
Between Affiliation and Autonomy: Navigating Pathways of Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice in Rural Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Inasmuch as women's subordinate status is a product of the patriarchal structures of constraint that prevail in specific contexts, pathways of women's empowerment are likely to be 'path dependent'. They will be shaped by women's struggles to act on the constraints that prevail in their societies, as much by what they seek to defend as by what they seek to change. The universal value that many feminists claim for individual autonomy may not therefore have the same purchase in all contexts. This article examines processes of empowerment as they play out in the lives of women associated with social mobilization organizations in the specific context of rural Bangladesh. It draws on their narratives to explore the collective strategies through which these organizations sought to empower the women and how they in turn drew on their newly established 'communities of practice' to navigate their own pathways to wider social change. It concludes that while the value attached to social affiliations by the women in the study is clearly a product of the societies in which they have grown up, it may be no more context-specific than the apparently universal value attached to individual autonomy by many feminists.

CONCEPTUALIZING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: PATHWAYS AND PATH-DEPENDENCE

This article is concerned with the question of women's empowerment where empowerment is conceptualized in terms of multidimensional processes of change rather than some final destination. These processes touch on many aspects of women's lives, both personal and public: their sense of self-worth and social identity; their willingness and ability to question their subordinate status in society; their capacity to exercise strategic control over their own lives and to negotiate better terms in their relationships with others; and finally, their ability to participate on equal terms with men in reshaping society to better accord with their vision of social justice. Each of these

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changes is important in itself, but it is through their mutual interactions that the empowerment of individual women is most likely to translate into broader struggles for gender justice and social transformation.

The pathways through which processes of empowerment occur are neither predetermined nor random. They occur within specific contexts and are shaped by them. In particular, they are shaped by the gender-related structures of constraint which prevail in a given context. Since these structures influence the pace, substance and direction of social change, as well as defining areas of 'inertness', pathways of empowerment are generally characterized by a certain degree of path dependence. They carry the imprint of the societies in which they occur.

The aim of this article is to explore how processes of women's empowerment and broader struggles for gender justice have played out in the specific context of Bangladesh. By drawing on women's own accounts of these changes, it seeks to provide insights into what empowerment might mean in this particular context. There is no exact equivalent for the concept of empowerment in the local language. However, when women talk about forms of change in their lives that they value, and when these changes undermine the prevailing structures of patriarchy in some way, they are providing us with their own highly articulate narratives of empowerment, ones that are grounded in their local realities and everyday lives.

The structure of the article is as follows. The first section explores the gendered structures of constraint in the Bangladesh context, both to understand what gives these structures their resilience as well as to theorize about how they might shape the possible pathways of change. The second section documents the changing nature of state and society in Bangladesh. This includes a number of positive changes in women's lives, including processes of individual empowerment, but as the paper notes, there is little evidence to suggest that these changes have enabled women from poor rural households to articulate and act on their vision of social justice. One exception to this generalization suggested by the author's field research are women's groups organized by development NGOs committed to social change. It is the experiences of this subset of women that inform the analysis in this article. The third section then examines the impact of the strategies adopted by these organizations on women's capabilities as defined by their material position, their cognitive capacity and their relationships with others, while the fourth section explores how they have used their enhanced capabilities to take collective action against gender injustice. The concluding section draws out the theoretical implications of these findings. It suggests that the analysis of women's strategies for dealing with various manifestations of injustice in their lives provides important insights into the values and motivations which shape their efforts to navigate change in different domains of their lives. It notes that there are injustices which they are prepared to deal with through open confrontation but others where they seek compromise and conciliation. This caution on their part testifies to the uneven pace of

change in the wider structures of constraint and the risks associated with the pursuit of autonomy.

GENDER AND THE STRUCTURES OF CONSTRAINT

Identity, Consciousness and 'Patriarchal Risk'

The structures of constraint associated with family and kinship systems play a central role in shaping gender relations in South Asia, as in most other developing countries, but their constant interaction with the forces of states, markets and civil society mean that these structures have not remained static over time. A brief description of these structures in the Bangladesh context will serve to sketch out the 'initial conditions' which have helped to shape the subsequent pathways of change which are the focus of this article.

Family and kinship relations in Bangladesh have many features in common with the ideal-typical model of household arrangements described by Kandiyoti (1988) as 'classic patriarchy'. They are organized along corporate patriarchal lines, with authority vested in a senior male household head. Descent and property are transmitted through the male line, leaving women effectively without property and genealogically irrelevant. Patrilocal marital practices mean that they must leave their natal home on marriage to reside with their husband's family and become part of his patrilineal group. Their position within marriage is strongly bound up with their capacity to produce sons to carry on the family name and inherit the family property. *Purdah*, or female seclusion, restricts their mobility and opportunities in the public domain while simultaneously conferring on them the status of a protected group. The patriarchal contract that governs gender relations within the family spells out the implications of these norms and practices: 'While men have power and authority over women, they are also normatively obligated to provide them with food, clothing and shelter' (Cain et al., 1979: 408).

The overall consequences of these interacting constraints mean that not only is women's access to material resources extremely limited but their social interactions tend to be restricted to the 'given' relations of family and kinship. They remain dependent on male family members for much of their lives, passing from the responsibility of father to husband to son. This marked dependence on men for economic needs and social protection leaves women particularly vulnerable to what Cain et al. term 'patriarchal risk', the likelihood of abrupt declines in their economic welfare and social status should they find themselves bereft of male guardianship. The risks and uncertainties attendant on women's dependent status within such structures paradoxically engender in them greater incentives to comply with, rather than challenge, male dominance, and to manipulate the norms of male obligation and protection to shore up their own position within their families.

However, it is not only the strength of their material stake in the system that has kept women locked into a subordinate position. There are also strong ideological factors at play. Constructions of gender identity clearly take different forms in different contexts. As Keller (1986) points out, Western culture has stressed differences between men and women as almost mutually exclusive. Male individuality, and an almost 'mythical' ability to live without relatedness or interdependence with others, was seen to give rise to a 'separative' sense of self (cited by Nelson, 1996: 16). For women, on the other hand, the stress was on 'relatedness', the construction of identities in terms of the relations of marriage and family. While men envisaged themselves as individual actors, women became wives and mothers as symbolized by their adoption of their husband's name after marriage (Nelson, 1996). Struggles for gender justice in these societies have long been framed by women's quest for autonomy, 'freedom *from* patriarchal oppression and *to* realise their "own" powers' and for recognition of their rights as individuals (Code, 2000: 36, italics in original; see also England, 2000).

A somewhat different account of identity and selfhood emerges in contexts where the processes of socialization are built around *interdependence* rather than *separation* as the basis of gender roles and responsibilities. Joseph's work in Lebanon has a wider resonance in these contexts. It suggests a connective notion of selfhood for men as well as women, 'one that sees itself embedded in others and fosters relationality as a central charter of selfhood' (Joseph, 1997: 86). This notion of selfhood gives rise to 'relational' understanding of claims and obligations, as generated through, and embedded within, the significant social relationships of kinship, family and community. However, inasmuch as these are essentially patriarchal relationships, they act as the taken-for-granted conduits through which power and privilege flow towards men and elders within the community. Nor is the salience of these relationships confined to the personal domain. They pervade all domains of society, rendering irrelevant the idea of an impersonal public sphere in which individuals enter as bearers of rights, equal in the eyes of the law.

Such constructions of gender identities and relationships are likely to have significant implications for processes of women's empowerment and struggles for gender justice. It is not simply, as Kandiyoti (1988) suggested, that women may actively resist individual rights if these are seen to undermine the traditional protections that accompany their dependent status within the family.¹ It is also possible that they do not view these social arrangements as necessarily *unjust*. As Basu (1996: 56–57) has argued:

the force of custom and norm cannot be too strongly stressed. The standard defence that much that is unfortunate about women's status reflects a conscious preference by women in this society is, at least superficially, valid. The internalisation of norms over generations means

1. See Kandiyoti (1998) for a revised version of her earlier analysis.

that subjective perceptions about inequality and subordination need have no connection with an outsider's views on these matters. And nor is it clear that one view is more real than the other. It is only in certain clearly defined and agreed upon goals such as an equal right to life, for example, that there can be any universal ethic. For the rest, the kind of modernisation and westernisation which lead to a questioning of existing norms about female subordination and the valuation of autonomy over, say, economic security need not have any kind of universal appeal.

Between Affiliation and Autonomy: Associational Pathways to Social Change

Such views pose a major challenge for feminist concerns with women's empowerment and gender justice. The recognition of injustice must clearly precede struggles for justice but if injustices are ingrained in the social relationships that construct women's sense of self and security within their communities, they are likely to be ingrained in women's gendered subjectivities, 'the very stuff that consciousness is made of' (Kandiyoti, 1987: 335). How then is it possible for women to recognize and deal with the injustices embedded in the social relationships that define their identities and give meaning to their lives without at the same time negating or undermining these relationships?

One way out of this conundrum is provided by Benhabib (1992). She notes that one of the key insights of Habermas's procedural theory of justice is precisely the importance of social relationships in the construction of identity and consciousness: 'The "I" becomes an "I" only among a "we" in a community of speech and action. Individuation does not precede association; rather it is the kinds of associations we inhabit that define the kind of individuals we become' (Benhabib, 1992: 71). However, as she goes on to argue, acknowledging the value and significance of social relationships in people's lives is very different from an uncritical acceptance of the 'station and duties in life' ascribed by them. However socially embedded women — and men — may be in the relationships of family, kin and community, it is in principle possible for them to attain a reflexive distance from these relationships, a critical vantage point from which to evaluate them. If it is through the 'given' relationships of family and kinship, the 'communities of birth', that women gain their sense of identity and personhood, then it is through participation in alternative forms of associational life that they can acquire a reflexive vantage point from which to evaluate these relationships. Such 'chosen' communities may embody their own forms of inequality but if they expand women's knowledge, information and interactions with others, they can allow a critical re-assessment of what was hitherto accepted as the natural order of things and open up the possibility of alternative ways of living that were hitherto inconceivable (Kabeer, 1999).

What is appealing about this conceptualization is that it implies a sense of self and identity that is not predetermined and fixed by cultural norms but shifting and fluid, constantly in the process of construction and

reconstruction through the social interactions of everyday life. It allows for the possibility that the expansion of women's sphere of social interactions will not necessarily lead to a rupture with the past. It allows for the possibility that any change that occurs may be uneven, with a greater desire for change in some domains than others (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007). Equally, it accommodates the possibility that certain kinds of interactions can strengthen women's capacity to recognize and articulate what they consider to be unjust, to decide what action to take and through their actions, come to formulate their vision of a better society.

Alternative forms of association have occurred in a number of different ways in the Bangladesh context. The emergence of market-generated opportunities has drawn women into the public sphere of work and new economic relationships (Dannecker, 2002; Mahmud and Kabeer, 2006), while state policies have created openings in local government and social service delivery systems (Goetz, 2001). However, the main focus of this paper is on the associations set up by the country's socially oriented development NGOs. An overwhelming majority of development NGOs have adopted group-based approaches which have generated widespread possibilities for 'chosen' forms of associations in the lives of women from low income households in Bangladesh. What distinguishes the socially oriented organizations among them is that they set out to create 'communities of practice' for their members on the basis of regular discussion and dialogue about matters of concern to them, from the practicalities of everyday life to the nature of the society they live in. The notion of 'communities of practice' has been most influential in the field of education, but has also been extended to other fields of social science analysis. It is useful for capturing what we are talking about here because of its focus on the construction of identity, affiliation and meaning on the basis of shared reflective practices (Wenger, 1998).

ECONOMY AND GOVERNANCE IN BANGLADESH: A SOCIETY IN FLUX

Bangladesh acquired independence from Pakistan in 1971 after a traumatic war of liberation. After a brief period of democracy, the country came under military rule in 1976. The literature from this period documents the challenges it faced in its struggle for development. A highly unequal distribution of land and other valued resources gave rise to a powerful landed elite on the one hand, and, on the other, a large class of landless households whose primary asset was their labour power (Alamgir, 1978; Siddiqui, 1982). The limited and uneven spread of markets and their segmentation meant that landless labourers were to be found in a limited range of livelihood activities, primarily sharecropping and agricultural wage labour. The interconnections between the rural elite and the state apparatus allowed these inequalities to be reproduced in the distribution of public resources through

governance systems characterized by pervasive corruption and rent-seeking (Adnan, 1990).

The weakness of state and market institutions led to widespread reliance on social networks and connections at every level of society. Poor and marginalized groups could only participate in such networks on extremely asymmetrical terms, depriving them of independent voice and agency which reduced them to the status of highly dependent clients. The pervasiveness of patron–client relationships served to fragment such groups, pitting them against each other and preventing the emergence of horizontal solidarities which could be mobilized to defend and promote their interests (BRAC, 1983; Hartmann and Boyce, 1983).

The analysis of gender relations in these early years was equally pessimistic. It documented a society in which the structures of patriarchal constraint played out in conditions of extreme poverty and widespread illiteracy. While families continued to be organized along corporate patriarchal lines, extended structures were giving way to nuclear forms under the pressure of growing landlessness (Adnan, 1988; Cain et al., 1979). Village exogamy meant that women not only married outside their kin but also outside their natal village. Marriage thus cut them off both from their natal families and the communities in which they had grown up.

The practice of purdah added to their social isolation. While wealthy families could afford to keep their women in purdah, poorer women who were in desperate need of income had to restrict themselves to economic activities within or near the homestead. The earlier practice of bride wealth which favoured the bride and her family in marriage transactions gave way in the second half of the twentieth century to dowry which favoured the groom's side (Blei, 1990). This further reinforced women's devalued economic status, turning daughters into a major economic liability for their parents and strengthening the prevailing culture of son preference (Lindenbaum, 1981).

This period saw growing instability of marital relations and the increased incidence of polygamy, divorce, separation and abandonment, particularly among the poorer households (Ahmad and Naher, 1987; Alam, 1985). As Cain et al. (1979: 408, 432) pointed out, '(T)he normative obligations of men towards women — the principal protection women have against loss of status have probably never been universally honoured, but there are indications that, under the pressure of increasing poverty, male normative commitment has eroded. . . as the bonds of obligation between kin erode under the pressure of poverty, the risk of precipitous decline in status increases'. Their prognosis of the likelihood of change in gender relations was gloomy: 'The systemic nature of patriarchy suggests that solutions to the problem of women's vulnerability and lack of income-earning opportunities will not be easily reached' (Cain et al., 1979: 434).

In actual fact, important changes were already underway. Intensive family planning efforts on the part of the government had led to a dramatic decline in fertility. Economic growth overtook the growth in population and poverty

began to decline (Sen, 2001). A network of non-governmental organizations founded in the devastating liberation war to carry out relief and rehabilitation evolved into development organizations working largely with the poor, and increasingly with women. The proliferation of NGO-led micro-credit delivery almost exclusively targeted at groups of poorer women and the emergence of an export garment industry that favoured a female work force contributed to the monetization of women's economic contributions and their greater visibility in the public domain. The establishment of democratic processes in 1991, albeit on a very fragile basis, provided further impetus to a number of other positive interventions, particularly in relation to girls' education, legal action on domestic violence, quotas for women in local government and high levels of female voter turnout (Azim and Sultan, 2010; World Bank, 2007).

However, while the country as a whole has made considerable progress on the development front, there has been little or no progress on the governance front, regardless of the regime in power (Sobhan, 2000; Wood, 2000). Indeed, Bangladesh was classified as the world's most corrupt country for five consecutive years by Transparency International during a period of civilian rule. In a context where the large mass of citizens find themselves unable to engage as active citizens beyond periodic voting, the additional constraints of patriarchy mean that women have found it even more difficult to articulate a collective voice around their needs, interests and rights. The development NGOs who work with poorer sections of the population might have been expected to create the impetus for such engagement, particularly as most of them target women, but the vast majority of them have gravitated towards service provision, predominantly micro-credit provision. Their impacts have been restricted to changes at the individual level with little evidence of a collective struggle for social justice (Hashemi et al., 1996; Kabeer et al., 2010; Khandker, 1999).

One exception to this generalization appears to be a number of socially-oriented NGOs with an explicit commitment to a social justice agenda. This was suggested in research carried out by the author into the meanings and expressions of citizenship as articulated by members of various associations of the working poor in Bangladesh.² An analysis of the accounts provided by members of trade unions, microfinance organizations and social mobilization organizations made it clear that it was those associated with the latter category that reported any awareness of their rights or the willingness to act in pursuit of them.³ A closer reading of the interviews with the women from these organizations revealed important insights into changes that they had generally experienced as empowering and which they attributed to their association with the organization. The motivation for the present paper is to

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2. This earlier research was carried out under the DFID-funded Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability based at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex.
 3. Published in Kabeer with Huq Kabir (2009).

conduct a detailed re-analysis of these interviews in order to develop more fully the insights they provide into the different ways in which the organizations in question sought to build women's capacity for reflective practice and how the women in turn translated their enhanced capacity into collective action against gender injustice.

A Note on Methodology

The larger study from which this paper draws its interview material was intended as a qualitative exploration of the meanings and expressions of citizenship reported by members of different associations of the working poor. This is a topic that is still under-researched in the context of Bangladesh and no attempt was made to draw up a representative sample.⁴ Members of these organizations were identified by a research team through a variety of methods: discussions with organizational staff, 'cold calling' and introductions provided by the interviewees themselves. Preference was given to longer-standing members. The interviews were based on a loose life history approach in order to locate their experience with NGOs in the larger context of their lives. The interviews were taped with the permission of the respondents and assurance of confidentiality.

This article draws on interviews with thirty-one women members of four socially-oriented development NGOs. Of these, five from BRAC, nine from Nijera Kori (NK) and seven from Samata were interviewed⁵ over three months in 2006, forming part of the early phase of the larger research project. Saptagram was subsequently added as an example of an organization that had an explicitly feminist agenda in its efforts to mobilize women. Ten women from Saptagram were interviewed over the period of a month in 2008.⁶

The four organizations that feature in this study had a great deal in common in their early years. All of them were established in the 1970s in the aftermath of the war of independence. They were set up by Bangladeshis but dependent on external financial support, initially from international NGOs and progressive donors and foundations, subsequently from the official donor community. All four were motivated by a strong class-based analysis of poverty, seeing it as a product of the unfair distribution of the means of production and channels of influence in society. While Saptagram started out with an explicitly feminist analysis of class, the other organizations

4. However, as part of the larger study, a survey was subsequently carried out on the impacts of a number of socially oriented and microfinance organizations using a randomly selected sample (Kabeer et al., 2010). The findings confirm the basic premise of this paper that socially oriented organizations were far more likely to promote struggles around rights and citizenship than microfinance organizations.

5. With the assistance of Ariful Huq Kabir.

6. With the assistance of Lopita Huq, Saiful Islam and Kobita Chowdhury.

integrated gender into their analysis over the years. All four had a common focus on the poor and landless sections of the rural population, followed a group-based approach in their activities, used livelihoods as their entry point into group formation and included an explicit concern with the rights and entitlements of the poor as a part of their agenda.

There were also some differences. BRAC and Saptagram worked primarily with women's groups. NK and Samata, by contrast, have always organized both men and women. Almost from the outset, micro-credit occupied a central role in BRAC's strategy and has become increasingly important over time. The other three organizations opted for a savings-led approach, encouraging their groups to rely on their own self-generated resources rather than externally provided funds. Groups saved on a weekly basis in amounts that were collectively agreed and decided together how the money was to be utilized.

All four organizations provided training of various kinds. BRAC's training was strongly influenced by its microfinance programme and put a great deal of emphasis on entrepreneurial skills, but it also provided inputs on social issues and literacy. For the other three organizations, popular education along Freirian lines to raise individual awareness and collective capabilities constituted the core of their organizational strategies and the main focus of their activities.

Despite significant commonalities in the early years, the organizations have evolved along different trajectories. Saptagram ran into organizational problems by the end of the 1990s, closing down for a period and then re-emerging as a much reduced version of its former self. Samata is currently struggling to survive while NK faces constant funding problems as official donors do not favour organizations with no obvious service delivery function. Only BRAC has flourished to become one of the largest NGOs in the developing world with a strong focus on service delivery, particularly microcredit (Smillie, 2009).

NGO STRATEGIES AND THE DYNAMICS OF EMPOWERMENT

This section examines the strategies used by the four organizations to bring about change in the lives of their members. The fact that they began in the 1970s committed to a radical agenda of social transformation meant not only that they were among the earliest in the field but that they were also among the first to take a developmental approach to tackling the structures of class and patriarchy in the Bangladesh countryside. The strategies they adopted can be analysed in terms of the material, cognitive and relational resources generated in the lives of their members. While each of the resources impacted on women's capacity for strategic agency in ways that reflected the nature of the resource in question, the changes coalesced to produce

different 'moments' in the multi-stranded pathways of empowerment that feature in the women's narratives.

The Material Dimensions of Empowerment: 'I Don't Give a Hoot About The Rich'

The economic entry point taken by all four organizations had both pragmatic and political rationales. The pragmatic rationale was that daily survival needs occupied a central place in the daily lives and livelihood efforts of poor people and that one way to motivate them to organize for development purposes was through the provision of material benefits. The political rationale was the belief that as long as poor men and women were dependent on the good will and patronage of wealthy families to meet their daily basic needs, their ability to challenge unjust social arrangements would be muted by their fear of the possible consequences.

Although development NGOs have now become a familiar presence in the Bangladesh countryside, this should not detract from the fact that in the early years, they represented a major break with the relationships of patronage, deference and hierarchy that dominated rural communities. The decision to join these organizations was fraught with risk, particularly for women. It required them to step outside their traditional domestic roles, carrying the possibility of resistance and rejection from their own families as well as the wider community. It was important from the organizational standpoint that their activities did not alienate women from their families, particularly their husbands, since very few women would have considered membership if it threatened their place within the family.

The women's recollections of the attempts by the organizations to persuade them to put aside their reservations suggest the predominance of two kinds of arguments, both appealing to their material interests. The first appealed to women's interests in the context of the family economy. For instance, the BRAC worker had told Nurban: 'Now you have to depend on your husband for every little thing you need. If you could have the patience to save a little bit of money every week, you could meet your own needs and you will be valued in the family. Your husband will no longer regard you with a sullen face'. Tara was drawn by the discipline of joint savings:

When Ruma first came from the office, she told me that Saptagram worked with samitis. She said that ten or fifteen women got together and saved small sums of money every week. The money stayed with the samity and could be used to meet a need or to generate a profit. I thought to myself, this is not a bad idea.

The other set of arguments appealed to women's sense of class injustice. For women like Aleya who had to work for a living in the homes of affluent families, there had not been much time to dwell on the fairness of the wage she received: 'We used to work the whole day, then go to sleep after cooking

some little food at night and then start work again the next morning'. This began to change through her conversations with NK. They led her to question the privileges of those with wealth and power and their ability to compel women like her to work for sixteen hours a day for wages that barely covered her survival needs.

For other women, their experience of class injustice was most painful when it affected their children. Aleya (Samata) told us:

Before when a poor man's child would make a trifling mistake, he would be tied to a tree and beaten with a stick. Whereas if a rich man's child did the same thing, he would be told, 'Son, this is something wrong you have done. It is alright but don't do it in the future' and they would be comforted.

The formation of groups, the practice of saving, the possibility of fairer returns to their labour, all these held out the promise that they could make more of a contribution to the family budget and provide a better future for their children. Once women had decided to join, they had to deal with possible resistance from their families and communities. Some of the women in Saptagram approached the organization to form men's groups so that their husbands would have a better understanding of what the organization was about. While men's groups never made up more than 10 per cent of Saptagram's membership, its willingness to work with them probably made the lives of women members easier. Others told us how they had taken their husbands along to the NGO office to meet with the staff. They believed that once their husbands saw that these organizations were run by educated and respectable people, they would accept that their wives were not doing anything 'bad'.

While some husbands were agreeable to their wives' membership from the outset, others came round subsequently and often became active supporters of their wives' activities. A common factor behind this turnaround in husbands' attitudes was the realization that the material benefits of women's participation would ease the pressure on them as primary breadwinners for their families. The views of most of the women in our sample leave no doubt that they gave considerable value to the material gains they made. Although generally not sufficient to lift their households out of poverty, they did a great deal to temper the humiliations of the various dependency relationships in their lives.

Komola (Saptagram) used group savings to buy livestock and reduce her reliance on the patronage of the rich for work: 'Now that I have an income, I don't go to the rich person's house or give two hoots about them, I can do without them. I earn and feed myself'. For Aleya (NK), increased income brought self-reliance, status and voice within both family and the wider society: 'If I have money, I can meet the needs of the stomach, I can buy a new sari and keep it in stock, I can go into society and speak out holding my head high. I can send my children to school. But if I have no land or money, I cannot speak'.

Rokeya had faced strong opposition from her father to the idea of his daughter working for a living on the grounds of family prestige. Today she takes pride in the work she is able to do: 'I learnt this from Saptagram. I bought a cow, I go to the field and cut grass for the cow myself. I hoe the weed from the land myself. I have been able to stand on my own feet'. Jaharana (Saptagram) spoke of the knock-on effects of women's greater economic agency on relationships within the family: 'No man in this village ever made a land deed in their wives' names but now they are registering deposit savings schemes and insurance policies in their wives' names'.

The Cognitive Dimensions of Empowerment: 'We were in a Dark Room with Our Eyes Closed'

Women explained their past failure to protest myriad injustices that made up their daily lives in the context of Bangladesh in terms of their fear of the consequences but also, in some cases, acquiescence to their place in the social order:

...we did not protest even when there was a lot of injustice and oppression in our village. We were afraid of the chairman, the village leaders and elected members. We couldn't even see any reason to protest. After all, they were our village leaders, we used to honour them. We used to think that arguing with the chairman meant committing an offence. (Jobeda, NK)

According to Aleya (NK), 'Before we did not realize we were human beings as well'.

All four organizations in our study had been influenced by Freire's (1972) analysis of the 'culture of silence' that frequently surrounds the injustices meted out to the poor. They had adapted Freire's ideas about functional literacy to the Bangladesh context in order to generate discussions among their group members that ranged from their immediate practical concerns to the nature of the society they lived in. What was loosely referred to as 'training' by the organizations was a far more interactive process than the mechanical transfer of information often implied by the term. Changes in awareness did not take the form of a one-off shift in thinking. They occurred through on-going processes of learning, reflection, action, experience, observation and analysis, reflective forms of practice generally absent in lives that were dominated by the struggle for survival.

In some cases, the awareness that women gained through these courses had a transformative impacts on their lives. As Rokeya put it: 'We were in a dark room with our eyes closed. Saptagram came and opened our eyes. It gave us strength'. However, even lessons related to the practicalities of daily existence contained within them the possibilities of other ways of living:

They told us how to keep our houses clean, to drink tube well water, to have iodized salt, drink purified water, how to make saline solution for diarrhoea, to use proper latrines. . . . We also learnt how to keep our children clean and about the problems of child marriage. We were given training on adolescents. What kinds of health problems they are likely to have, how they should move around, how tolerant their parents should be with them. Now I treat my children with trust. I have taught this to others, that instead of always scolding their children, they should handle them with love. (Jahanara, Saptagram)

Jahanara also told us about the dramas they used to enact to promote awareness within their village community:

A woman is cooking rice, her husband comes home and starts beating her with a stick, asking why the cooking isn't done. . . . There are many men in this village who abuse their wives. We wanted to send the message that this cannot continue. Both have to work together. Wives don't just sit at home while their husbands work outside. Taking care of cattle, doing household work, looking after the children; they do it all. If the husband comes home and lends a helping hand, he will be supporting her. Then they can finish the work quickly, bathe, eat together and then rest. Nowadays husbands in villages don't beat their wives so much. They realize that their wives also work.

Hawa (Saptagram) had learnt to value her own contributions to her family and to demand respect for it from others:

Husbands would come, eat the meals we cooked and then go out again. If there was any change from this norm, there would be abuse and violence. Now I have learnt about our rights: "You come home after working outside, I have also been working at home all day. I took the cow out, gave it food, I cleaned the house, cooked, washed the dishes. This is not easy work, I was not just sitting around. On what basis can you get angry with me?"

Shanti believed that she had learnt more from her membership of BRAC than from her formal education:

If there had been no BRAC, I would not have learnt about the usefulness of different plants. I have learnt that a tree is the dearest friend of a human being. The education I got earlier told me that my only duty was to serve my husband after my marriage. But a woman has so much she can do besides serving her husband. A woman can work as hard as a male.

According to Rahima, Saptagram had taught the most important lessons of her life:

I have learnt how to stand on my own two feet from Saptagram, the value of unity, how to overcome problems, how to mix with people, how to sign my name. And I have learnt about our rights. Now I understand that I have the same rights as my husband. I didn't get rights earlier and I cannot say that I get them all even now. But at least I now know what they are and I can teach my children. . . . Whether I get my rights or not, I can still demand them.

Another outcome of these collective learning processes that featured in a number of narratives was the ability to distinguish between justice and injustice, to reason with others, to help resolve conflict. As Komola (NK) explained, this had translated into greater confidence in her dealings with the world:

We learnt how to do arbitration in disputes. If a husband is beating the daylights out of his wife, five of us women go there and warn him not to make trouble. Because we took this training for arbitration, we are able to talk like this. I could not have done this earlier. I did not have the courage to talk to people then. Now I am able to tell myself and others what the right course of action should be. Earlier if I saw a group of people sitting together, I did not have the courage to go up to them and say anything. Now even if there are 100 people sitting together, I can go up to them and have my say. Earlier, if we saw a policeman on the road, we would run away. Now even if we go to court, we can talk to policemen there.

The Relational Dimensions of Empowerment: ‘One Stick can be Broken, a Bundle of Sticks Cannot’

The other fundamental change that the organizations brought about in the lives of their members was the expansion of the social relationships open to them. Material incentives may have provided the initial impetus that brought these groups together but it was sharing life experiences and seeking solutions to common problems that kept them together and built them into the communities of practice that we referred to earlier. These communities were built up over a sustained period of time through regular face-to-face interactions between group members around a variety of purposes: savings and credit activities, training, conflict resolution and various forms of collective action. As one Samata member put it, ‘Regular meetings keep the samity alive. If we met every two months, our samity would lose its vitality’. Those who had known each before forming a group believed that this collective experience had changed the nature of their relationships with each other. As Mossamet put it:

Being BRAC members, the people of the group have developed strong, intimate relationships. They knew each other before, but the closeness was not like this. Now, if any member is in trouble, we try to help them. If one person has financial trouble, we all pool donations and try to help her. If anyone tries to harm one of the group members then our whole group would protest against this unfair situation.

Jobeda from NK made a similar point:

The people in our Bhumihien Samity knew each other from the very beginning. However due to our association with the samity, our views towards each other got changed. Earlier we did not use to share each others’ problems. But now we have got united, we have formed groups, hence each one’s problems influences the other. . .we all take care of each other.

The building of group solidarity was not without problems and setbacks. There were references to groups that had dissolved as a result of internal conflict, complaints about the failure of the male leadership to speak out in favour of women’s rights, quarrels and betrayals. But a more general theme running through the women’s narratives was the value they gave to their bonds with each other and what it represented in the different domains of their lives. It had proved to be an important source of strength in helping

them to face the hostility of the community in the early years. It continued to be a source of strength in their struggles to exercise political influence. As Tara recalled:

There were so many barriers in those days and so much loose talk. Many religious people came to stop us. They said things like, “Wives and daughters can’t go to the field, crops don’t grow if women go to the field”. But how many of them are there? We have the numbers. How did Khaleda Zia and Begum Hasina become rulers of this country? Through us. So who do the matobbers now come to for their power? To us, right? Without our support, how can they have power?

Others also spoke of the importance of group solidarity in terms of both their everyday needs as well as their struggles in the political domain. Shanti (BRAC) said:

One stick can be broken, a bundle of sticks cannot. It is not possible to achieve anything on one’s own. You have no value on your own. Now if I am ill, my samity members will look after me. Moreover to establish your rights you need to struggle, you need to be united. If I want to stand in an election, I would need support for that, to vote for me, to run my campaign. Can I make myself valuable on my own? I cannot. No matter how big you think yourself, you have to win support.

It was also evident that this sense of solidarity was not confined to group members, that it influenced some of the men in their families as well. Shanti (Saptagram) offered an example of this:

Once a mullah came to our village to preach. He said that Bangladesh has been destroyed because of women, that there is more corruption because of women, that poverty has increased because of women, that if women walk across a field it catches on fire. Some of us had gone to hear his preaching. When he started talking about women, a number of us women got together. We confronted the mullah and asked him whether he was not borne by a woman. And does everything happen because of women and nothing because of men? One of our brothers caught me and clapped my mouth shut and sent us home, telling us that he won’t talk anymore about women. We did go home, but our husbands who had now become aware stood up and warned the mullah not to speak that way about women. They said the world cannot exist without women. Were you not borne of a woman? They created trouble and stopped the man from preaching. This could happen because of our group.

COLLECTIVE ACTION AGAINST GENDER INJUSTICE

The preceding section dealt with some of the changes that membership of NGO groups had brought about in the lives of individual women. As some of the accounts cited have indicated, they were able to use their enhanced capacity for agency to take collective action against various instances of injustice in their lives. Such actions were most frequently reported in relation to forms of injustice in the domain of marriage and family, followed by injustices relating to formal and informal structures of governance. They were least frequently reported in relation to the market domain. One of the ways in which struggles for change can be seen to be ‘path-dependent’ is in this

ordering since it reflects the relative significance of these different domains in women's everyday lives. At the same time, it was also in relation to marriage and family matters that their responses were at their most contradictory, frequently combining public confrontation with private compromise.

Contesting Injustice in the Economic Domain

Collective action against injustice occurred least frequently in the economic domain because while membership of NGO groups had brought valued economic gains for many members and expanded their mobility in the public domain, it had done little to challenge the marked gender segmentation of the economy. The women in our sample were still largely concentrated in informal economic activities that could be carried out in or around their homes. These offered little scope for collective action around economic rights.

There were a number of exceptions to this pattern. The most important were associated with Samata and NK whose members had been engaged in prolonged struggles over their rights to *khas* land (unutilized public land). These had been designated to landless households by government decree in the 1970s but had been illegally occupied by local power-holders. Many of the landless had not been aware of their entitlements before the organizations came along and were, in any case, powerless to claim them. It was through their association with these organizations that they learnt about their entitlements and engaged in prolonged collective struggles to realize them. This had often brought them into direct, often violent, confrontation with the armed musclemen sent by land-grabbing industrialists.

The active involvement of women from Samata and NK in these struggles helped to highlight the failure of their organizations to foreground the gender dimensions of class injustices in their analysis and strategies. These women stood alongside their men in confrontations that often turned violent only to find that the government ruling about the rights of landless groups did not extend to women. It was their protests at this blatant injustice that led Samata and NK to take up their cause with the government and to successfully demand the right to joint registration of land.

The experience had a profound impact on some of the women involved. Nasima related how the struggle had crystallized her own thinking about women's land rights. She recalled how her grandfather had willed his 30 bighas of land to his two sons, thereby depriving his daughters, including her mother: 'In a case where a father can deprive his daughters, what are the guarantees that a husband would not do the same to his wife?'. The *khas* land allocated to her household had been registered in her husband's name, but if the opportunity arose again, she would insist that it was jointly registered. In the meanwhile, she had managed to persuade her own father to write half of any land he had acquired over his own lifetime in his wife's name:

My father did not agree at first, though I have only one brother. But both my mother and my father have been toiling hard and so any land he buys from their income should be shared with my mother. My father is a very peaceful, simple man. If a person like him does not easily want to surrender any ownership to his wife, what will other men do?

Women's participation in land struggles also had an impact on some of the men within their families. Male members of these organizations had generally agreed to let women from their family form their own groups because they had seen it simply as a way of allowing women to engage in savings activities which would in any case benefit the family. But when they found that their wives were willing to stand alongside them against the violent tactics of the land-grabbers, that they courted arrest and were beaten along with the men, a number of them underwent a change in their attitudes. The experience laid bare to them the extent to which they themselves had internalized social norms about women's inferiority. Abdur Rahman told us:

Before joining Samata, I hardly recognized women's roles. We really had no idea that women worked as hard as we did in running the family. Now I realize that our family is a result of our joint effort. When we received two bighas of land in 1994, it was in both our names. . . because I now believe that land should be allotted jointly in the name of both husband and wife.

Akkas was similarly influenced by his experiences with Samata:

In the past, I used to behave badly with my wife, I used to beat her if I did not get my meals on time. But during our movement I saw women help us in so many ways. They were behind us with bricks, pebbles, water and food. . . They had so much love and affection for us. How then could we not show them affection in return? Everyone associated with Samata regards women as human beings.

He had registered the *khas* land allocated to his family jointly with his wife as well as registering half of a small parcel of land he had purchased in her sole name.

None of the other examples of collective action around economic rights had the life-and-death quality of the struggles over land, but they nevertheless served to challenge social norms about female seclusion and dependency in a very public way. For example, both Saptagram and Samata had successfully ensured that women were given a share of the public works employment carried out in their areas, while NK members working in a weaving factory had led a strike to increase the meagre rates they received for filling yarn rolls.

Contesting Injustice in the Governance Domain

A second category of collective action around issues of injustice related to various aspects of governance in rural areas: the distribution of public goods and services, the dispensation of justice and engagement in the political

process. Group members frequently adopted a monitoring role to oversee the distribution of public goods and services so as to ensure that they went to the intended beneficiaries rather than disappearing into the patronage networks of elected officials. While these actions were motivated, in the first instance, by self-interest, over time, they began to mobilize on behalf of others within the community.

Maleka Begum (NK) invoked her constitutional rights to explain why her group had taken collective action to protest the flawed provision of health care in her area:

Each citizen in this society has five fundamental rights but we do not enjoy these rights. There is no proper treatment or medicine in hospitals. We have demonstrated in Maizdi town demanding our rights and protesting against the corruption of doctors and theft of public medicine. So now when they hear at the hospital that someone is from our Landless Association, they give them a bit more respect.

Aleya (NK) believed that greater awareness about gender inequality had translated into active pressure to promote the socio-economic rights of girls and women:

We have to establish the rights of women all over Bangladesh, not only in our area. In our area, we talk to those families who only send their sons to school. We ask them to send their daughters as well. We even make arrangements for her notebooks, pen, school fee and books, which are essential to go to school. Before the teachers were not taking classes regularly; but now we monitor and take information about their attendance, regularities and class performances.

Rohima (Saptagram) described how her group made it their business to keep track of government programmes and services:

We go to the Social Welfare office, to the TNO office to find out when the Vulnerable Group Development cards and the old age pension cards are going to come. We go to the union members to find out how we can get sanitary latrines. We keep in touch with the chairman and union members to show where the tube-well should be located so that most people benefit from it. . . We know where the blind and the deaf can get an education, where someone can get disability stipend. We know what to do if there is an acid attack. We know where we can get justice.

Training in arbitration and dispute resolution had stood the women in good stead in seeking justice. Many of them now participated actively in the *shalish*, village level dispute resolution forums. In the past, women had rarely attended shalish. Their only involvement had been when they were accused of some moral impropriety when mullahs were frequently brought to pronounce on their behaviour (Adnan, 1988; Chen, 1983).

It is precisely in relation to these instances that women are now most active in the shalish, frequently convening their own proceedings because of their lack of faith in the traditional forms. As Zobeda (NK) explained, blatant gender bias had served to discredit the traditional shalish proceedings

in the eyes of poorer women: 'Now nobody approaches the village leaders because they do not deliver justice. Because women cannot be of any help to village leaders, they do not see any fault in men. They have their own yardstick and take the side of whoever is strong'. Women's presence in the shalish marked a clear break with the past. Asked if village leaders objected to women's participation in shalish, Tara responded: 'Do you think that the days when you could shout at women are still here?'

Membership of NGO associations appeared to be acting as a seedbed for grassroots leadership in the countryside. Members, both men and women, were sought by others for advice and information and for support in accessing social services or standing up to injustice. This role has taken on an increasingly political form with the restoration of democracy in 1991, the decentralization of government to the local level and new provisions since 1997 which allow women to be directly elected to reserved seats at the local level (in place of the previous practice of nomination). Years of activism have made NGO group members credible candidates in these elections.

A number of the women in our sample had successfully contested local elections. This had brought them into a new terrain of struggle as they found themselves confronting the prejudices entrenched in what had hitherto been an exclusively male domain. According to Habiba (NK), 'Women in the Union Parishad council are treated as inferior because they are women. Neither the chairman nor the other male members give us any responsibilities'. Her response to this treatment was testimony to the experience she had gained as an NK member. She examined the official documents relating to roles and responsibilities of elected officials and found that one of the elected female representatives was supposed to chair the committee for the VGD scheme and the pension allowances. She called a meeting of other elected women from eleven wards in her union and got them to agree that they would withhold their signatures from all documents until they were given their proper responsibilities.

Jomila (NK) also had to deal with similar treatment from elected officials, but was less successful in gaining a voice within the union parishad. The male members in the council ignored the women and the other two elected women kept silent most of the time. Being the lone female voice on the council was a thankless task but she persevered. She fought to ensure that women officials were given their due responsibilities, including the distribution of VGD cards, but failed. However, she had been re-elected and promised to fight on.

Contesting Injustice in the Domain of Family and Kinship

The effects of women's dependent status are felt most directly and personally within the domain of family and kinship. These have acquired new forms in tandem with changes in the wider society. As we noted earlier, the pressure

of poverty has been eroding the norms governing male behaviour within the family. This was evident in the impunity with which they were able to make exorbitant, and continued, demands for dowry, beat their wives, divorce them at will, take on other wives or simply abandon their families. There also appeared to be a rising incidence of public forms of violence against women, including rape, assault, acid throwing⁷ and the punitive use of *fatwas* to enforce women's moral conduct.

It was evident from the women's accounts that they were able to use their increased organizational capabilities to constitute themselves as a countervailing force to these manifestations of gender injustice. At the same time there was a degree of ambivalence in their responses which was missing in their responses to injustice in the other domains. In particular, there was a marked contrast between women's response to institutionalized forms of injustice in the public domain, which they openly opposed, and their dealings with inter-personal injustices where their responses were mixed and often contradictory.

Almost all the women we spoke to had taken a public stand against gender-based violence. The case of Yasmin, who had been raped and murdered by the police in Dinajpur, had generated a high level of publicity and mobilization at both national and local levels. Jobeda (NK) told us:

We organized mass gatherings to protest her death here in Rangpur because Yasmin was a woman, we are also women. . . who can guarantee the same thing will not happen in other districts of Bangladesh? If we protest what happens in a far-away place like Dinajpur, those who would commit the same crimes against women here in Rangpur would be deterred.

Other cases of the rape and murder of women and girls were also discussed. Majeda, Sabina and Jesmin were among the victims who had not made the national press but who were remembered by women who had organized locally on their behalf.

In addition to their public opposition to these acts of violence, group members had also come out against a range of practices which they perceived as the unacceptable face of patriarchy in the domestic domain. The most frequently mentioned examples of these were dowry, *hilla* (intermediate) marriage, child marriage, polygamy and *talaq* or verbal repudiation. This had often brought them into direct confrontation with the mullahs who issued *fatwas* in support of such practices.

However, when it came to gender injustice in the personal domain, they were less uncompromising in their responses. This was most strongly in evidence in relation to marital relations and testified to its continued centrality in women's lives. In social terms, marriage is still the only conceivable pathway to full adulthood for women, particularly in rural areas. In economic

7. Acid throwing with intent to harm and disfigure emerged in Bangladesh in recent decades as a crime most often directed at women by men, often jealous husbands or rejected suitors.

terms, it marks the necessary transition from their dependence on fathers to dependence on husbands and ultimately on sons. On both counts, women had a strong stake in shoring up rather than undermining the institution, however abusive the relationships involved. This played out in their efforts to find ways of responding to injustices in the context of marital relationships that did not jeopardize the relationship in question. The following account by Habiba (NK) captures the arguments and actions her group used to achieve such an outcome.

Very soon after Habiba had joined NK's landless association, her group heard that a man in their village had given his wife *talaq* (verbal divorce) in a fit of anger and driven her out of his house. They decided to take up the case to publicize the fact that such behaviour was both unacceptable and illegal: they hoped to get greater support for their efforts to oppose the practice and to make men more cautious about resorting to it.

On the basis of this logical reasoning, we decided that we would not let the woman return to her father's house. Instead we arranged for her to stay with one of her relatives. We then asked for a shalish where we tried to persuade her husband to take her back. We told him, "In family life, a husband and wife can have many severe quarrels. But if because of that, the wife is treated in an inhuman manner, she has the right to take legal help against you. If you gave verbal divorce to your wife out of rage and anger, this is not acceptable in the eyes of law. So you should take her back again".

The husband was persuaded by their arguments but the local mullah intervened with a fatwa to the effect that verbal divorce was recognized under Islamic law, and therefore, the only way that the man could take his wife back would be to remarry her after she had first gone through a *hilla* marriage: 'We did not accept this irrational claim on the part of the maulvi. Instead we argued with the shalish that the law did not recognize *talaq*. We also told them that if our appeal was not accepted, we would take it to the courts'. This threat won the day and the woman returned to her husband.

What is striking about Habiba's account is the value she attaches to the power of reasoned arguments in countering the 'illogic' of injustice. It also draws attention to one of the most widely used strategies that the women's groups have brought to bear on the abuse of male privilege: seeking to hold men to their socially sanctioned obligations within the marriage contract. As long as women could be shown to have fulfilled their side of the contract in taking care of their family and upholding family honour, men should not be allowed to default on their responsibilities to their wives and children.

It was not only in relation to current marital relationships that the women's groups have sought to uphold the principle of male responsibility but also in relation to marital prospects of young girls. Aleya (Somota) told us about the case of a young girl from a landless family who had developed a relationship with a boy from a wealthier kin group. The two had tried to elope but his parents put a stop to it and sent the girl back to her own family. The scandal

clearly jeopardized her future marital prospects. The group interceded successfully on her behalf with the boy's family, arguing that she had risked her reputation because she had been promised marriage.

The reluctance to undermine marriage as an institution was also in evidence in the personal lives of some of the group members. As noted earlier, due to the threat this could pose to marital relations, few women would have joined or remained with an NGO if their husbands had raised serious objections. However, their group membership was associated with gradual improvements in many of their relationships. In some cases, this had occurred without any active effort on the part of the woman. For instance, Manjura (BRAC) believed that her husband was more circumspect in his behaviour towards her because he knew that her group could take legal action on her behalf.

In other cases, women were engaged in active renegotiations of their family relationships, demanding greater recognition for the work they did and a greater voice in family decision making. However, we did not come across any cases of women who decided to walk out of abusive marriages. Even women like Aleya (NK) who had participated in public protests against incidents of gender injustice, opted to remain with her verbally abusive husband. Her group members had sought to reason with him but had failed to change his behaviour. She has now resigned herself to her fate, saying 'How much can I protest against him? After all, he is my husband, I am compelled to tolerate his behaviour'.

We found other examples of the contradictions between public opposition and private compromise around the question of marriage. Fatema (BRAC) told us about the efforts she had made with her group members to dissuade potential grooms and their families from demanding dowries: 'We told them that a woman's life could be destroyed as a result of dowry disputes'. They had also helped to arrange marriages without dowry for daughters from poor families. But she appeared to find no contradiction between her active role in these efforts and the fact that she had paid dowry to marry off her own daughters: 'When I arranged my elder daughter's wedding, I had to give dowry. I also just got my second daughter married. . . we had arguments with them on the question of dowry. We will have to give a colour TV, a suitcase and a bed. They will give my daughter gold ornaments'.

Sufia (Saptagram) considered that women's ability to earn a living was the single most important positive change in their lives, but she also believed that not being able to get married was the greatest misfortune a woman could face. It was this fear of not getting their daughters married off which led women around her, including Saptagram members, to pay dowry despite knowing it was a punishable offence to give or take dowry: 'They cannot be argued with, they say, "do you want my daughter to sit at home then?". The truth is that if you can't get your daughter married off, you don't remember what you learnt'.

One reason why marriage continues to occupy such a central place in women's lives may be that despite the economic gains that Sufia refers to, market opportunities have not expanded sufficiently for them to be economically self-reliant. However, this is not likely to be the only reason.⁸ Interviews with women who had been abandoned or widowed revealed other reasons as well. While these women spoke of the hardships they faced in their struggle to earn a living for themselves and their children, they also spoke of the vulnerability of being on their own, bereft of protection and status in a society where a woman without an adult male guardian is subject to individual and social harassment. Patriarchal risk was, in other words, still a major factor in the lives of the women in rural Bangladesh, placing limits on their capacity to bring about change.

Jahanara was one of these women. She worked as an agricultural labourer and spoke of how her association with NK had helped her to challenge the restrictions of *purdah*: 'Before I could not move around at night time. Now we have broken this tradition. Here many women still wear burka but I do not. Why should I wear a burka when I am working? I have to work as a farm labourer, do physical work. Can I do this wearing a burka?'. But abandonment by her husband in recent times had brought home the nature of her vulnerability: 'I am a person who has lost so much and now I have lost my husband. He has left me without any information. My children and I have been thrown into a sea of uncertainty. If he were here I would not suffer so much pain, but I do not know where he is. His is the worst injustice'.

Nurjahan also spoke of the 'endless sea of uncertainty' that the death of her husband had brought. Left on her own to raise their young child, she spoke of the abuse and harassment she had faced as a widow and how wary she had been about being seen talking to strange men when she was first approached by Samata staff to start a women's group in the village. Shahana (BRAC) had faced a different form of patriarchal risk. She had been living in her father's house and worked in a reasonably secure and well-paid job as a clerk in a sub-registry office. Her husband was only able to find a less well-paid job in a different town. When he was put in gaol on a false charge, she gave up her job to devote herself to getting him out: 'What I understand is that a woman can live without a job but she cannot live without a husband. I could have drawn a pension of two or three lakh taka in my old age with that job but that would have been of no use to me if I couldn't get my husband freed'. While her actions could be interpreted as an expression of her loyalty to her husband, her words testified to the generalized significance of marriage for women in Bangladesh.

8. For instance, Kabeer (2001) noted how a number of women microfinance borrowers with abusive husbands had resorted to what the paper termed 'divorce within marriage'. They continued to live in the marital home but used their loans to set up a parallel economy within the household, only cooking for their husband if he contributed money.

NAVIGATING PATHWAYS BETWEEN AFFILIATION AND AUTONOMY**Grassroots Narratives of Empowerment**

This paper started with the proposition that in contexts where women's notions of selfhood and social identity are formed through highly unequal and largely 'given' relationships of family and kinship, they need to attain a reflexive distance from these relationships in order to assess what they value about their lives and what they would like to change. It explored the extent to which women's association with socially-oriented development NGOs in rural Bangladesh constituted such a critical vantage point and how this translated into change in their lives.

As noted in the introduction, the women's narratives about their experiences not only offered important insights into the gendered dynamics of social change as it played out in the context of rural Bangladesh; they also provided a grassroots discourse about empowerment as they had experienced it. This discourse was organized around a recurring cluster of concepts, different 'moments' in processes of change, moments that bore clear traces of their experiences as NGO members: awareness, voice, being listened to, standing on one's own feet, reason, solidarity, justice and courage. Each of these concepts was defined in relation to a corresponding counter-concept which described how things had been before. They therefore tell us what women rejected about their past and what they valued about the present.

The idea of awareness captured the dawning of a critical consciousness. Women described themselves as having been illiterate, confined to the four walls of their homes with little conception of the world outside. The gradual realization that they too were human beings, that they had rights and that the country's constitution and laws supported many of these rights was the critical moment at which other changes became possible.

'Voice' related to the breaking of the culture of silence. These were women who had been brought up to accept their fate without question, who believed that to speak out against those in authority constituted defiance of the natural order of things. For these women, the concept of voice expressed many things. In some cases, it was almost literally about being able to speak in situations they had once feared or had simply never encountered: with strangers, with officials, with landlords and also with us, as interviewers. It was a way of saying that they could handle any situation with confidence. In other cases, it was about a public voice: the ability to speak at meetings, to petition the government, to participate in shalish.

'Being consulted' was indicative of greater respect and recognition from others. It meant no longer being overlooked, but being valued, being listened to by husbands and family, being sought out by other members of their community for their opinion and knowledge and, in some cases, being taken seriously by those in authority, such as elected officials. 'Standing on one's own two feet' was posed against the various dependencies which defined

women's lives. In some cases, the dependency related to the necessity of relying on the patronage of wealthy households for work at wages that barely fed the family. In others, it was a sense of pride in their own economic contributions, their ability to contribute to the family income and to educate their children without having to turn to their husbands whenever they needed money.

Like awareness, 'reason' signified a break with unreflecting acceptance of norms and tradition, but it brought a deeper meaning to this break. It was awareness grounded in the ability to think for oneself, to make judgements, to evaluate, to exercise one's critical faculties. Women who spoke of learning to distinguish between right and wrong, justice and injustice, were articulating a transition from the realm of the unquestioning acceptance of the given order to the realm of debate and discussion about alternatives.⁹

Solidarity, the building up of social relationships based on shared learning and experiences, had a particular resonance for women who had lived lives of considerable social isolation, married off at a young age to men in villages some considerable distance away from their natal village, cut off from their own families and childhood friends. Their relationships for most of their adult lives were generally confined to those who lived in close proximity to them, often members of immediate and extended family. Along with all the instrumental and strategic gains associated with their membership of NGO groups, it also offered them the possibility of friendship and support that they had been denied for much of their lives.

Ideas about justice were derived from their direct experiences of injustice. A common theme underpinning the instances of injustice that they cited was the notion of unfairness, of unjustified inequalities. In some cases, the injustices related to the sphere of the family: the denial of a fair share of family resources to its female members or the failure of husbands to live up to their side of the marital contract with wives who had lived up to theirs. Others spoke of class injustices: the differential treatment meted out to the children of the rich and the children of the poor; long hours of wage labour for very low returns; the upholding of patriarchal privileges by the village shalish. Their meetings and discussions as a group allowed what had been experienced as a vague sense of unfairness to become crystallized as recognition of injustice that they could, and did, challenge.

Finally, the concept of courage came closest to capturing a sense of personal empowerment on the part of women. Courage was at the other end of the spectrum of the fear that had so far defined the lives of many of the women in our study. The courage they spoke of related to all the different kinds of actions that they had been able to take that would have once been considered inconceivable: the exercise of voice, greater freedom of movement in the public domain, standing up for what they believed in, breaking with traditions that they considered unjust. Courage drew on all the

9. To use Bourdieu's terms, they were describing a transition from doxa to discourse.

other gains they had made through their membership of these organizations: knowledge, awareness, respect, recognition and the support of each other.

These values and meanings were clearly *influenced* by their interactions with specific kinds of organizations that were committed to bringing about social change, but they were not *determined* by them. Women use their strengthened capabilities to make their own judgements about their priorities for change, judgements that were influenced by what they believed to be possible and desirable in a context in which family and kinship remained a key source of security. While the family is characterized by relations of unequal interdependence in Bangladesh as elsewhere, women's contestations in the domestic domain appeared to be motivated by their desire for greater equality within their families rather than greater independence outside them. This was manifested in the contrast between the more confrontational strategies women often resorted to in the public domain compared to the more conciliatory approaches to injustices in the private domain. Positive changes *had* taken place in their marital relationships but often in silent and implicit ways as husbands learnt to adjust to the gradual empowerment of their wives.

CONCLUSION

The analysis in this article helps to flesh out some of the theoretical questions discussed in the introductory section. It supports our starting proposition that the expansion of social relationships in women's lives beyond those ascribed by their place in the gendered social order can provide them with a critical vantage point from which to assess the justice of this order. However, it suggests that not all relationships do so to the same extent. One reason why the relationships associated with the socially-oriented NGOs in this study did offer such a vantage point was that they were purposively constructed on the basis of such reflective practices. We have drawn on the idea of 'communities of practice' to describe these particular examples of Habermas's 'communities of speech and action' because they embody the interactive learning practices that are central to the idea.

One important insight that comes out of the analysis is the critical role of men, both in blocking the possibilities open to women but also in enabling them to realize the full potential of these possibilities. We have noted that in many cases, men's initial resistance to women's membership of the NGOs subsequently gave way to active support, particularly in those cases where both had participated side by side in the struggle for their land rights, but also more generally through a better understanding of what these organizations were about.

The analysis has also drawn attention to the 'path dependence' evident in the pathways of empowerment that emerge out of the women's narratives. The influence of the underlying structures of constraint is evident

in the nature of the injustices that women sought to challenge and the kinds of changes that they valued. While rape and domestic violence appear as manifestations of gender injustice across a wide variety of contexts, other instances of injustice were products of the local structures of patriarchy. Thus women's struggles against dowry, polygamy, *hilla* marriage, child marriage and the punitive use of fatwas represent struggles against the institutional manifestations of patriarchal constraint within a particular context. Similarly, the value they attach to the opportunity to earn a living and to move more freely in the public domain reflects the experience of those who have been denied these possibilities for much of their lives.

At the same time, the continuities that they sought to defend in their lives support the contention that autonomy may not hold universal appeal for women, even in contexts where they have begun to question their subordinate status. Instead, our analysis suggests that significant aspects of resilience in the larger structures explain why marriage, despite the dependent status it assigns to women, continues to occupy a central role in the lives of individual women. Market opportunities have not expanded sufficiently to offer them viable livelihoods without the support of a male breadwinner, while rural society still views marriage as the primary, perhaps only, route into adulthood and childbearing for women. There is little place here for those who might want to create an alternative life for themselves.

This paucity of alternatives is what lies behind the greater premium attached to affiliation compared with autonomy in women's struggles for change in their personal lives. What we do not know is how they might have evaluated the possibility of personal autonomy had it been accompanied by the prospect of greater social acceptance of women who opted for alternative ways of living — including walking out on abusive husbands or choosing not to marry at all. The privileged value given to affiliation by the women in our study may be as much a product of social forces which prevail in the particular context of rural Bangladesh as the privileged value given to autonomy by women in other contexts.

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