowers of their village about the micro-finance process. Women too internalize these ideas of honor and purity. This is evident in the observation of one of the interviewees, “A husband will marry me only if my character is good. If a man sees that the woman’s character is not good then he will think that this woman will not be suitable to manage my household and will bring conflict in my life and he will not marry her.” This is how hegemonic masculinity plays out. “This is more than women acting to preserve their own position within community or family – once they embody hegemonic masculinity, they position themselves as powerful, and may enforce hegemony through violence. Women are also central to the project of gender construction among men.” (Balzani, 2009, Pg. 84)

Tied to their multiple identities is the sense of self that develops in individuals. This sense of self is a perceived sense, and in situations of conflict and cooperation how the woman perceives herself, and what she thinks she deserves are crucial in determining what and how much she will tolerate, cooperate, or fight for. Khader (2011) inspired by Amartya Sen’s concept of ‘perception of entitlement’ which “...highlights the subjective dimensions of social and intrafamily distribution of goods; who gets what depends partly on how entitled - that is, deserving - that person perceives herself to be” (Khader, 2011, Pg.112) puts forward her term “self-entitlement” where women who

have a positive sense of themselves believe that they are deserving of opportunities and flourishing, whereas women with a negative sense of self-entitlement question if they are deserving of doing well, and thus if they should at all work for their own well-being. (Khader, 2011) In the process of empowerment of women it is essential that this sense of entitlement and self is developed into a positive sense for only then will women consider themselves to be worthy of pursuing their well-being. Yet, this sense of self-entitlement gets eroded by gender-based violence. For gender-based violence is not limited to isolated incidents of violence meted out to women, it is a systematic oppression that makes women feel that they are inferior and deserving of this violence. In Khader's research, "Paul Benson (2000) argues that some women "feel crazy" under unjust conditions; they experience themselves as alienated from their own choices. According to Benson, society encourages women to internalize harmful norms, and the conflict between their desires and those norms produces the sense that they are not worthy of answering for their actions. Similarly, Susan Babbitt claims that oppression can undermine women's abilities to pursue their own well-being by impeding their sense of their own worthiness (Babbitt 1993). In Babbitt's words, oppressed people can fail to possess "a sense of self that would support a full sense of flourishing" (Babbitt 1993, 248)." (Khader, 2011, Pg. 113)

I could see how this development of a negative sense of self plays out, and the impact it has, while interviewing some of the women in Bangladesh during the research process. Two of the respondents, talking about their family lives and position within the community, said that no matter how much good a woman does, she is always criticised. If they have a conflict with their husbands then they are the ones who are asked to keep quiet and maintain peace. "No one will support me. It seems like 'naarir jaattai kharap' (women as a group are bad). It's easy for a woman to be criticised. We

work so hard and suffer so much, but if anything goes wrong, we are blamed.” Referring to the common practice of men getting married multiple number of times that leads to their previous wives often being abandoned, they observed how the society still considers men to be blameless and puts the entire burden of blame on the women. “If my husband has other wives, even if he marries fourteen times and does not look after me, and I do everything alone, the society will not tell him anything. He is still good. Even then the society will say the wife was not good, so he married again. Even if women do something out of the norm, like not cover her head or walk differently, she is criticised and called a bad woman.” This holding the survivor of abuse, responsible for the abuse instead of the perpetrator is called ‘victim blaming’. This occurs when it is automatically assumed that the survivor provoked the violence by their attitude, dress, actions, words, or behaviour. (Weingarten, 2016) The abused has to then face the trauma of being abused, and being held responsible for the abuse. Thus, not only is their trauma multiplied with feelings of guilt and shame that victim blaming results in but it also erodes the self-entitlement that women should have and makes them believe that they deserve to be disciplined and abused, internalising their inferior status vis-a-vie the men in the family.

Victim blaming in cases of domestic violence also leads to women who are abused by their spouses, to feel that her husband has the right to discipline her using abuse. As one of the respondents observed, if a woman does not take care of her husband, does not speak nicely to him, is rude to his family members, does not give him time, does not share his happiness or sadness, then her husband will avoid her and leave her. Thus, then if the husband abuses or abandons the woman, everyone in the community, family, and the woman herself will evaluate the character and the actions of the abused to find the reason for the abuse. This normalization of abuse for an

assumed fault of the victim signifies that the woman is constantly under pressure to portray and prove that she is 'good'. This also makes it difficult for an abused woman to leave an abusive situation since her community and society feel that that she had done something to deserve the abuse, and thus the woman's exit from her husband's house often remains unsupported. (Weingarten, 2016) Another harmful consequence of victim blaming is that often this is an important deterrent for women who have survived sexual and spousal violence from reporting their abuser to the authorities or even to people outside their private spheres. (Weingarten, 2016) Two of the students while talking about rape highlighted how victim blaming when a woman has been raped increases her trauma and destroys her future, " When a woman gets raped then the society holds her to be impure and blames her, but the man walks around in his community with his head held high. When it comes to getting married, no one will marry the girl, but it will not be a problem to find a bride for the guy." Another student adds that, "Not only in case of marriage but in all aspects of society, she suffers. The whole society points fingers at her." They both conclude that "it seems that if a woman gets raped, then it is better that she come to terms with it (the trauma) secretly. If she goes to the police, they will ask her a thousand questions (how, why, where, what were you doing etc.), the police will get entertained by this. They don't ask the questions to help the woman but for their personal amusement at the plight of the women." Thus, they made it evident that victim blaming makes it difficult for the abused to leave the situation, confide in others, try to get over the trauma by moving on with another aspect of her life, or seek help from authorities. In one narrative a woman bitterly questioned the position of women in the society within this context. She said, "What is the position of women in this society? Everyone thinks women are nothing - they have no value. But society can't do without women. The society gives no value to women. Women

tolerate everything even if they are suffering, they tolerate because they have no place to go. If a woman leaves and doesn't tolerate then the woman is bad. Only good women tolerate. So, if the woman protests and leaves, she will become the bad woman." It seems that the abused woman is caught in a catch-22 situation. However, it is interesting that this clear articulation on her part of the unfairness of this situation may be an indication not just of her helplessness, but of her moral disapproval of this state of affairs, and hence of her inner awakening. Thus, it is possible with self-reflection, which ideally women should be able to do during the empowerment process, they recognize that victim blaming is a power move by the dominating forces to keep women subjugated by constructing a gender identity that within the cultural context seem to deserve being dependent and subjugated. Subsequently, they should be able to resist and reject this power move.

Resistance, Reactions and Responses to VAW- Indicators of Empowerment

While discussing the various experiences that they have had with gender-based violence in their lives, the women did not just describe the incidence of the abuse or their own sufferings, they also talked about the range of responses they have to both abuse as incidents, and abuse as a continuous power-depleting phenomenon. They talked about the immediate response they had, the kind of support they needed, offered and sometimes got, and what should be done to improve the current situation. Like there is no situation of abject powerlessness, there is no situation of gender-based violence without even a degree of resistance. Sometimes the response might be so passive that it does not seem like resistance, but even in the thought that this abuse is unjust there is a degree of resistance. When asked to pay dowry during her daughter's wedding, one woman's response could seem passive on the surface, since she complied, but her response as narrated by her was, "They ask (the bride) what did you get from your

parents that you speak so much -‘etto baro baro katha kao’. I raised my daughter, educated her, fed her, made her a capable human being - on top of that why do I have to give dowry?” This act of her questioning the system is also a form of resistance. This questioning the system is also indicative of the change in her mindset about the societal rules that are oppressive for women. Thus, even though her actions seem compliant, this disquiet in her mind and acknowledgement that this system is unfair is a sign of resistance. This makes examining the response and resistance to gender-based violence both important and interesting, since as McGee (2016) points out “Foucault’s dictum that resistance can be used ‘as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods used.’” (McGee, 2016, Pg. 105) Thus, to get a true understanding of how empowerment of women impacts gender-based violence, and how the process of empowerment is affected by VAW, we need to look at the reactions and responses of the women to the incidence of violence in their lives.

Heise et al. (2002) posits an ‘ecological framework’ to understand how personal, situational, and socio-cultural factors may combine and interact at different levels of society to cause abuse. They say, “The model can best be visualized as four concentric circles. The innermost circle represents the biological and personal history that each individual brings to his or her behavior in relationships. The second circle represents the immediate context in which abuse takes place: frequently the family or other intimate or acquaintance relationship. The third circle represents the institutions and social structures, both formal and informal, in which relationships are embedded in neighborhoods, the workplace, social networks, and peer groups. The fourth, outermost circle is the economic and social environment, including cultural norms.” (Heise et al., 2002, Pg. 87) Just like the interplay of factors at these different levels make possible

the incidence of abuse, these factors also combine and interact in the same level of the social environment to make resistance against this abuse possible. In the narratives of the women there are several instances of individual responses or coping strategies employed on an individual level, community and familial networks used for support, advice and alleviation of abuse, a growing awareness of their own rights as given by laws that may be invoked in extreme situations and may potentially act as a deterrent for the perpetrator and an opinion about the structural change that needs to occur for the alleviation of the problem.

On an individual level the responses to VAW may often seem, on the surface, passive and submissive since the women often use coping mechanisms like compliance and silence to prevent everyday occurrence of the violence. However, if we look closely at their reactions, we see that the women consciously adopt these strategies to further their own well-being without letting conflict situations develop into oppression. One woman said that even though she knows that her husband is not as efficient or aware as her, she maintains the façade of his superiority in the household to prevent conflicts from arising. She said “Onar oi buddhi ektu kom aarki tai aamri jaite hoy (His intelligence is a little less so I have to go to the shop with him). If I decide alone (on things) later he may blame me so often I provide the ideas (buddhi ta di aami) and we discuss it. A lot of times for day to day cooking or shopping I have to ask him. I don’t have my own income, so he gives me the money, so I have to ask him. If I had my own income then I could decide myself.” Thus, she uses compliance as a strategy to maintain peace in her family even though she knows that she is more capable than her husband in making decisions for the family. One of the students, when she was going abroad for further studies, had to convince her marital family that her attitude towards her familial responsibilities will not change and she will not ‘spoil’. She said her husband was very

supportive and helped her to convince his family and now they do not have any issues with her work. She narrated, “He (her husband) is very liberal and he gets what this profession is about. When I got engaged, I had told him about the scholarship for my Masters and I will have to leave and go abroad for 1 year; when he understood he said he will explain to his family. Then his family was apprehensive that oh “she has gone and studied abroad which means she must be ultra-modern or she won’t be caring” but he convinced them. Then it was decided that we will get married after a year after I come back. Even now that I am working, they don’t have a problem with this.” One of the women rests the responsibility of maintaining peace within the household not only on the woman, but on both the husband and the wife, “it’s both people’s responsibility to maintain peace in the house. Shonsar korte holo donojonei korte hoibo (both the people will have to work together to maintain the family).” Though all these responses seem non-passive in reality all these women consciously pander to the male and dominant egos and help them maintain the hegemonic masculine identities by seemingly being the obedient wife or woman. However, they are aware that these are different strategies and that ultimately, by employing such strategies they avoid incidence of violence in their lives, and continue to run their business, get educated, make decisions in their families the way they want; in short, they successfully further their own desires and well-being. In this awareness itself lies the seeds of development of ‘power within’ Not all individual responses are passive and peaceful. One woman talked about a young girl (under age), when she was forced to marry an older man (rumoured to be her mother’s paramour), ran away and went straight to the police station to complain about being forced to marry as a child. A long-time activist in the field (who will be referred to as R in this section) talked about the problems that women face if they have to or choose to live alone. Then men in the community consider them

to be available for all. She said, “I’ve heard in the village where women live alone (husband left her) even women with children will sleep with a weapon under the pillow. This is how the woman is forced to be aggressive to defend herself.” Thus, the range of individual reactions is broad, ranging from passive resistance to outward show of aggression, and each of the responses count towards their empowerment.

Community support becomes extremely vital in helping the survivors of violence cope with the trauma and to strategize ways to alleviate the situation. There is a difference in ways community involvement occurs in the rural and urban areas. In the urban areas, communities are quicker to get involved in case of street harassment or if the domestic conflict becomes extreme enough to be public. A woman who lives in the city thought that “on the roads so many men say so many things. I also see on TV that there is a lot of harassment towards women. One solution is for the public to get together and find a solution.” However, in the rural areas, community involvement is often the first step towards finding a solution to the conflict that has escalated into the abuse. Most of the women interviewed in the rural areas said that if they are faced with domestic violence, they will first go to the elders of the family and the community and only if they are not able to mitigate the issue, then with their advice, they will take legal recourse. Another respondent also echoed a similar opinion about why domestic abuse should not be considered a private matter and people outside the household should get involved. She said, “When you got married you did not ask for a dowry and now you cannot beat up the woman because she did not get dowry, you can’t turn her out - all this is illegal. So, the neighbours keep a watch and intervene. Because the neighbours watch out and protest against such injustice these incidents happen less in the area.” It was evident that even as a community sometimes women felt the need to be private about the occurrence of domestic violence in their neighbourhoods. While talking to

two women at the same time, the older of the two initially was quick to deny that any abuse of women happen in their neighbourhood at all. It was only after the younger woman contradicted her that she was ready to speak about it. Involving the elders of the family and then the elders of the community for advice and solutions is a common strategy in case of escalating conflicts. This follows the age-old customs in these communities of the elders being considered the moral and ethical judges of the community by virtue of the experiences they have gathered over the years. The community also offers support in extreme cases if the survivor needs medical help or legal help; to protest against such injustice; and even if she wants to walk out of the situation. One respondent said that it is especially important for the neighbours and community to get involved when the survivor is afraid of, or is reluctant to speak out against her abuse. She said, “When a husband tortures his wife, even to the point of brutally beating her up, if some neighbour goes and tells her ‘why is he treating you this way or why do you let him treat you this way? Take some step against him’ then that gives her courage. The woman herself doesn’t want to take a step against her husband who feeds her and clothes her. She thinks that it will be fine in the long run- he will change. And that’s why she doesn’t proceed with any concrete or legal steps. The neighbours can provide her with the courage to take steps.”

There are several laws in Bangladesh and in many international charters agreed on and adopted by various nations of the world. Even if the laws are not engaged with directly or invoked in all cases of gender-based violence, the existence of the law renders that type of abuse illegal. This may act as a deterrent to the perpetrator and more importantly, this gives the survivor the confidence that she is morally on the ‘right side’. For example, R points out that spousal violence was not really recognized as illegal in Bangladesh till the law was passed in 2010. Before this law came into existence spousal

conflict was not even considered a conflict. According to the Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center, “The Penal Code of Bangladesh contains provisions that protect women from various forms of violence, although it does not specifically define 'sexual assault'. However, offences related to rape, kidnapping, abduction of women, acid throwing or attempt to cause death or grievous injury because of dowry are treated as specific crimes of serious nature. The Penal Code prescribes capital punishment for kidnapping, abduction, acid throwing and rape.” (Khan, 2005, Paragraph 6) They provide a list of all the laws that deal with violence against women with a brief description, and the laws cover a range of issues that are commonly occurring in the region. Many of the women during the interviews referred to the existence of these laws and their own rights. Even though rarely anyone spoke of invoking those laws but their awareness of the existence of the laws gave them courage and confidence that it was something they could fall back on if all other avenues failed. As one woman points out about street harassment “when a woman goes out in the streets and men assault her, harass her, hijack her that is nari nirjatan (violence against women). There should be more laws to prevent this from happening because if we cannot solve this by ourselves, we need to go to the court and police and take legal steps.” This recognition on their part of legal resources available to them to counter the violence they might face is also a crucial indicator of empowerment. R, who has been active in this area of work for more than twenty years, also commented on the growth of awareness among the women of the laws and their rights. The problem with using the laws, she said, lies in the implementation. So even if nowadays women are “more aware of the dowry laws and harassment laws, women don’t know how to put together evidence. For example, there are no government kits for survivors of rape. Plus, they (the survivors) do not even really want to talk about it because of social stigma and victim blaming. The different

aspects of implementing the law have not happened. We haven't made the path easier for women.” The respondents in a group discussion who posited that to become truly empowered a woman needs to be self-dependent prescribed greater social awareness and awareness of the laws of the country among women to achieve this end.

There are several non-profit organizations in Bangladesh that work towards alleviating abuse. They engage several women from the communities to not only figure out from the grassroots the best methods to deal with such occurrences and the larger problem, but also to spread awareness and take measures. They often employ a combination of individual, community and legal strategies to come up with solutions for the individual survivors and the larger issue. A respondent who is also a grassroots level activist in the community said that “In areas where we have offices like this (the BLAST¹² office), they (the officers in these non-profits) say that if such issues of abandonment, VAW, DV, child marriages come up in your families then tell us, we will investigate them. Nari nirjatan and bou nirjatan (women abuse and wife abuse) both happen - They deal with both. Wives get tortured over dowry issues...1 lakh/2 lakhs are demanded in dowry and wives/daughters-in-law get beaten up because of this. I have worked on these issues - to prevent them and it is important to have a plan to stop these. For example: if a 11-year-old girl gets married and becomes pregnant at 12 there is a risk to her life. This is wrong and should be prevented. So, then we file a case, we get together with 5 other people and we protest.” This is a good example of employing a combination of legal and group resources to come up with strategies to counter incidence of gender-based violence.

As in any patriarchal society, one cannot deny or ignore gendered structures, norms and systems that are in place that make gender-based violence of this nature

¹² BLAST-Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust

possible. We have seen above how norms and customs make violence against women ‘another burden that women have to tolerate’ in their lives. We have also seen how communities and individuals recognise the injustice of these customs and sometimes work to change them. However, changing the structures is not easy and cannot happen overnight but recognising that the structures need to change is an important step in that direction. Some of the respondents during the group discussion talked at length about the skewed gendered structures of the Bangladeshi society and what needs to change. They also prescribe strategies that can change these structures. “The society is dominated by men (patriarchy). A woman is kept silenced, and society is such that if she does not protest or speak out, it is better for her (and for the social and gender hegemony). We can counsel the woman, so that she is more comfortable speaking out. We can change the thought process of the perpetrator- we can ask them why they are doing this and why this might be wrong. If this does not work, we can change the legal system of Bangladesh with respect to this.” Another participant added to this that, “...the familial set-up and the social set-up that is there - everything needs to be changed and more positivity needs to be brought in. Family set-up is important. If there is equality in the family then the society will reflect that. So, the changes have to be made at the familial level and then soon society will reflect those positive changes (she said this is true not only for Bangladesh but for the rest of the world).” Thus even if it is not clearly articulated in this awareness we find a desire for family justice. One way of doing this is through education and especially education of young children who are less likely to have already internalised the oppression and been socialised into following the hegemonic norms. However, the respondent clarifies that while it is harder to change the mindset of adults, the government and the community should try to at least make them aware of the harm such practices and customs cause. “In any social system the

people who are already adults (married and have children), it is not possible to change them or make them go through primary school education, but the government should give them some education (at this adult stage), there should be community centres that teach them how to coexist in a family - how husband, wife, and everyone can live peacefully. If this kind of training can be given to them then perhaps they'd be able to come out of practices like domestic violence.” Finally, some of the group discussion participants pointed out that for the structures to change it is not sufficient for the thinking and mindset of the women to change but everyone and especially the men need to be involved in this change too. One participant said, “When we walk to and from the hostel, we see men who stare at us, accidentally bump against us, pass a comment, and even touch us (others add to this showing how it is a common and an everyday occurrence). They have this tendency. Why do they do this? The main thing is manoshikata (tendency/way of thinking). Till these men change from inside, their behaviour will not change - I think that's the main thing.” It is also interesting that their awareness is not just centred around changes for just women but includes what needs to change systematically for both men and women since gender-based violence is relational.

R advocates for the various changes in socialization that needs to occur for the women to understand her own value. She said unless that change happens it will be difficult to change the structures and empower women such that they can resist the abuse they face. “Till women do not understand themselves that I have a personality/ life apart from my family, it will be very difficult. She has to set her boundaries and say this space is mine. Perhaps the NGOs have not really transferred the value of women to the women - this needs to be transferred from a very early age. The Bangladesh Government's ambition is zero tolerance for violence against women. So many things

have improved like education, development work for garment factory workers, resources etc. But if I do not give women the freedom of thought, do not give them the ability to reflect on their decision-making (for example: she is cooking everything, but for her husband, and not what she likes) things will not change. She has to value what she like s- these are small things - but the woman needs to find and understand these things herself or else there is no real empowerment.” She also observed that one of the challenges of trying to change these structures is that the hegemonic gender forces do not want these structures to change, because they derive their power from these norms and structures in place. R said, “A lot of technology, like the internet, has reached the village, but the confidence levels have not reached the villages mainly because the elders in the family do not necessarily want their daughters (and daughter-in-law) to have the confidence level. Thus, if women have that confidence then women are called disobedient, unruly, not ‘good’ women. There are various battles- sometimes we have to win the small battles in everyday life- we cannot win all of them. My husband says you can’t change the centuries-old men’s habits in one day. The little battles - going out with friends, coming back home late - these are also their achievements. We make all sorts of compromises every day or else family will not last- it will break.” McGee (2016) points out the importance of everyday resistance and while everyday resistance might not seem that significant to change the structures, continuous employment of such strategies ultimately will be successful in making the desired change. “‘Everyday resistance’ as conceived by Scott is all about forms of agency that offer ‘disguised’ resistance to both visible and less visible forms of domination; other terms Scott uses are ‘masked’, ‘invisible’ and ‘tacit’. Because it happens unnoticed under a veneer of compliance with the dominant coercive order, each act of everyday resistance ‘discursively affirms that order’ and ‘leaves dominant symbolic structures intact’ (Scott

1989: 57). However, over time everyday resistance ‘[exerts] a constant pressure’ (ibid.: 59), and eventually norms get changed through the defiance and delegitimation it entails... Resistance, like these contemporary understandings of empowerment, is also a process of agency and structuration. However, rather than shifting power, creating power or wresting ‘power over’ from another actor, resistance holds out against power, withstanding and countering its effects, which may entail overcoming it but not necessarily, and may entail just sitting it out.” (McGee, 2016, Pg. 107-108/Pg. 112) Thus reactions to gender-based violence take many forms ranging from reactive actions to active agencies at work, sometimes women employ community resources and support, and sometimes they rely on legal resources, but in all these reactions is a demonstration of awareness that violence meted towards them is ultimately unjust and is harmful for themselves as well as for their families. This awareness lays the road for further empowerment and changes for a more just society.

Conclusion

Like empowerment is a continuous and complex process, so is the occurrence of and resistance to gender-based violence a complex and continuous process. There is no situation of abject powerlessness that occurs even under circumstances of extreme abuse. The strategies to recognize the incidence of violence and resist it are varied across communities and groups. There are structures in place that make it difficult for women to escape this abuse, that erode the confidence and value of women so much that they internalise the oppression, and do not want to come out of the situation. These structures thus serve as a great barrier to not only the alleviation of violence against women, but also to the achievement of empowerment of women. There are vested interest groups that consciously and unconsciously work to maintain these structures because that gives them hegemony and power. However, on the other hand, there are

several examples from the experiences and thoughts of these women who were interviewed to show that changing these structures might be difficult, but not impossible. In fact, over the years, some of the norms have been destabilised and there has indeed been much progress in Bangladesh in addressing the issue of violence against women. This has been made possible by different endeavours to empower women and, in turn, has paved the way to achieve empowerment of women.

CHAPTER FIVE

Interventions for Empowerment

“People, especially poor women, are capable of promoting their own development if their own efforts and initiatives are recognized and supported. The first steps must be to build the ‘infrastructures’, the context in which women can feel some sense of control over their lives.”

Antrobus in Reversing Realities by Naila Kabeer

Bushra Begum (name changed) came to Dhaka from the village when she was a teenager after her marriage. She was not used to the city at all. In the beginning she would rarely even step out of the house because she was scared. Her husband did not hold a regular job - In fact he was not very interested in working. He was more interested in politics. So, there was no regular income in the household. She initially became a member of a micro-finance institution that had just started operating in her neighbourhood but she heard rumours about how the organisation was forcing its members to convert to a different religion. So, she left the organisation even though she incurred a financial loss. When her children were born, she was worried about their future. By this time, she and her family had moved to a prominent low-income neighbourhood. She became a member of the same organisation and took an initial loan of 7k taka. She bought a sewing machine and started a tailoring business to ensure there is a regular household income. She also improved the rooms that they were living in and rented more rooms. Thus, through taking small loans, she was able to transform her mud house into a brick house and educate her children. Her daughter now is a lawyer and her son, a computer engineer. She is now a micro borrowers' group leader and also actively takes part in various UNDP and social justice projects in that area. Bushra Begum credits the availability of micro loans for her and her family's improved life situation.

Such accounts of success stories of women's empowerment interventions are plenty in development literature. Evaluations of popular interventions with women's empowerment as their focus narrate similar success stories. In certain ways Bushra Begum's life did improve for the better. She went from being someone who was afraid to step out of the house to someone who ran a successful business, is a group leader, and an activist with the UNDP. However, she still had to give in to dowry demands during her daughter's marriage, albeit reluctantly. Moreover, she complained about how her success and efficiency in running her business and maintaining her household has made her husband more neglectful towards family duties which, in turn, increases her workload and responsibilities. Thus, this apparent improvement in life conditions due to development interventions does not necessarily reflect the idea of 'power within' that is an integral part of any long term and sustainable empowerment.

Empowerment is the process by which those who have previously been denied the ability to make strategic life choices, acquire such an ability. Thus, empowerment entails a process of change. (Kabeer, 1999) There are two lines of thought when it comes to the purpose of women's empowerment. One line of thought sees women's empowerment as 'individualized and instrumental'. (Chopra & Muller, 2016) Sardenberg (2008) uses the term 'liberal empowerment' for this. She states that in this approach power gets taken out of the process of empowerment and thus it gets depoliticized. Instead, this approach focuses on the technical and instrumental aspects of empowerment that can supposedly be 'taught' in special training courses. The other line of thought considers empowerment to be more collective in nature and claims that the purpose of empowerment is for the women to attain autonomy and self-determination through the process itself. Thus, the ultimate purpose of empowerment in this line of thought is to challenge the hegemonic power relations structures.

Sardenburg (2008) calls this form of empowerment 'liberating empowerment' and states that power relations are a central issue in this process. So, for Sardenburg (2008), empowerment entails expansion of options, choices, control, power, and ability to make decisions. It should increase control over one's life, control over resources, ability to affect one's well-being, and ability to make strategic choices. This form of 'liberating empowerment' is what is desired to make it possible for a woman to reflect on her situation and the situation of women in that society, entailing an underlying expansion of the horizon of thinking, imagination, and possibilities. It makes it possible for a woman to question and evaluate the structures that were oppressive for her. It echoes the feminist view of the purpose of women's empowerment which is "to question, destabilize and eventually transform the gender order of patriarchal domination." (Sardenburg, 2008, Pg. 19) Liberating empowerment makes it possible to develop the 'power within' - the power that liberates a woman from patriarchy-preserving thoughts and enables her to revise her judgements if necessary.

In this chapter I evaluate two popular methods of interventions to bring about women's empowerment: micro-finance and education. Through the narratives of women from Bangladesh who have all benefited directly or indirectly from them, to a varying extent, I look at the impact that these interventions have had on their lives and selves. The inner transformation in women that is sought after in an empowerment process also indicates an awareness of their gendered identity and gender roles. I argue that interventions that do not train and immerse their beneficiaries in leadership and activism manage to achieve empowerment of their beneficiaries at a superficial level only, and does not aid the process of this inner transformation. Batliwala claims that the process of change that signifies and is brought about by empowerment of women does not necessarily 'begin spontaneously from the condition of subjugation'; it must

be 'externally induced' by convincing women of their innate right to dignity, respect, and justice. (Batliwala, 1994) Thus interventions for development and empowerment of women are imperative. It is only when the interventions use combined strategies of professional skill building, development of critical thinking, and practical experience of being in leadership roles that we see the conditions for achieving 'liberating empowerment' being fulfilled.

According to Kabeer (1999), the ability that gets transformed during the process of empowerment rests on three distinct but interrelated dimensions that are a) resources, b) agency, and c) achievements. While 'achievements' refers to the consequences and outcomes of the exercise of the agency, for the purpose of this paper, there is a need to extend the explanation of 'resources' and 'agency' because the combination of the two denotes the link between interventions for empowerment and the concept of 'power within'. By resources Kabeer means material resources in the economic sense, but she also extends the meaning of resources to include "the various human and social resources that enhance the ability to exercise choice." (Kabeer, 1999, Pg. 437) Thus, resources are the economic, social, familial, and human conditions that are necessary for empowerment. By agency she means the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. She also clarifies that "Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose that individuals bring to their activity." (Kabeer, 1999, Pg. 438)

In Sen's 'Capabilities Approach' the concept of capabilities is given by a combination of these two dimensions, resources and agency, that Kabeer put forward (Kabeer, 1999) The Capabilities Approach adds to the idea of Human Development in a society. It does not stop at totalling or averaging the well-being of people in a society but also focuses on the opportunities available to each person. This approach focuses

on respecting people's self-definition. "It is focused on choice or freedom, holding that the crucial good societies should be promoting for their people is a set of opportunities, or substantial freedoms, which people then may or may not exercise in action: the choice is theirs."(Nussbaum, 2011, Pg. 18) Capabilities are described by Amartya Sen as 'substantial freedoms'. Nussbaum (2011) quotes Sen's elaboration of the meaning of capabilities: "a person's 'capability' refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom, a substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations." (Nussbaum, 2011, Pg. 20) So, this approach not only considers the inherent abilities of the people but also the freedoms and the opportunities created by these abilities and a person's social, political and economic environment. Nussbaum (2011) calls these substantive freedoms as combined capabilities that she distinguished from a person's internal capabilities. These internal capabilities that include intellectual and emotional capacities as well as skills, like perception and movement, are not innate features but are "...trained or developed traits and abilities, developed, in most cases, in the interaction with the social, economic, familial and political environment". (Nussbaum, 2011, Pg. 21)

To evaluate and analyse interventions that have been undertaken for the purpose of development and empowerment of women, it is not sufficient to look at statistics that indicate the change in number of women in the work force or who are literate in a society. Sen (2005) in ' The Argumentative Indian' says that empowerment, or as he terms it, 'agency freedom' must include "...the freedom to think freely, without being severely restrained by pressured conformism or by the ignorance of how the prevailing practices in the rest of the world differ from what can be observed locally." (Sen, 2005, Pg. 240) It is important to evaluate these interventions on the basis of how they are

bringing about this kind of empowerment and how they are impacting these capabilities as defined above - the inherent abilities and the substantive freedom of the women who are the target beneficiaries of these interventions.

In this chapter I will analyse two interventions popular in Bangladesh for development and empowerment of women: micro-finance and education, to understand how, and to what extent, they are effective in enhancing these inherent capabilities. For this analysis I will use the narratives of women collected through in-depth interviews during the course of my field research in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and its surrounding areas during November, 2018, and February, 2019. I will also focus on the Grameen Caledonian College of Nursing (GCCN) which is an education initiative that combines this literacy and skill development targeted education with an education that targets enhancing the students' leadership and critical thinking skills and experiential learning to analyse the impact of such a curriculum on women's empowerment. Not all of the women I interviewed were direct beneficiaries of micro-finance but some of them benefitted by virtue of being daughters of micro credit borrowers. Also, not all of the women were educated, and some of them were not literate, but in their conversations their opinions on the importance of education were evident.

Micro-finance

Micro-finance is a development strategy that provides credit and savings services to the poor, particularly rural women, for income-generating projects. Since the mid-1980s, micro-finance programs have reached nearly 100 million clients in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Kim, et. al, 2007). Conventionally micro-finance refers to a financial mechanism through which formal or informal financial institutions make very small loans (micro-credits) to the entrepreneurial working poor (micro-entrepreneurs) to start, maintain, or expand small businesses (micro-enterprises).

Subsequently it also started to extend to include micro-loans for housing, education, consumption, and saving and money transfer programs for low income individuals (Carr, 2002). Micro-finance interventions became increasingly popular in South Asia when the much-lauded success of the Grameen model, in Bangladesh inspired similar efforts throughout the developing world and even in industrialised nations.

The micro-finance industry has become a global phenomenon. The proliferation of micro-finance programs has been accelerated by a global publicity campaign, the 'MicroCredit Summit'. While the main target group were supposed to be women, it is clear that women do not always benefit from credit for micro-enterprise. (Johnson and Kidder, 1999) Women are regarded as the most appropriate targeted beneficiaries of micro-finance programs. Women are reputed to be more reliable than men when it comes to repayment of loans. It also argued that the entire household benefits when women are the principal beneficiaries of the loans. It seems the submissiveness and the pliability of women in relation to repayment schedules is what makes women such good credit risks. The women who are micro-finance beneficiaries in Bangladesh are aware that they are more creditworthy than men for these reasons. One of the respondents said, "If they (the micro-finance institutions) give it (the loan) to women they can track them down...men hardly stay at home, also men find it easier to run away. With women it's not that easy so they are easier to get a hold of when they default." Thus, in her view, the reliability that is extolled as a virtue of women borrowers is because the patriarchal structures of the society hold the women hostage and thus, they are easier for the institutions to find to recover their loans. This reflective judgement, even if she may be a beneficiary, is an important indication of an awareness of the unjust gender structures in society.

Through micro-finance programs people are earning and thus contributing to the economy both in the production process and as actors in the market. In addition to providing economic benefits, micro-finance is regarded to be an effective vehicle for women's empowerment. Micro-finance programs often attach health and social education with loans. This positively affects the health and hygiene within the family, and education of the children. Most micro-finance interventions in Bangladesh have a health and education component for the borrowers' families. With regards to education, the next generation (especially the daughters of borrowers) benefit from the scholarships that children of the borrowers can avail. This makes the conditions possible for inter-generational empowerment. During my research some of my respondents were daughters of women who benefitted from micro-finance programs. All of them had pursued higher studies and felt that their mothers' involvement with micro-finance institutions had not only helped them procure scholarships and finances to be able to pursue their graduation degrees, but also, the managers of the institutions had advised their mothers on what degrees they could pursue, what scholarships they could avail of and the career path they could take. Thus, they not only got financial help but also mentorship by virtue of their mother being beneficiaries of such interventions. One of the daughters of a micro-finance borrower reinforces how that particular institution continues to support not only her, but the education of other women, "The institution still continues giving scholarships for education. Now they have a tie-up with a Malaysian University and give scholarships for that. Then they have the GCCN¹³ which has a tie-up with a nursing school in Glasgow and if anyone wants to study nursing, they can go there. The borrowers' children who have good results and records are prioritised in these educational institutions, as well as other institutions with which

¹³ GCCN - Grameen Caledonian School of Nursing

the founder has a connection. Even after my school after 10th class I would get a small scholarship from the institution for 11th and 12th classes. They always support education.”

In the developing world micro-finance rests on joint liability (or self-help) groups that make all members responsible for each other’s debts to judge risk and enforce payments. Thus, the clients in their self-help groups support each other in not only paying back the loans, but also in other social and political spheres of their lives. One respondent said she had joined the institution in 1997. They had formed self-help groups of initially 3 members which now have grown into ten members. Since she has been a member from the inception of the group, she is a group leader now. Group members come to her for advice on various issues including how to deal with domestic conflict. She tries to assess the situation and resolve the conflict. She said, “I have to point out what is unjust. People might not like what I say but if I see injustice then I need to point it out. After that if they wish not to talk to me that’s up to them. I will be clear in the eyes of Allah.” She is also a part of a samiti (committee) for loans etc. She has taken the health, legal, hygiene training that the BRAC employees give to their borrowers and now as a part of the samiti she has given that training to others- specially the newcomers. Through these programs, people in the informal economy and people who are marginalized and exploited by the mainstream economy and society are getting resources and financial help not only temporarily, but help that will generate more revenue for them and be a sustainable source of income and thereby give them better life opportunities. In addition to the economic help and resources, these women also get access to a community that supports them through other issues in their lives which is an associational dividend.

The potential impacts of micro-finance on women's empowerment are regarded to be immense. It is expected to increase the income levels of women that would lead to greater levels of economic independence for them. Micro-finance is also supposed to increase the experience of women to the world outside of their homes, give them greater access to information, and increase the possibility for development of other social and political roles. Finally, by enhancing the perceptions of women's contribution to household income and family welfare, it is assumed that micro-finance will increase women's participation in the household decisions about expenditure and other issues that, in turn, will lead to greater expenditure on women's welfare. So, overall, it is expected that micro-finance will bring about general improvements in attitudes to women's role in the private sphere, as well as the public domain. (Mayoux, 1997) While discussing cooperative conflicts within households, Amartya Sen posits that the interpretation of who is contributing how much to the family's prosperity majorly influences the division of the family's joint benefits among its members. He says, "...the circumstances that influence these perceptions of contributions and appropriate entitlements (such as women's ability to earn an independent income, to work outside the home, to be educated, to own property) can have a crucial bearing on these divisions." (Sen, 2005, Pg. 242)

The critique of micro-finance practices that emerge from the socialist/structuralist as well as the postmodern discourse holds these assumptions to be problematic. The fact that the women's families benefit indirectly if the woman is involved in a micro credit program cannot be assumed. The assumption that the benefits trickle down to the children in most cases may be true but in a patriarchal society there is a prioritisation of the boy child's interest rather the girl child's interest. On the contrary the daughters as well as the daughters-in-law of the household are employed

as unpaid labour thus increasing their workload. The assumption that in cases where women are the employers the environment will be more gender sensitive and the wages and condition of the workers will be better is also false. (Mayoux, 1997) In reality, this positive potential may not be at all realised and, on the contrary, studies have shown that many micro-finance programs have a negative impact on women. (Kabeer 2005; Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996; Bates et al. 2004) For instance, Rankin argues that the availability of credit can increase women's work burden, and that men often control the income generated by the credit that women receive. (Rankin, 2001) During an interview I was talking to two women at the same time. One of them, (the younger of the two) who works in a garment factory, talked about this double duty. She said that, "I have to work very long hours. I work from 8 in the morning till 8 at night and, on top of that, sometimes I have to do overtime. Sometimes I don't get back home till 10pm or 11pm at night. Then I have to come home and do all the household work like cooking etc. I wake up with the morning azaan. My husband can't do anything because he is busy driving the rickshaw." The other woman is quick to point out that this juncture that "he (the younger woman's husband) earns an income, how will he do household work?" That the male in the household is exempt from doing any housework because he earns, while the female still has to bear that responsibility, not only increases her work load but also suggests that inadvertently women's income is not regarded as important as a man's income even if that is the more regular income coming in to the household. Thus, there is also gradual recognition that most of these micro-finance interventions have concentrated only on the economic aspects of the women's lives and have failed to address the non-economic dimensions. (Burra, Deshmukh-Ranadive, Murthy, 2005)

Another barrier to the realization of the positive potential of the programs is that there is a lot of pressure from the donors to adopt the financial systems approach that

prioritise cost efficiency and financial sustainability. This approach takes demand for credit and repayment rates as indicators of success, and requires micro-finance programs to be ultimately self-sustaining and preferably making a profit. This stress on repayment rates usually leads to increased pressures on women since they may take loans from other sources to repay their debts thereby getting into serious debt. (Mayoux, 1997) An example of how this kind of pressure leads to heavy indebtedness was narrated by one of the respondents. This respondent had borrowed 60k taka to buy a van. Her husband used to drive the van as a business, but someone stole the van. Now she is facing a loss of 60k taka. So, to pay back this loan, she has had to take an 80k loan from a different bank. It's very difficult for her financially. She works as a help in someone's house, but she is having difficulties in feeding and educating her children. She said, "I have to pay interest. I am still trying to continue my children's education (both her son and daughter study in private schools) but it's very difficult." Now she has almost 1.20 lakhs taka in loan, so she has to pay very high amounts in interest. She has to now pay 12k taka, annually, in interest alone. One of the other women in the group discussion points out that when there are sudden emergencies like the interest payment is very difficult. If the defaulter fails to pay the interest, people from the bank then come to the house and create a fuss. The defaulter then gets publicly shamed since everyone in her neighbourhood gets to know that she has defaulted. This is very embarrassing for her and this makes the idea of paying interest very stressful. This leads to some people getting very heavily indebted to various institutions since they take loans to pay off other interests and they fall in the vicious downward spiral circle of debt. Another respondent points out that this results in people in the area who are money-lenders (middle men/agents for the banks) becoming very influential, and they lend to the poorest of poor. Then as a result of that, these agents really put a lot of

pressure and use their power on these poor people. This demonstrates how this concern over repayment of loans puts pressure on groups to exclude the poorest women who are likely to experience greater problems. In all, the concern with short-term cost-efficiency may jeopardise long-term organizational and client sustainability. Long-term sustainability requires developing the skills, earning capacity, and empowerment of clients and institutional learning which will lead to substantial costs in the short-term. (Mayoux, 1997)

For most of the women who I interviewed, taking a loan from a micro-finance institution was a major step. They did so because of financial need, but for many, this was the first time in their lives that they were doing something financial on their own. A lot of them expressed that they felt scared and apprehensive in the beginning but slowly gained confidence. The statement of this respondent was echoed by others - "Since I have been taking loans now, I am used to it. I have got courage after doing it repeatedly. In the beginning I was scared but S apa (sister) forced me to get into this (taking loans). Now I've been doing it for 4-5 years." Thus, the very act of taking a loan is something that builds confidence and gives women a sense of self. However, this is not sufficient to build the capabilities that Sen and Nussbaum discussed. This alone cannot give women the 'power within' that will enable them to perceive and reflect on the structures that are in place and are the cause of their oppression. Thus, though these women have broken out of their gendered roles to a certain extent due to them being beneficiaries of micro-finance programs, the patriarchal structures that are oppressive and that prevent women from developing their inherent abilities and exercising their substantive freedom are still firmly in place. The three aspects through which this is best demonstrated are decision-making, movement outside the house and their attitude towards women's value in society.

Among the respondents, the women whose only relation with micro-finance was to borrow money were most likely to preserve the patriarchal structures and be least reflective. One woman said, - “Jamai chhara to kichhu kora jaye na. Mohila manush ki shob kichhu pare - sheta bojhen na?” (You can’t do anything without the husband. Will women be able to do everything? Don’t you understand?) in response to if she consults with her husband about her cow business. This reinforces the conventional gendered identity that women are secondary to the men and are incapable of functioning without the involvement of men. Another woman very astutely observed that most of the borrowers are women, but men are mostly the decision-makers in the background. Another respondent explained why she is hesitant to take decisions alone, “If I decide alone, then later, he may blame me that this was your doing. So often I give him the idea and we discuss it. A lot of times with regard to day to day cooking or shopping, I have to ask him. I don’t have my own income so he gives me the money, so I have to ask him. If I had my own income then I could take decisions myself.” It is interesting that though she claims that she has no income of her own, she has been taking a loan from the institution for three years and the tea shop that her husband has set up and that is their main source of household income was set up using the money that she borrowed. Yet, she feels that she has made no contribution in earning this income and is completely dependent on her husband.

Most of the respondents from the semi-urban and rural areas had limited freedom of movement outside their homes. They felt that they needed to be escorted either by a man or a family elder if they ventured out of their neighbourhoods. There were two reasons given for this. For some, the reason was because they were not confident of travelling themselves and did not know how to negotiate roads and public transport. For a lot of them it was an issue of honour. The common feeling was that if

women travelled alone then she lost 'izzat' (honour) not only for herself but for the entire family. An older respondent who has been a beneficiary for over 20 years was saying how her daughters (who are adults and married) never travel alone when her husband interjected to say that the women in his family - wife, daughters, daughter-in-law, no one travels unaccompanied, thus implying that it is not desirable or honourable for a women to travel alone. The respondent continued her response by saying that nowadays women do move about alone but again her husband interjected to say it doesn't happen in their family. Another respondent said while talking about her self-confidence that it comes from her own honor and that a woman's honor is tied to her husband.

Their attitude to women's position in the society was that they believed that women had less value than men and that the government has given enough opportunities and independence to women in current times through various policies and that is sufficient. One respondent said, "What more can be done? Men and women are not equal. Men and women are bound to be different. Some of this inequality is just and some is unjust. If I am disobedient to my husband - he tells me not to do something, and I still do that, then it is wrong of me. Since I am under my husband, I can't be disobedient to him." There was no reflection on the patriarchal structures or even what can be done to improve lives of women in the society. Thus, while in certain aspects these women are empowered but the 'power within' that enables a woman to reflect critically, realise her self-worthiness and gives her the freedom of choice is missing in interventions done through such ways. Thus, the gains of such empowerment appear to be limited and routine.

Those of the respondents who, along with being micro-finance borrowers were also involved in activism through UNDP projects, or were group leaders, or had gone

through training on various social issues and were responsible for doing a similar training for others, or had gone for higher education, or had experienced a combination of these, had a more nuanced understanding of themselves, and of women in the society, and of how women were oppressed by certain structures of society. As mentioned above, one respondent has been linked with this particular micro-finance institution since 1997 and has been a group leader. She was 14 years old when she got married and has lived in Dhaka all her life. She has also been involved with the UNDP projects and has led many movements against child marriage, domestic violence, and multiple marriages. In response to the situation of women's development in Bangladesh she said, "Apu, there are still injustices like child marriage - sometimes it's the fault of the girl, and sometimes the parents. Sometimes the girl falls in love and then the parents fix her marriage to save honor and face and sometimes parents are themselves not able to resist a good match. There are still a lot of people in our society who don't understand (that this is wrong) we have to 'brain wash' them to understand what's right and what's wrong. We have to make them understand or we won't have proper development. I don't differentiate between my daughter and son." Thus, having been involved in various movements to improve lives of women, she understands that there needs to be a critical shift in ways of thinking for any real change for the better to take place. Perhaps the best example of the kind of impact an intervention has when it combines financial resources with education, is how N - a respondent whose mother is a long-time client of a micro-finance institution and a self-help group leader - benefited from this. Through her narrative we find a more nuanced understanding of her community and society at large. She availed of the scholarship that the micro-finance institution gave to complete her graduation. The only reason she was able to get this scholarship

was because her mother was a micro-finance client. In response to the question how the intervention has improved her life she said,

“Without this scholarship I wouldn’t have the opportunities that I did. The transformation that I had after the university was immense with the leadership skills, critical thinking skills, analytical skills and management skills. I wouldn’t have got this quality of education otherwise. I want to contribute to the society. I specially want to contribute to my community. I see that women in my community who want to advance, overcome their barriers, often don’t have the mentorship that is required. I want to start this and be a mentor and give them the support and advice that they need. Here I’ve seen that women don’t go for higher education much. They don’t go to the university. There is a lot of social stigma for women who want to go to the university. Once the woman crosses 20 there is a lot of social pressure on the girl and the parents to get the girl married. There is an attitude that - why do women need to study so much? Of what use is education for women? It’s not necessary that I have to go in for higher education just so that I can get a job. I might also use this higher education to make sure the next generation is educated and has the guidance and the support they need. People here don’t understand that and therefore there is less support for women who want higher education. It is often seen that men do whatever they want and they are supported by their families but this is not the case for women. They don’t think their daughters’ education is very important. They think once the daughter is married, she’ll go to a different household. She won’t support us during our old age. Ultimately such ideas and traditional beliefs (kusangaskar) still persist in areas like this village.”

One of the most striking parts of her response is her interest and determination to use the skills, knowledge, and awareness that she has gained to contribute to advance the well-being of other women in her society. Sen (2005) says that empowerment and agency should of course include women pursuing their own well-being but they have to go beyond promoting their self-welfare. “It is obvious that the active agency of women cannot ignore the urgency of rectifying many social influences that blight the well-being of women and subject them to deprivations of various kinds.” (Sen, 2005, Pg. 222) This kind of empowerment is evidenced in N’s eagerness to mentor the women in her community and change the outlook of her community with regard to women’s education and roles.

Education

Women's education is crucial in various ways for not only improving the lives of individual women, but also for advancing that particular society towards achieving its goal of human development. Thus, various international and government policies focus on increasing literacy rates of women and on women's education. The link between empowerment of women and education is strong. Quantitative and qualitative studies done on the topic of women's empowerment all discuss the importance of education as a strategy to be empowered, as well as an indicator of empowerment. Jejeebhoy's study in North and South India (2003) found primary and secondary school education to be determinants of women's autonomy. Allendorf's (2007) study on couples reporting about women's autonomy and healthcare in Nepal found that both men and women were more likely to report greater autonomy for women if she was educated. Senarath and Gunawardena (2009) also report that women's participation in household decision-making is positively correlated with women's education in South Asia. Mahmood (2002) looked at urban and rural women in Pakistan and found that especially for urban women, their education determined their role in the decision-making process. Though all these studies from South Asia look at women's autonomy or decision-making, they consider increased role in decision-making to be synonymous with empowerment. Thus, it is evident that education is regarded as a significant determinant of empowerment.

Nussbaum (2005) in her essay "Women's Education" lays down the reasons why education for women is so important for improving the lives of women and the various aspects in which it impacts their lives. Firstly, she says that education makes women's access to employment easier which, in turn, increases women's bargaining power within the household since she will be able to leave if she is stuck in an abusive

family situation. An example of a woman feeling stuck in an abusive situation, because of lack of her own independent income, is found in the narrative given above (in Pg. 150) of the woman who had to involve her husband in all the decisions that she took, She felt that because she had no income she was dependent on him, and if she angered him, or turned him against her, by not giving his wishes importance, he might abandon her. In that situation she would have nowhere else to go. So, she felt forced to follow all his decisions even at times she felt they were not the best ones. Thus, in a family “...an illiterate woman has a low bargaining position for basic resources such as food and medical care, because her exit options are poor and her perceived contribution to the success of the family unit is low.” (Nussbaum, 2005, Pg. 194) However she says that literacy is not the only important factor in increasing the value of women within the family, but training in other marketable skills, access to credit, and property rights are all important in improving a woman’s position within the family. Literacy also increases women’s access to legal and political systems and it helps to develop women’s abilities to meet and collaborate with other women. (Nussbaum, 2005) One of the women I interviewed, described the value of literacy by stating what she could have achieved had she been literate and what she misses out on. She said, “There is a LOT of value in education. We who have not studied, we understand. If we had studied, we could have achieved a lot in life. We could have done work like you. Now that we haven’t studied, we understand the value (bujhtasi lekhoparar ki goon). So, I told my daughter to study hard because I understand the value of education. If we go to the hospital (medical) they tell us go to this number room and that number room. How will I go? Everything is written in English. If I was educated, I’d be able to understand everything. I’d have my own experience; now I don’t have my own experience (abhigyata). Now I have to ask. When I use my mobile, I don’t know who is calling. I

have to ask my daughter to see who is calling.” Thus, navigating day to day life like picking up the phone, reading road signs, access to hospitals or other public spaces, etc. get limited due to lack of literacy. One respondent highlights this lack, “I don’t watch the news much, my husband watches and tells me what’s going on. I am not educated, I don’t understand what’s happening and what they say.” Thus, not only are uneducated women dependent on their husbands or families financially but also in terms of access to the legal, political, social, medical world outside their homes.

Many of the women I interviewed either had limited schooling or no schooling at all. However, all of them agreed that education was an important resource to have and many were determined to make sure that their children, especially their daughters, became highly educated. A common saying that a lot of women used to describe how they feel about not being educated is ‘Chokh thakte kana’ which means that one is blind despite of having eyes. They cite various reasons as to why they were unable to complete their education including lack of finances, problems in the family, not understanding the value of education when they were immature, but one of the primary reasons that was evident is that their parents and the larger society paid very little importance to girls’ education. In fact, women were not supposed to be very educated but were expected to get married early. This they felt has changed over one generation since in present times everyone, regardless of their economic status, wants their children to be educated. This is an indication of achieving, to an extent, the kind of transformation that women’s empowerment is expected to bring about. One woman said, “My parents didn’t understand the value of education. They’d say why make a daughter educated. Then parents were not like parents of today. Now we say why spoil our daughters’ future by letting her remain uneducated. If daughters learn to read and write, when they have children, they don’t have to keep a tutor at home to teach them.

They can teach them themselves. I can't do that. I feel very bad that I can't." During another interview both the women present there echoed this sentiment. R1 said, "When we were young people paid more importance to getting jobs and getting married but now, even the poorest of poor want their children to study and make them do so. They are doing whatever they can to ensure that their children get an education. They are sending their children to school - even their daughters. Everyone is getting literate. In our generation not all of us were literate." R2, on the other hand, grew up in a family where the value of education was understood, but still the custom of educating girls did not exist. She said, "I grew up in an educated family. My father has passed his intermediate examinations and my mother the matric examinations. So, our mentality was different. Both the sides laid importance to education. But in those days, there was no concept of higher education for girls, they were married off right after they finished their Madhyamik. I got married when I was 20. But now our kids, all of them are going to the university" It is evident that this increasing understanding of the value of education is also changing the expected gendered roles for women and is aiding the challenge to the conventional gender identity of women.

Nussbaum (2005), does not stop at discussing the tangible gains associated with literacy but she argues that "...learning has a more subtle value as well, as a cultivation of powers of thought and expression that might otherwise go neglected...The girls in Bihar were learning useful skills, but they were also learning to value their own humanity." (Nussbaum, 2005, Pg. 196) She says that it is this intrinsic value of education that should be promoted to achieve what she discusses are the inherent capabilities of women. This intrinsic value cannot be promoted through schooling that requires rote learning, no questioning, focus on grades and points, etc. In short, this kind of education is what Friere (1972) calls 'banking education' where 'antidialogical'

and ‘non- communicative’ ‘deposits’ are made in the brains of the students. He contrasts this with ‘liberating education’ that has the potential to free men from the oppressive structures that bind them. In Nussbaum’s argument “the role of education in developing central human capabilities in no sense implies that without education women do not have selves worthy of respect, or basic human dignity. We may acknowledge that the absence of education involves a blighting of human powers without at all denying that the person who has been so blighted retains a basic core of human equality that grounds normative claims of justice. Indeed, in the capabilities approach, it is precisely the presence of human dignity that gives rise to a claim that core human capacities should be developed, as an urgent issue of justice.” (Nussbaum, 2005, Pg. 198) Thus, education is not only required for women to have opportunities and rights, but education also has an intrinsic value that enhances the woman’s sense of self-respect, gives her the will and ability to inquire about her situation, develops a critical thinking mind, and gives her imagination. In short, it gives women a sense of self, one of the primary markers of ‘power within’.

A Case Study

The Grameen Caledonian College of Nursing (GCCN) is an education initiative that combines this literacy and skill development targeted education with an education that targets enhancing the students’ leadership and critical thinking skills and experiential learning. The GCCN was established in 2010 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, as a result of a partnership between the Glasgow Caledonian College (GCU) in Scotland and the Grameen Healthcare Trust. The visionary college offers international standard nursing education and clinical practice to its students, as well as raises the status of the profession in Bangladesh, and provides opportunities, education and training to women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds across the country. Since 2013, the

college has also awarded the top three students the Principal's Scholarships, offering full financial support, including accommodation fees and a financial stipend, to allow them to continue their studies at GCU.

The GCCN offers four-year bachelor in sciences degrees in Nursing, graduate degrees in Nursing, and diplomas in Nursing Science and Midwifery. It also offers opportunities for their current students to complete their B.Sc and M.Sc (Bachelors and Masters degrees) in Nursing in the United Kingdom. The curriculum includes courses on not only on the fundamentals of nursing and different aspects of nursing like critical care, gynaecology, paediatric care, community health, surgical care, trauma care, mental health care, etc but also courses on behavioural sciences, communicative English, and internet technology¹⁴. During the courses, the students, gain not just theoretical knowledge but are also required to put in hours in the laboratory and in different hospitals to gain practical experience. The teachers and the students share close mentor and mentee relationships, and the students feel comfortable going to their faculty with their problems. One of the current teachers, who is also a GCCN graduate narrated how the students feel free to go to their teachers when they feel insecure about succeeding in their course work and professional lives, and how the teachers inspire them to follow their ambitions. She said, “Our teachers would stay with us and explain things to us till 7 or 8 pm. But when they took classes, they’d give us examples and also tell us about things they faced in life and we got a lot of courage from that. There are many people who drop out in the middle due to family pressure or pressure from the husband or financial pressure but to remain steadfast and jump all those barriers is no easy task. It’s very tough - you need a lot of courage and commitment to overcome

¹⁴ The information about GCCN is from their main website: <https://gccn.ac.bd/>, conversations with the principal of GCCN and interviews with the students and graduates.

those challenges. We have been inspired by our teachers. They taught us how to dream.” Another student echoes this too, “For our confidence we thank our faculty. When we first got admitted they divided us into groups and encouraged us to take on the group leadership (all of them were group leaders), this helped us gain confidence. We learned to lead from these experiences.” The combination of experiential learning and theoretical knowledge, along with close guidance from their mentors, prepare the students to not only to pursue their careers successfully but also to fulfil their tasks adeptly, earning the respect of their colleagues and seniors. This leads to them gaining confidence and pride not only in their work and the way they negotiate the world, but also within themselves. It enables the transformation that Kabeer defines as ‘empowerment within’. This is reflected in the transformation that the students discussed. They said that when they studied in school, they had no prior experience of group work or team work, they got that in GCCN. GCCN does not just focus on theory and curriculum, but also on overall development of the students. For example, along with studies, there is a focus on developing their leadership skills, ability to work in a group, communication skills, etc. One of the students said, “...when we first came, we didn’t even know that to enter the principal’s office we’d have to knock and wait for permission - we were taught all that. We also had classes on how to maintain personal hygiene - We were taught computer skills and English. So, starting from studies to whatever we need to deal with the personal and professional worlds we were taught here.” They were also taken to different places so that they gain different kinds of experience. These places included other organizations linked with Grameen like their micro-finance banks and other social businesses. The students expressed that when they first went to the hospitals, they were very scared. They had apprehensions about how to administer an injection, how to communicate with patients, how to handle

emergency patients, and so on. However, as they gained more practice both in government hospitals and in private hospitals, they got used to the various tasks and became more confident. This transformation is captured in the words of one of the GCCN graduates and current faculty members, “So, as students we got that confidence that no matter which hospital we go to, we’ll be able to manage. By the time we reached 3rd year we got this confidence because we were given these responsibilities from our very first year. That is why we had the confidence that when we entered the hospitals (after completing the course) we could tell the senior nurses to sit and we would take care of the injection/medication.”

Initially when the GCCN started, the student body was comprised entirely of women who were daughters of micro-finance clients of Grameen. In the last few years though, GCCN has opened up to everyone, both men and women, but they still give a preference to daughters of Grameen borrowers. Most of the students come from middle to lower income groups and are on scholarships. They also come from rural and semi-rural areas. Some are first generation college goers in their families. They and their immediate families have to face a lot of criticism from other people for allowing their daughters to join GCCN. One student said that, “In my family I am the first who has come out to study. Because of this my mother constantly has to hear negative remarks about how she let the daughter - a daughter of the family - go outside her home and stay alone and study. They keep asking when will you get your daughter married.” Two of the respondents I interviewed in GCCN were faculty members who were also graduates of GCCN. They said that they faced similar criticisms when they first began as students. Due to being first generation college goers, they were detracted from pursuing their dreams and careers by relatives and neighbours. The urge in society to keep women’s roles unchanged and unchallenged is strong. However, these graduates completed their

diploma from GCCN and then got their B.Sc. and M. Sc, degree from the UK. They have now shown their detractors what they can achieve, and are inspirations for the current students. They describe the reaction of their neighbours and their position in their localities and families after they have achieved so much: “Now we have become examples in the neighbourhood. Those who detracted me before tell their children - Be like her. Look, she has gone abroad, if you study hard you will be able to do the same. Now it also happens that if their (the neighbours) relatives come over to their house and they’ll tell them about me, then these relatives (who she doesn’t know) will come over to our house to look at me and see who is this girl who has achieved so much.” Not only the praise that they now get, but also the knowledge that they were able to achieve so much, despite all the obstacles and detractors’ opinions, bolster the sense of self for these women and enhances their ‘power within’.

The curriculum and the experiences of the students in spaces outside of their educational institution and home environments have shaped their attitudes and viewpoints about women’s position, equality, empowerment, and about ways to bring about change. One way of defining women’s empowerment that was highlighted during the group discussion is that, to achieve women’s empowerment women have to be self-dependent. They recognize the strength of ‘power within’. All of the respondents echoed this student who said “... now when I am a nurse, I will have a job, I will be financially independent, and I will not be dependent on anyone for anything.” However, while they talked about women aspiring for independence and freedom, they were also quick to recognize that the structures are so unequal that complete freedom is not easy to achieve for women. They pointed out that, while in some cases women are given freedom but, in some aspects, like in jobs and salaries, women have a lower status as compared to men. In case of food distribution in the household too, they observed that

better food and more food is prepared for men compared to women (the bigger egg/ the bigger piece of fish go to men). Thus, within the current structural set-up men always get more priority and preference. One of the respondents elaborates on this: “Another aspect we see inequality in is if there is a job that both a man and a woman are capable of doing, we often see that job will go to the man instead of the woman despite both being equally capable of doing the job - just because he is a man - that is his plus point. So, we see that in the professional world, women are not as valued as men.” Another respondent points out that while the government has tried to make the structures equal, the religious and social set-ups are inherently unequal and therefore “... starting from public transport to jobs women are still a long way behind (men).” Thus, due to the government’s efforts the women have advanced, i.e. compared to their own previous status they have advanced, but compared to men, they still fall behind due to the socio-religious structures. To overcome these structural constraints, the respondents suggested that confidence and courage is required that a lot of women still lack. One of them said: “I realise that I can do things - I am a lot more confident. But a lot of women don’t even have this confidence. They second guess themselves - they think will I be able to do this? I am linked with volunteering, so I go out a lot to various different places but I have seen that not a lot of women do this or show the courage to explore, even in a city like Dhaka. This courage - we need to show this courage, or else, the confidence won’t increase.” They also point out that this discrimination and the establishing of differences between men and women start at an early age. Due to these discriminations men and women are also not respected equally: “You have to respect both men and women equally. Then things will change... if we don’t maintain discriminations (and don’t teach our children these discriminations) then from the base that will develop - children learn a lot of these things from their family environment.”

Another respondent elaborates on this idea; “The male/female difference is learnt from the family. I am a girl, so I am expected to serve myself food, whereas my brother gets served his food. This an example of how the boys get priority - they get served or prioritized while we (women) have to work to serve them. At the family level a difference starts appearing as to which tasks are a man’s job and which a woman’s job. You have to do this because you are a woman. This change in mentality has to be brought about at the root level.” Thus, all of them recognize that for women to become empowered, there will be a need to change the structures of society. For the students of GCCN, empowerment of women is a combination of independence and freedom of decision-making that enables the formation and existence of their individual identities. This establishment of their own independent identities is intrinsically linked with their definition of empowerment. Two of the respondents elaborated on these linkages. For one of them empowerment is the ability to take one’s own decisions and not go to anyone else for financial help. She said, “I will be able to support my family, I will be able to do what I want. The most important thing is that I will have an identity and I will have independence. Sometimes we see that a woman has a job but she has no independence in her household - she is dependent on her husband for decision-making - so I think she is financially empowered but she is not personally empowered. Empowerment, in my opinion, as a whole, should be both financial and psychological independence.” Another respondent agreed with her about achieving independence, but highlighted the importance of identity for her. She also said there is a link between establishing one’s identity and confidence. Thus, for her “... what’s important is, identity - people will know me with my identity and my name - I am someone’s sister, wife, daughter. I don’t want people to know me through such relations - I want them to know me for me (amake amar naam-e chinbe shetai ami chai). This will give me

confidence and once my confidence increases, I will be able to positively apply it on someone else (she will be able to help someone else get a similar sense of identity and confidence). This is my main aim.”

So, we see that in GCCN with its combination of mentorship, practical experience, and focus on an overall development of the students, has been able to approximate the kind of education that also has an intrinsic value that enhances the woman’s sense of self-respect, gives her the will and ability to inquire about her situation, develops a critical thinking mind, and gives her imagination. The students themselves stress on the necessity of education to enable the change in structures that is desired. Thus, according to them “...education is primary. Women are stepping outside their homes, meeting other people, getting a job, and they are now able to develop themselves. When you are dependent on someone else, then you have a little bit of fear and shyness in you, and you tend to think that because I am dependent I can’t hurt the person (the one I am dependent on) even if I want to - if I hurt that person, I am the one who will have to face problems. Once I am independent, I don’t have to be dependent to anyone else for anything. If I want to, I can do anything I want, as long as I don’t break the rules.” However, another student is quick to point out that these rules too should be judged if they are right or wrong, and education gives them the ability to judge that.

Conclusion

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), Friere lays the path for education that enables empowerment. In his argument Friere states that unless the oppressed become aware of the systems that oppress them, and then continuously launch struggles against these systems, they will not ever be truly liberated. For only the oppressed understand their own oppression the best and thus any struggle for liberation must start with the marginalised. Often, they are so immersed in and shaped by the oppressive structures,

that the oppressed are not conscious of their oppression. Only in recognising and becoming conscious of the causes of their oppression, can they take transforming actions that lead to new situations. This Friere calls critical ‘conscientization’. To serve this purpose, the pedagogy of empowerment that is required cannot be limited to the intellectual level alone, but also requires involvement at the level of action. Thus, initiatives such as a skill-based education projects like GCCN or micro-finance initiatives that involve their clients into actions for social justice (by including them in activism or giving them roles of group leaders) lead the way to this critical consciousness. From the responses of the women who have been involved in the initiatives at the level of action it is evident that they are closer to achieving some of the basic capabilities that Nussbaum (2011) discusses. Out of the ten core capabilities, three of them are capabilities of senses, imagination and thought, and affiliation and control over one’s environment¹⁵. We see in the responses of the women who are more involved in the empowerment process (such as the GCCN students) that these core capabilities are being achieved, rather than in responses of women who are clients of micro-finance but their only involvement is taking a loan, or women who have had

¹⁵ Nussbaum in Creating Capabilities; The Human Development Approach (2011) Pgs. 33- 34

“Senses, imagination, thought. Being able to use the senses; being able to imagine, to think, and to reason--and to do these things in . . . a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education . . . ; being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing, and producing expressive works and events of one's own choice . . . ; being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech and freedom of religious exercise; being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial pain

Affiliation. Being able to live for and in relation to others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; being able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; having the capability for both justice and friendship. . . . Being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others.

Control over one's environment. (A) *Political:* being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the rights of political participation, free speech and freedom of association . . . (B) *Material:* being able to hold property (both land and movable goods); having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others . . .”

some education but in a system that follows the pedagogy of 'banking education'. Thus, interventions that do not train and immerse their beneficiaries in leadership and activism manage to achieve empowerment of their beneficiaries at a superficial level only. It is only when the interventions use combined strategies of professional skill building, development of critical thinking, and practical experience of being in leadership roles that we see the conditions for achieving 'liberating empowerment' being fulfilled.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion: Revisiting Empowerment

Women in most societies in the world have been relegated to a lower social position as compared to men. Their desires and choice have been undermined, and their powers and capabilities have been suppressed. Nussbaum (2001) argues that “Women’s unequal failure to attain higher level of capability, at which the choice of central human functions is open to them, is therefore a problem of justice.” (Nussbaum, 2001, Pg. 298) The discussions in this thesis have centred around women’s identities, choices, and desires and their linkages to power, capability, and empowerment. One of the primary focus of this thesis was to explore the idea of ‘power within’, both within the individual as well as within the household, and understand how that is shaped by and in turn shapes women’s empowerment, agencies, identities, and experience of and attitude towards gender-based violence.

The research questions and aims that I had for this study are the following: a) To study if for women being beneficiaries of gender focused interventions leads to a change in their decision-making *agencies and autonomy* and if this change in agency and autonomy leads to a change in the sense of ‘power within’ oneself. b) To study if the process of empowerment of women leads to a change in their awareness about and reflection on their *social identities, specifically their gender identities*, and how this is linked to a change in gender roles and power dynamics within their households. c) To integrate the first two aims and study if changes in their agencies and recognition of gender identities lead to a change in their awareness and experience of *oppression and violence* within the household, and if this change is mediated by their participation in the process of empowerment. To achieve these research aims I examined the idea of

‘power within’ that requires women, individually and collectively, to reflect on their choices, aspirations, interests, and strategies for change. I argued that the different and sometimes conflicting identities of an individual as well as the cultural norms that women are expected to follow, inhibit and assist the process of empowerment to different degrees resulting in the manifestation of the ‘power within’ to be varied and sometimes even counterintuitive for different women. No matter how counterintuitive women’s some choices and preferences might seem, they are an integral part of the process of empowerment. I also argued that while women constantly negotiate the social norms and expectations that they are required to follow in a patriarchal system, the ‘power within’ is manifested only when the negotiation is done consciously and reflectively. Conscious reflection on the interaction of the various identities of an individual in different circumstances to adapt to, negotiate with, resist and transform the spaces and systems that the individuals occupy is an unerring mark of the manifestation of ‘power within’.

Power, which is at the heart of the word empowerment, is central to any understanding of the term empowerment. In Fraser’s (1989) discussion of Foucault’s concept of power she argues that modern power (Foucault argues this) is productive and not prohibitive, and that it is capillary in that it operates at all levels of society in every practice. Thus “Foucault enables us to understand power very broadly, and yet very finely, as anchored in multiplicity of what he calls ‘micropractices’ the social practices that constitute everyday life in modern societies.” (Fraser, 1989, Pg. 18) With the conceptualisation of power as productive and not prohibitive Wendy Brown (in Dryzek et al., 2006) argues that Foucault’s concept of power dispels the notion of the most commonly understood form of power as repressive and oppressive. “Foucault’s challenge to the repressive hypothesis (of power) is fourfold; 1) power is productive

rather than repressive, that is, power brings into being meaning, subjects and social order- these are effects of power rather than it's material or it's a priori; 2) power and freedom are not opposites in so far as there is no subject, and no freedom outside of power; 3) repressive models of power tacitly posit a human subject (or a human nature) untouched by power underneath power's repressive action; and 4) repression itself far from containing desires proliferates them.”(Dryzek et. al, 2006, Pg. 70) It is this idea of power as capillary and productive that informs the idea of ‘power within’. Thus, women’s agency or capabilities are shaped by and simultaneously shapes the power(s) of various intersecting individuals and institutions. So, the concept of power dynamics in the household is not and has never been a static, monolithic concept. It is constantly in flux and intersects with various other forces. The idea of ‘power within’ therefore is not a static concept but one which is in flux and one that is produced by the action of various other kinds of power.

The following narrative by one of the participants in this research reflects different manifestations as well as erosions of ‘power within’. The research participant is a beneficiary of a micro-finance program and someone who works with a non-profit program to alleviate women’s issues and especially issues on violence against women in her neighbourhood. She narrated the story of a family that got called out by community leaders for practising domestic violence and in this narration, we also find various problematic elements of child marriage. The parts in parenthesis were implied during the interview.

“The groom is not even 16 (both the young girl and the boy had a romantic relationship) but they wanted to get married. We all went together and said that they can’t get married (since they were under age) and after a lot of fuss they agreed but then we heard that they had sneaked the girl and her mother (the girl’s father married again and abandoned their family) to Mymensingh to get them married in secret there. They forged birth certificates to show that the ages of the pair were legal. The girl could not even be more than 13. Now she (the young girl) lives with her mother-in-law, sister-in-law and her husband in

the area. She works in the garments factory but she is so young that she doesn't know how to manage the household. They (her in-laws and husband) torture her because of this. She sometimes goes back to her mother's house (after not being able to tolerate) but they convince her to go back to her marital house and soon starts torturing her again. This cycle keeps on repeating and has been for a year and half now. Now her in-laws have created a huge conflict, accusing her that she does not take baths properly, clean properly, do the laundry or other household chores. But how will such a little person (both because she is young and because she is slight in physical form) do so much? She wakes up and goes to the factory at 7 am, when does she have time to do household chores? Then the girl's sister-in-law called me and wanted to talk to my husband (since he is involved in politics). Three of us (women from the project the respondent is involved in) went to visit their house. We listened to all sides of the story- to her, her husband, and the in-laws. They were shouting about all the things (chores) she does not do. So we told them that she is too young - we tried telling you not to marry them at that point, but you did it secretly and now you expect her to do all this work on top of the factory work that she has to do and you take away the 7 thousand taka wage that she gets in the factory. Three of us explained it to them how they were being unfair to this young girl. Next day the girl did not come back from her work so her marital family called us again. Then her husband went looking for her and found that she had stayed at her supervisor's house. The girl said she had informed her in-laws but they said she had not so there was a fight about it. They created so much drama about this in front of the supervisor's house that the girl lost her job because of this. Later her in-laws called me and complained that she has now gone to her mother's house with her salary. We all tried explaining how indulging in child marriage is illegal and that's what they had done, so they cannot force her to return."

There are instances of power erosions in this story when the young bride is tortured, made to work at home and in the factory, expected to take on responsibilities beyond her age, deprived of an education and a childhood, and when attempts on her part to escape the oppressions are thwarted. In the midst of this though there are still examples of power manifestations in ways the young girl chose to escape to her parental home when the oppression got unbearable, she sought out help and shelter from her supervisor, and that she chose to be vocal about her side of the story to the non-profit workers. She recognizes that the oppression is unjustified and tries to resist this injustice. The importance of gaining 'power within' with collective support as she gets from the three women who work in the non-profit institution and negotiate with her marital family on her behalf is also evident in this narration. During the research process

many such stories emerged from the field that evidenced the various complex patterns of simultaneous power erosions and power accumulations in the lives of the respondents.

In this thesis, exploring the linkages between power, empowerment, oppression, agency, identity, and consciousness, has led to many conundrums and complexities in the understanding of 'power within' to be brought forth. The research has also brought into focus various ways that the concept of empowerment and the policies to empower women may be enhanced. In conclusion, I highlight a few of the major findings and contributions that this research makes.

Empowerment and alleviation of oppression in the lives of women cannot be achieved by a grand occurrence. In fact, it is achieved through the continuous, daily and very ordinary actions of the women. Even though, on the surface sometimes the daily actions of women may seem submissive, and construct an image of women not being aware of their oppression, in reality this is not true. For example, the decision-making process even for the apparently simple decisions can be very nuanced in terms of power and preference that is often missed. The participants in this research study were all aware that having a role in decision-making was a positive aspect. They considered having a greater role in regular, day to day decision-making as being important and progressive. One of the respondents, when asked if there has been a change for the better in women's status in society over the years, said, "Now women can take their own decisions. Before women used to listen to whatever her husband told her. Now husbands also listen to their wives." When the women start working, or are beneficiaries of micro-finance programs that only lend to women to fulfil their aim of women's empowerment, they start being regarded as 'valuable' members of the household. This is evident in the narratives of some of the women, as for example, one of the

respondents while expressing her dissatisfaction about her husband's saving habits said, "He didn't save then. I told him to save but he wouldn't listen to me then... He'd listen to other people's advice. Now he listens to me because the income is mine and so he has to listen to my advice." Through the process of some of these changes in the everyday lives of these women, changes in their individual consciousness, as well as the underlying social structures are manifested. One of the women I interviewed talked about using compliance as a strategy to maintain peace, "when the husband gets angry, I keep quiet and then when he calms down, I make him understand. Then there is less conflict in the family. The woman has to maintain the peace and understand how to react (or not to react.)" Thus, even when they are aware of their oppression, and they have the means to protest against the injustice, they choose to downplay their power and use a different strategy to ease tensions in the household. This ability to maintain peace in the household on a daily basis also contributes to her self-worth and 'power within'.

Empowerment is relational. There is no situation of abject powerlessness, just as there is no situation of absolute power. This is not to suggest that there should be no understanding of what abject powerlessness or absolute power looks like but it should be noted that a relational approach to power as opposed to a transcendental approach is more useful in terms of making changes to policies and institutions. In 'Idea of Justice', while discussing a theory of justice, Amartya Sen distinguishes between a transcendental approach and a comparative approach. He says that, "If a theory of justice is to guide reasoned choice of policies, strategies or institutions, then the identification of fully just social arrangements is neither necessary nor sufficient." (Sen, 2009, Pg. 15) In this research such a relational aspect of power and empowerment emerged from the field. Sometimes the response to oppression might be so passive that

it seems like the individual lacks any power, but even in the thought that this abuse is unjust there is a degree of empowerment. When asked to pay dowry during her daughter's wedding one woman's response could seem passive on the surface, since she complied, but her response as narrated by her was, "They ask (the bride) what did you get from your parents that you speak so much-'etto baro baro katha kao'. I raised my daughter, educated her, fed her, made her a capable human being, on top of that why do I have to give dowry?" This act of her questioning the system is also empowering. This questioning the system is also indicative of the change in her mindset about the societal rules that are oppressive for women. Thus, even though her actions seem compliant, this disquiet in her mind and acknowledgement that this system is unfair, are a sign of resistance to the oppression. In one narrative, a woman bitterly questioned the position of women in the society within this context. She said, "What is the position of women in this society? Everyone thinks women are nothing - they have no value. But society can't do without women. The society gives no value to women. Women tolerate everything even if they are suffering, they tolerate because they have no place to go. If women leave and not tolerate then the woman is bad. Only good women tolerate. So, if the woman protests and leaves, she will become the bad woman." It seems that the abused woman is caught in a catch-22 situation. However, it is interesting that this clear articulation on her part of the unfairness of this situation may be an indication not just of her helplessness, but of her moral disapproval of this state of affairs and hence of her inner awakening.

Empowerment is enhanced through inter-generational interventions. It is expected that increasing agency of one generation of women will have a positive impact on the freedom of choices and support for the next generation. For a woman, in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, where historically women have been known to

maintain the purdah system, to break out of the private domain and occupy a space in the public domain, demonstrate agency in multiple spheres of their lives, and sometimes even fulfil roles that are commonly considered to be masculine, is a path that is difficult and ridden with obstacles. The courage and the ability to break out of the private sphere is not obtained without support. During the interviews, in most cases I found that this support was inter-generational - especially between mothers and daughters. One woman said, "There is a lot of difference in the way I was brought up and my daughters are being brought up. They have grown up wearing what they want and eating what they want. We haven't denied them their little wishes because we are poor or because there's a lack of finances. (this pertains to little wishes- so if they wanted new clothes or to eat something fancier- they weren't denied) I have suffered and worked hard. I won't let my children suffer." It is important to note that the women who discussed their determination to support their daughters in a way that the daughters are able to live their lives more independently were all women who were clients of micro-finance institutions and had themselves benefited from the empowerment programs and policies of these institutions. One woman said, "Confidence, courage, and strength - I was always interested in these issues. Growing up in the village where I followed whatever my parents decided for me, I felt that I would like my daughters to grow up in a way where they can decide for themselves" and so, she supports her daughters to be able to be independent. When explaining the concept of 'power within' Kabeer (1994) writes, "New forms of consciousness arise out of women's newly acquired access to the intangible skills, social networks, organizational strengths, solidarity and a sense of not being alone." (Kabeer, 1994, Pg. 245) These new forms of consciousness are formed by and subsequently enables the kind of solidarity and support that makes empowerment and development sustainable over generations.

A lot of the participants recognize that for women to become empowered there will be a need to change the structures of society. For them empowerment of women is a combination of independence and freedom of decision-making that enables the formation and existence of their individual identities. This establishment of their own independent identities is intrinsically linked with their definition of empowerment. Two of the respondents elaborated on these linkages. For one of them, empowerment is the ability to take one's own decisions and not go to anyone else for financial help. She said, "I will be able to support my family, I will be able to do what I want. The most important thing is that I will have an identity and I will have independence. Sometimes we see that a woman has a job, but she has no independence in her household - she is dependent on her husband for decision-making - so I think she is financially empowered but she is not personally empowered. Empowerment, in my opinion, as a whole, should be both financial and psychological independence." Another respondent agreed with her about achieving independence, but highlighted the importance of identity for her. She also said there is a link between establishing one's identity and confidence. Thus, for her "... what's important is identity - people will know me with my identity and my name - I am someone's sister, wife, daughter - I don't want people to know me through such relations - I want them to know me for me (amake amar naam-e chinbe shetai ami chai). This will give me confidence and once my confidence increases, I will be able to positively apply it on someone else (she will be able to help someone else get a similar sense of identity and confidence). This is my main aim."

I found that reflections on their identities, awareness of the injustices done to women daily, and consciousness of the unfair devaluation of women in their society are the true indicators of 'power within' these women. By recognizing their gender identity and becoming aware of the actual value of that identity group in society, and how the

perceived value is unjust, increases their self-respect and self-valuation as members of that identity group (women), and as a consequence bolsters the process of empowerment. Many of the women I talked with drew their strength from being identified as a working woman, an educated woman, a business woman, or from their group affiliations to certain development projects. For example, when the students from the nursing college claim that they feel capable and independent being nurses, this professional identity does not only give them a monetary strength but also, they claim to derive strength from the fact that their job is to help people, and thus they are blessed by many. Another woman who works on social projects of the UNDP also feels empowered by the respect that this affiliation brings. She said, "It's more important for me to have this respect and recognition than money. Money won't last. But the respect I get will last me forever." All the women I interviewed feel that women are given less value than men in their households, communities, and society in general. They do not think women are inferior to men, in fact, most of them agreed that women are in many cases more hardworking than the male, and thus regarded this inferior status unjust. Many of the respondents are aware of the contradiction that while women are essential in society, they are valued much less than men- "Everyone thinks women are nothing - they have no value. But society can't do without women."; "In the society women are needed more. In society a lot of people say that women have no value but women have more value than men in the society." They recognize this inequality in the value of gender identity translates to consequences in the kinds of choices women have in life- "Men always get more priority and preference. We see this inequality in if there is a job that both a man and a woman are capable of doing, we often see that job will go to the man instead of the woman despite both being equally capable to doing the job - just because he is a man - that is his plus point." Recognizing both the intrinsic value of

their identity in society, and the injustice in ways that higher respect and value is denied to them through norms and structures, is within itself empowering but also propels women to take control of resisting and challenging these norms.

Raj Sekhar Basu (2020) in his article 'In the Quest for a Different World: Viramma and the Depictions of Dalit Womanhood' criticises earlier Indian feminists for not recognizing the importance of the multiple identities that belong within the broader gender identity. He says, "But, what most feminists in earlier times failed to locate is that women as a category were also not an undifferentiated one, rather it was torn by class standings and they were engaged in all forms of labour and employment contracts, which rigidly did not confer to the simple subsistence mode." (Basu, 2020, Pg. 39) Similarly the research participants too were not a part of a whole undifferentiated identity category. Their multiple identities enabled them to engage with the empowerment process in different ways. This also made their experiences of and attitudes towards gender-based violence varied.

Shirin Rai says in "The History of International Development: Concepts and Contexts" (2011) that "Development continues to be linked to economics- growth, modernization, industrialization, trade, the income of nations and the poverty of populations map the development of countries in the World Bank annual reports. Critiques of this economic focus have stretched the boundaries of development to include education and health in the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI) starting in 1990 and gendered critiques of development resulted in the introduction in 1995 of the Gender related Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure, which measures achievement in the same basic capabilities as the HDI does, but takes note of inequality in achievement as well as agency between women and men."(Rai, 2011, Pg. 18) The findings from this research may not only inform policies focusing on

women's empowerment or gender-based violence but also contribute to the designing, implementation, and assessment of development and empowerment interventions. There are some ways in which this research can be taken forward and enhanced. One would be to include a temporal analysis. So, the same group of women would be interviewed in several times over a span of years. In this research plan one could also think about looking at a control group and comparing it with an uncontrolled group of participants. This would contribute to an understanding of how their situations and understandings change over their life-times, and if and how empowerment interventions impact these changes. Another important way to enhance this research would be to include men as research participants. This will allow us to understand not only the impact of the empowerment interventions on women, but also how the male perspectives change, and how the changes in both men's and women's perspectives impact the household power dynamics.

In the standard approach to empowerment, power is assumed to be a settled concept, and empowerment then is only seen as addressing the problem of power deficit. The departure from this approach in this thesis contributes to the literature by critically examining and unsettling the relationship between power and empowerment - both conceptually, and in practice.

APPENDIX

Areas of Enquiry for Fieldwork

Decision-making--for the individual, partner, family, children, large purchases, small purchases, other money related matters, education/employment related matters, other

- Who is the main decision maker for the family?
- What kinds of decisions do you make?
- Is the decision unilateral or in consultation? With who? How much of advice or suggestions is taken into account?

Status/Position—within the spousal relationship, larger family, different social groups, community

- Description of the household/family structure
 - If you had to order the members according to respect one gets how would you describe the group
 - Who do the rest of the people go to if they have a problem or if they are upset?
 - Who do you talk to if you have a problem or are upset?
 - Are there some established rules of the family? What are these? Who makes them?
- What is your community/neighbourhood like?
 - What are the rules of the community?
 - Has anyone/any family been ostracized by the rest of the family? If so, why?
 - What kinds of situations bring different families together?
 - Are there specific roles in the community for men/women/children
 - How are the children of the community treated? (e.g. Are they looked after by the neighbours if the parents are not at home?)
- (If the participant is a member of a self-help group) Describe the dynamics of the group
 - Why was the group formed? How old is the group?
 - What is the main task of the group?
 - Do the members meet for any other purpose? If yes, what?
 - If you had to order the members according to respect one gets how would you describe the group
 - Who do the rest of the people go to if they have a problem or if they are upset?
 - Who do you talk to if you have a problem or are upset?
 - Are there some established rules of the group? What are these? Who makes them?

Mobility-- in terms of movement, communication, awareness about community, country and world

- Can you go outside the house alone?
- Are there rules about when you can go? Who you can go with? How far can you go? Who you can meet? For how long you can stay out?
- When you go out is it only for work or for your leisure time too?

- Do you have a mobile phone? If yes, how much do you use it? For what? Who pays for it? If not, why not? If you had one what do you think you would use it for?
- How often do you hear the news? What kind of news do you get to hear of? What is your source?
- Is current news something that is discussed in your family/friends? If yes, what kind of news? Do you discuss any recent (not directly related to you or your family) happenings with your spouse? How often?
- Are you aware of the laws of the country especially if they change? What kinds of laws do you know of? How did you get to know of these laws? Do you discuss laws with your spouse/family/friends? How frequently?
- Do you think there are some laws that you would like to see implemented or removed? What are they? Elaboration.

Confidence-- ability to perform various tasks, speaking with strangers/public/people in authority; disagree (with who?), problem solving, giving advice

- How confident/sure are you to –
 - Speak to people outside your sphere
 - Speak to people of authority
 - To perform various tasks- What kinds of tasks are you most confident in performing and what tasks are you least confident in performing
 - To solve problems within the family

Violence-- is it justified? If so when? If it's not, what are ways to prevent incidence, Can it/ should it be discussed? If so, with who and why?

- How do you describe/define domestic violence?
- In case of physical violence what do you think the woman, should do?
- Should rest of the family intervene? When should the family intervene?
- Would you intervene in a conflict between a husband and wife? If yes, at what point would you intervene. Justification of intervening or not intervening.
- Do you think the woman should discuss any conflict she has with her husband with anyone else? If yes, with who? When? Justification as to why or why not.
- Do you think violence within the households is a problem in your community? Do you think in some situations it is necessary to be violent? Elaborate

Resistance to oppression/violence—

- In what are the situations where is it important to resist?
- What are the kinds of things that would make you want to resistor you would resist?
- Can you give me examples of resistances from your lives or examples you have heard of or seen?
- Do you think that it is justified to resist or defy? Why/why not?
- Do you know of any instances where someone has used ways other than direct methods to deal with spousal conflict? If so what?

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