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

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BY

SHARMISTHA GHOSH

CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, CALCUTTA

(AFFILIATED WITH JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY)

R-1 BAISHNABGHATA-PATULI TOWNSHIP

KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL – 700094

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A quarter of a century ago, 17,000 participants, and almost double that number of activists, gathered in Beijing for the Fourth World Conference on Women. Through the two weeks of debates and discussions between representatives of 189 countries that followed, the groundwork was prepared for the blueprint that is now adopted internationally as a framework for advancing women's rights globally. This framework that serves as a guide and inspiration for any work that is done in the fields of women's development, empowerment, and advancement is the 'Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action'. This Platform for Action calls for a world where girls and women have the freedom to choose, to get an education, equal rights, freedom from violence, and equal participation in the decision-making process, among other goals. As a global response to this call for action governmental agencies, nongovernmental, and non-profit organizations, as well as, private and for-profit organizations have taken steps to include women in their development plans and empowerment of women has become their focussed target. However, in practice, the empowerment agenda in gender development initiatives has only met with moderate success even though it has been adopted almost globally. Bangladesh is a country that has been internationally recognised for making enormous progress on many gender indicators as given by the United Nations[1]. 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 micro-finance sector too, has greatly expanded since the eighties, and has brought the country into the international limelight for gender development by focusing mainly on women as their beneficiaries. The garment industries, too, primarily employ women as workers. Thus, the development of Bangladesh has occurred in tandem with the

[1]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

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.

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. I am also interested in seeing 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. I conducted this analysis in the context of the developing and patriarchal society of Bangladesh.

Research Questions and Aims

My specific research questions and aims 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 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 women's some 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'.

<u>Literature Review: Competing Theoretical Perspectives</u>

This research study draws from various bodies of literature. It draws from literature on women's empowerment, capability theory, family justice, patriarchy, social identities, and gender-based violence. Here I highlight some of the most salient literature that I reviewed for this study. 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 Amartya 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 to pursue. (Nussbaum, 2001). Thus, in development theory a combination of this agency and capability is what constitutes an individual's 'power within'.

There are several definitions and elaborations of the concept of empowerment. Different scholars and institutions tailor the concept to fit their agendas. Most definitions highlight the expansion of resources and capacities as the crux of the concept. It is a commonly agreed upon feature of the concept of empowerment 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; Schuler et.al, 2010; Nussbaum, 2001; Allen, 1998). 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, 2007; Rowland, 1997; Nussbaum, 2001)

In this discussion of women's empowerment in developing societies, 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. (Kandiyoti, 1988) In such a system the masculine and feminine stereotypes are structured and shaped in ways that gender inequality and women's oppression not only persist but is 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. (Rawat, 2014; Kandiyoti,1988; Balzani, 2009)

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 individual's 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. Sen (2006) 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. 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.

In considering women's empowerment, within the context of development, the unit of familial household cannot be ignored. However, in the various debates between individual empowerment and collective empowerment, the familial household often

gets ignored. Yet, this is the site 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. (Okin, 1989; Nussbaum, 2001; Sen, 1987) An uniqueness of the household unit is, 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. (Kymlicka, 2001; Nussbaum, 2001) Due to 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 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.

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'. (Coomaraswamy, 2005; Heise et al, 2002; Hill, 2020; Balzani, 2009) 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. (Kabeer, 1994; McGee, 2016) 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 violence.

Contributions to the Literature and Gaps in the Literature

One important gap that this research study will potentially seek to fill 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. 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 time, women make conscious and reflective choices to curtail these freedoms. Does then the agency of women 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 and remains a gap in the literatures on both women's empowerment and gender-based violence. However, gender identity and social group identity and their complex interactions are interesting specifically when discussing empowerment which is aiming to change the structures that constitute the site in which these identities are defined and maintained. Women, like men, are not socially unencumbered individuals and neither 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 as 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 assert autonomy and decisions that are antithetical to individual wellbeing; etc, compete, if not conflict, with each other to

either embellish or enervate the understanding of empowerment. Thus, this thesis aims to contribute to the analysis of not only the complex nature of empowerment on the ground but also at a theoretical level.

<u>Methods of Enquiry</u>

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

The two main approaches which I use for this research 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. I used three types of methods for data collection for this research project: semi structured interviews, focus groups, and case study. Following the Grounded Theory Approach, I did the coding, translating, and transcribing of the data iteratively and the interpretation and analysis of the research occurred throughout the research process. 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 the data collection stage, I maintained detailed notes and drew from there not only when writing this chapter on methodology but also to provide descriptions of the context in the rest of the chapters. The ethical standards that I followed for this research are informed by the Belmont Report (1978). The ethical standards for collecting data for academic research with human subjects,

that I adhered to for this research study, as given by this report focused on three aspects-respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

Data, Sources and Evidence

As this is a qualitative research study, the data and evidence 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 from 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. The expanding micro-finance sector in Bangladesh since the nineteen eighties and the increasing popularity of the garment factory industry since the nineteen nineties in Bangladesh, put the country on the international map for committing 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 mostly women. 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, 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 are likely to lead to their empowerment. Some of the participants of this research are direct beneficiaries and some of them are inter-generational beneficiaries. 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 center for women working in garment factories and a college for nurses. The micro-finance institution organized three different research sites for me to conduct my interviews - rural, semi urban and urban with the urban site being in Karail, which is the largest informal settlement or 'slum' with over a 200,000 population in Dhaka. For my case study, I looked at The Grameen Caledonian College of Nursing (GCCN) in Dhaka.

Chapter Outlines

There are six chapters in this thesis, including the introduction, research methodology and conclusion.

In *Chapter one* which is the introductory chapter, I examine some of the different meanings attributed to the concept of empowerment, drawing out certain commonalities, irrespective of the side of the debates on empowerment that they come from. I elaborate on the contexts, including a literature review of development, patriarchy, families and households, and gender development in Bangladesh, within which the main arguments of this thesis are set. I, then, focus on certain indicators of empowerment, like agency and decision-making and alleviation of gender-based violence, and certain development interventions, like micro-finance and education, that form the basis of subsequent chapters in the thesis.

Chapter two is on the research process 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 perpetrates 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 interviewed 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 analyze 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 analyze 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 to changes to social structures in their favour.

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.

Major findings and contributions

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. Here, 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, says, "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 questions the position of women in the society within this context. She says, "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 says, "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 says, "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 agrees with her about achieving independence, but highlights the importance of identity for her. She also says 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 says, "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 when 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.

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. Thus, the same group of women would be interviewed in several times over a span of years. This would contribute to an understanding of how their situations and understandings change over their life-times. 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.

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