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# **National Discourses on Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh: Continuities and Change**

Sohela Nazneen, Naomi Hossain and Maheen Sultan

## **Summary**

As Bangladesh turns 40, improvements in women's wellbeing and increased agency are claimed to be some of the most significant gains in the post-independence era. Various economic and social development indicators show that in the last 20 years, Bangladesh, a poor, Muslim-majority country in the classic patriarchal belt, has made substantial progress in increasing women's access to education and healthcare (including increasing life-expectancy), and in improving women's participation in the labour force. The actors implementing such programmes and policies and claiming to promote women's empowerment are numerous, and they occupy a significant position within national political traditions and development discourses. In the 1970s and 1980s development ideas around women's empowerment in Bangladesh were influenced by an overtly instrumentalist logic within the international donor sphere. This led to the women's empowerment agenda being perceived as a donor driven project, which overlooks how domestic actors such as political parties, women's organisations and national NGOs have influenced thinking and action around it.

This paper explores how these perceptions and narratives around women's empowerment have evolved in Bangladesh from 2000 to date. It studies the concepts of women's empowerment in public discourse and reviews the meanings and uses of the term by selected women's organisations, donor agencies, political parties and development NGOs. By reviewing the publicly available documents of these organisations, the paper analyses the multiple discourses on women's empowerment, showing the different concepts associated with it and how notions such as power, domains and processes of empowerment are understood by these actors. It also highlights how these different discourses have influenced each other and where they have diverged, with an emphasis on what these divergences mean in terms of advancing women's interests in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh; women's empowerment; NGOs; political parties; women's movement; international aid agencies.

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## Acronyms

AL	Awami League
BMP	Bangladesh Mahila Parishad
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
CAP	Country Assistance Plan
CAS	Country Assistance Strategy
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DFID	Department for International Development
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
GAD	Gender and Development
GOB	Government of Bangladesh
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
NIPORT	National Institute of Population, Research and Training
NP	Naripokkho
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RMG	Ready Made Garments
SIDA	Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WB	World Bank
WFW	Women for Women
WHO	World Health Organization
WID	Women in Development

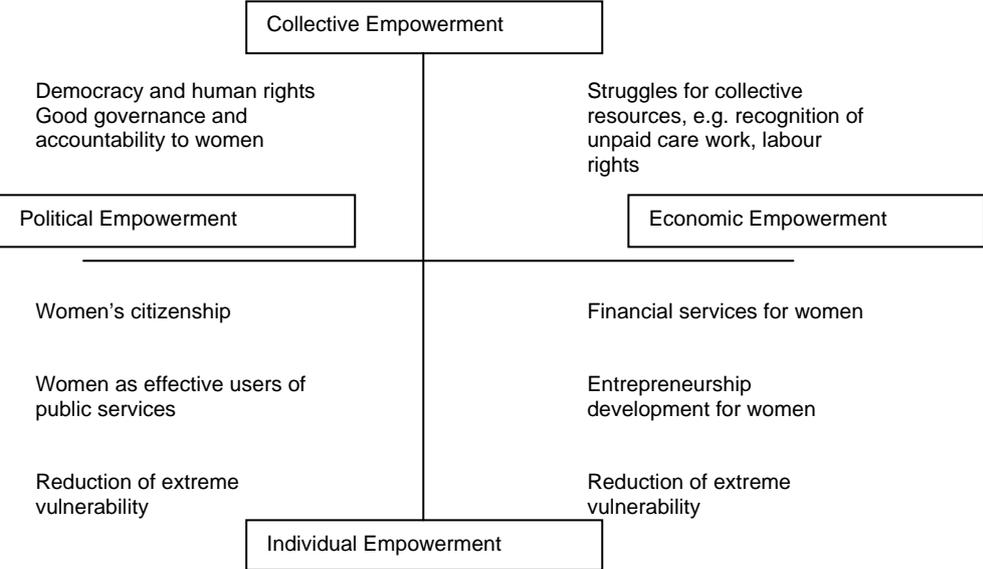
# 1 ‘You’ve come a long way’? Framing women’s empowerment in Bangladesh

It seems inappropriate to borrow the US Virginia Slims cigarette advertising slogan to introduce our analysis of conceptualisations of women’s empowerment in Bangladesh: a slick, artful campaign, this sought to persuade American women in the prosperous ‘baby boom’ era that they were empowered, and that smoking – and smoking Virginia Slims in particular – proved this. Our present exploration of how the empowerment of Bangladeshi women has been conceived suggests a similarly credible surface change in women’s lives. This has been widely interpreted as progress. Yet there is similarly little evidence of depth with respect to what this means. Does it just look and feel good, or does it really mean gains in women’s power? Have there been any costs of empowerment? Which targets has it missed? This paper interrogates this surface change, asking how the concepts that we use to frame our understanding of whether Bangladeshi women have ‘come a long way’ in the last 20 years.

The paper unpicks how actors of varying degrees of influence and authority have used the concept of women’s empowerment in Bangladesh. These are essentially elite discourses rather than those of the majority of Bangladeshi women, although they may subscribe or contribute to the shaping of them. The paper is explicitly concerned with questions of power at several levels: not only the multiple dimensions of power that processes of women’s empowerment need to address, but also the power of actors to influence thinking, to generate support or create coalitions of interest behind visions of how women should progress; the influence and authority of different forms of knowledge and evidence about women, including interpretations of the preceding decades of purported progress; and the spaces in which such concepts are developed and transmitted and gain credibility. It sees the forms of power relevant to questions of women’s empowerment as involving two sets of continuum, with individual and collective empowerment at either end of the first, and an emphasis on political and economic empowerment at the extremes of the second. This is depicted in Figure 1.1.

In each quadrant of the figure is an important example of the different pathways of women’s empowerment that feature at each of the extremes. A core strategy of women’s empowerment through national economic growth and development is about collective empowerment, but clearly not focused on questions of politics and governance. Women’s collective economic empowerment would involve greater recognition of their unpaid care role and of their rights as workers. A focus on the material and human dimensions of poverty and extreme vulnerability tends to combine collective and more individual approaches to economic empowerment, in the lower right-hand quadrant. Bangladeshi women have come to exemplify the success of individual approaches to economic empowerment through the microfinance model. Also focused more at the individual levels are efforts to increase women’s power as ‘users’ of public services, in the lower left-hand of the figure. Moving towards the more collective pole is the idea of women’s citizenship and participation across domains of political and civil life. In the upper left-hand corner is an emphasis on women’s empowerment as collective and centrally about power and rights.

**Figure 1.1 The double continuum of women’s empowerment**



The analysis is shaped by a desire to revisit issues first raised by Alam and Matin. In 1984 Alam and Matin wrote an influential and highly critical article analysing the women in development (WID) discourse in Bangladesh. The article investigated the various research and policy documents produced by feminist scholars, donors and the Bangladesh government, and uncovered the conditions under which these were produced, and by whom. At that time, none of these actors used the term ‘women’s empowerment’, although they did address women’s emancipation, advancement, status, condition, etc. By the 2000s, ‘women’s empowerment’ had become an entrenched concept, used surprisingly consistently across the three groups, with interventions, policies and programmes designed by them all claiming to promote the idea. This focus on women’s empowerment partly reflects the changes in international development discourse and the mainstreaming of WID and Gender and Development (GAD) but it is also a result of the changes, gains, progress and challenges that Bangladeshi women have experienced since the Alam and Matin article was written.

The dominant – and indeed official state narrative – is that substantial progress has been made regarding women’s rights and status, though there are persistent and emergent obstacles to women’s empowerment (Government of Bangladesh 2005; World Bank 2008). How did Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the ‘classic patriarchal belt’ (Townsend and Momsen 1987),<sup>1</sup> make these substantial gains or ensure the ‘first round of victories for women’s rights’ (Government of Bangladesh 2005)? What lessons can be drawn from Bangladesh’s experience? What are the enduring challenges?

How the status and progress of women is evaluated depends in part on how women’s empowerment is conceptualised. This paper focuses on how different interpretations of women’s empowerment influence how different gains and lessons, enduring and emergent

<sup>1</sup> The countries that are in the classic patriarchal belt have a highly corporate organisation of family and kinship relations with strict controls over women’s mobility in the public domain. Generally they are reported to have lower levels of female labour force participation than the rest of the world, low levels of state support to women, and hence high levels of female dependency on male breadwinners and guardians. The belt stretches from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region) and the northern plains of the South Asian subcontinent, including Pakistan and Bangladesh (Townsend and Momsen 1987).

challenges, are translated into programmes of action. It offers some insights into how this logic flows through into programmatic action by focusing on how women's empowerment is conceptualised by political parties, feminist activists, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and donors. The reasons for this focus is to show how ideas on women's empowerment are generated, distributed, borrowed and re-interpreted; how alliances of interest can emerge to strengthen the claims of a particular usage of 'empowerment', and then their applications in intervention.

The paper starts with a brief comparative review of the evidence on which claims of substantial progress are staked, noting that many aspects of women's power are not covered by the indicators; as well as there being a bias towards the measurable. The core sections of the paper analyse how women's organisations, mass political parties (including a religious party of the right), NGOs, and aid donor agencies conceptualise change for women, along each of the following lines:

- Concepts associated with women's empowerment, including in which contexts and for what purpose the terms come to be used;
- Dimensions of women's empowerment and core notions of power – domains and spaces, processes and time-periods, questions of collective action and solidarity;
- Politics and political effects: the ideological origins of the concept; the basis of claims to represent women or women's voice; the transmission of concepts, including the kinds of knowledge production on which they depend.

## 2 Evidence of improvement of women's status in Bangladesh

It is widely agreed among development policy actors and many feminist activists and scholars that Bangladeshi women have made considerable gains since national independence in 1972. But there have also been attacks on women's rights and reversals in gender equity, including a generalised shift to fundamentalism in religion and religious politics. None of the changes that Bangladeshi women have experienced in the last 39 years can be read simply as progress; witness the rich academic and development policy debates about how and whether Bangladeshi women were empowered by the new economic opportunities of microfinance and the ready-made garment (RMG) industry since the 1990s (for example, Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996; Kabeer 1999, 2001b, 2001c; Mahmud 2003).

Two caveats are in order in reading the evidence of how women's lives have changed. The first is that a sketch of the 'status of women's empowerment' is of necessity a limited description of the complexities of women's differentiated lives in Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> The second is that the sketch depends on the measured and measurable indicators of women's empowerment. These are important in part because of the power such quantifiable indicators come to possess over the conceptualisation and policy discourse of women's empowerment. They are presented here to highlight the more prominent claims about such change in Bangladesh.

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<sup>2</sup> Following Kabeer's (1999) conceptualisation of empowerment.

## 2.1 Human development (health and education)

In 2007, Bangladesh ranked 123rd in the gender-related development index section of the UNDP's Human Development Index. This ranked it just above Pakistan (124) but below Nepal (119) and India (114) (UNDP 2009) so that even within South Asia, Bangladesh has little to celebrate in terms of its levels of gender-related development. But the pace of change merits attention: gains for Bangladeshi women were made from a lower starting point than these other countries, catching up surprisingly fast given the modest pace of poverty reduction overall. This suggests a strategic or de facto focus on promoting health and education for women, sometimes motivated by instrumental links to other goals such as fertility control. Table 2.1 summarises some of the key changes over the last three decades.

**Table 2.1 Changes in Bangladeshi women's health and education outcomes over time**

Indicator	Outcome
Fertility <sup>1</sup>	Total fertility rate declined from 7.3 (1974) to 2.7 (2007)
Maternal mortality <sup>2</sup>	Maternal mortality ratio (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births) more than halved from 648 (1986) to 315 (2001)
Primary education	Gender parity in enrolment by end of 1990s; girls now outnumber boys
Secondary education	Gender parity in enrolment by early 2000s; girls now outnumber boys

Sources: <sup>1</sup>NIPORT *et al.* (2009); <sup>2</sup>World Bank (2008)

**Table 2.2 Total fertility rates, Bangladesh and comparator countries**

Country	Total fertility rate	Year of survey
Bangladesh	2.7	2007
Cambodia	3.4	2005
India	2.7	2005/6
Indonesia	2.6	2003/3
Nepal	3.1	2006
Philippines	3.5	2003
Vietnam	1.9	2002

Source: NIPORT *et al.* (2009)

The rapid achievement of lower fertility rates in Bangladesh (see Table 2.2) owes to a combination of access to and latent demand for fertility control services (Simmons 1996; Caldwell *et al.* 1999; Kabeer 2001a). With respect to maternal mortality, deaths per 100,000 live births more than halved in the 15 year period up to 2001 (Table 2.1), although they remain high (Annex Table A.1). A World Bank report credits government action in expanding service delivery with these rapid gains, noting that the proportion of women vaccinated against tetanus increased from around two-thirds in the early 1990s to 85 per cent a decade on, while antenatal care access also increased.<sup>3</sup> However, in general, the skilled maternity and emergency care remains extremely low (see Annex Table A.2).

Infant and child mortality rates have also improved. Until the early 1970s, infant mortality rates had stagnated at a very high level of around 165 infant deaths per 100,000 live births; they then declined steeply to 65 (1999–2003 DHS data) (World Bank 2008). DHS data for 2002–6 indicated a further decline to 52 (NIPORT *et al.* 2009).

<sup>3</sup> In the 2000 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) around one-third of women who had given birth in the preceding five years reported receiving at least one check up, this figure rose to 56 per cent in 2004 (World Bank 2008).

More striking changes have been seen with respect to girls' education. Bangladesh had closed the gender gap in enrolment at primary level by the end of the 1990s, ahead of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) targets and many comparator countries (Chowdhury *et al.* 2002). More girls than boys now enrol in secondary school, drawn in substantial part, it is believed, by the availability of cash stipends for all unmarried girls who meet a minimum standard (Al-Samarrai 2009). The gender gap in illiteracy is narrower compared to the region (Table 2.3), and Bangladesh reached gender parity in primary and secondary enrolment earlier than countries at comparable levels of development.

**Table 2.3 Illiteracy rates in females aged 15 and over, South Asia (percentages)**

Country	1985–94	2000–2006	Projected 2015
Bangladesh	56	55	53
India	61	65	65
Nepal	63	67	67
Pakistan	...	64	64

Source: UNESCO 2008

While Bangladesh has done well compared to other countries in widening girls' access to school; educational quality and attainment for both boys and girls are low compared to elsewhere. There are also valid concerns that the closure of the gender gap in basic education may reflect stagnating educational access among boys from the poorest households, and not merely gains for girls – the so-called 'boys left behind' phenomena (World Bank 2008).

## 2.2 Economic participation

One interesting recent development has been the sharp increase in women's formal labour force participation. Analysis of the 2005 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), the main source of nationally representative poverty data, concluded that while the labour force as a whole had grown modestly and gradually at the start of the 2000s, women's wage employment increased considerably over the five year period, growing at 4.3 per cent each year between 2000 and 2005 (World Bank 2008).

Some 60 per cent of the increase in women's paid work during the 2000s was concentrated in urban areas, half overall in manufacturing sectors. Over two million women are estimated to be employed in the RMG industry, which dominates the Bangladesh manufacturing export sector. Given that garment factory careers may be short, many more than the current two million women are likely to have experienced this employment. There has also been significant recent growth in new areas such as public sector employment, as teachers or health workers, and in self-employment and household enterprises.

It is not only where and how many women are in paid work that matters: declining reliance on agricultural self-employment means women have been shifting into higher productivity activities with longer working hours. The result has been that women's wages have increased much faster than men's since 2000, and the gender gap in income and wages has narrowed considerably. A critical factor appears to have been education, the impact of higher levels of which has been significant, particularly among those with secondary education (see Table 2.4). This means, however, that real wage and income gains for women have been concentrated among the more affluent and educated population, with limited impact for poor women. Nevertheless, this striking shift marks further changes of relevance to a discussion of women's empowerment. For women in the richest 20 per cent, for instance, 58 per cent had been in salaried work and 26 per cent self-employed in agriculture in 2000; these proportions changed to 76 per cent in salaried work and only 3 per cent self-employed in agriculture in 2005 (Al-Samarrai 2007).

**Table 2.4 Years of education in the labour force by quintiles 2000–5**

Quintile	2000			2005		
	male	Female	total	male	female	total
1	1.6	0.6	1.4	2.0	1.4	1.9
2	2.2	1.2	2.1	2.7	1.5	2.6
3	3.0	1.7	2.9	3.7	3.1	3.7
4	4.5	3.4	4.4	5.3	4.7	5.3
5	7.7	6.8	7.6	8.6	8.4	8.5
Total	3.9	2.7	3.8	4.6	4.0	4.5

Source: Al-Samarrai (2007) based on HIES data

Note: quintile 1 refers to the poorest 20 per cent of the population, while quintile 5 refers to the richest 20 per cent.

An older, much-debated pathway of women's economic empowerment has been microcredit, in which the scale of Bangladeshi women's collective participation has been unprecedented. Microfinance programmes for women expanded dramatically from the second half of the 1990s; by 2006, it was estimated that there were some 20.6 million microfinance borrowers in Bangladesh, the overwhelming majority of them female (Microfinance Information Exchange n.d.).

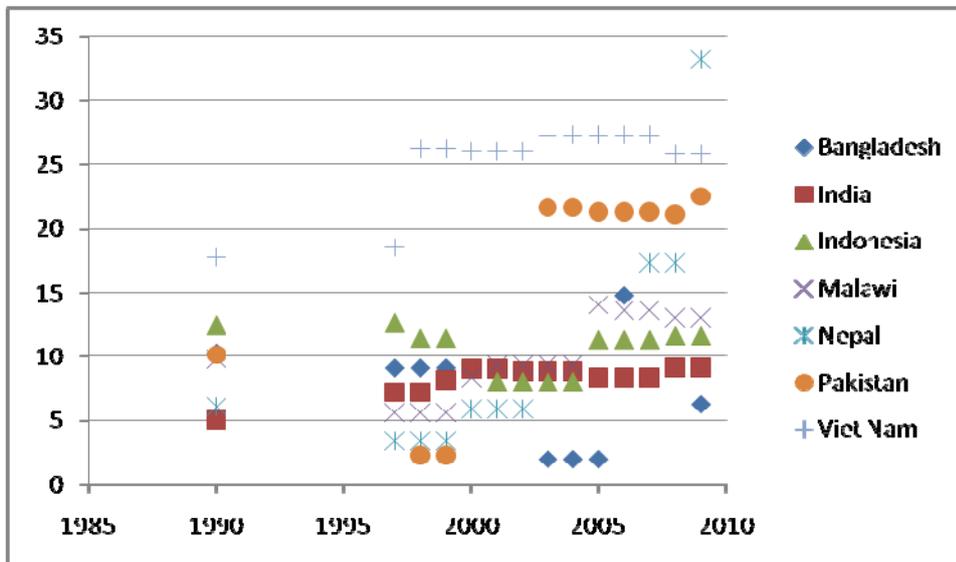
Debates about the impacts of microcredit on women's empowerment have examined themes around control over resources and the effects on women's domestic bargaining power (Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996; Kabeer 1999). While critiques of microcredit still exist (e.g. Karim 2008), by 2006, the World Bank was able to cite evidence that participation in microfinance programmes enabled discussion of family planning with spouses, an expanded role in household decision making, more access to 'financial, economic, and social resources' and greater mobility (2006: 24). In relation to intra-household relations and women's economic empowerment, the 2007 DHS found that while fewer women were reporting making decisions on their own about the use of their income than in 2004 (from 39 to 31 per cent), the proportion of women claiming involvement in joint decision making had risen, from 47 to 56 per cent (NIPORT *et al.* 2009).

### 2.3 Political and civic participation

In contrast to their striking gains in human development and new economic opportunities, and despite the two top political leaders being women, Bangladeshi women in general have fared far less well with respect to participation in national politics than women in comparator countries (see Figure 2.1).

Female representation in local and national government has been ensured with the reservation of one-third of seats, but few women have won party endorsement to contest general seats. Only 17 women contested and won general seats in the last parliamentary election – and this is the highest figure to date. Many women candidates are, however, understood to be proxies, contesting seats on behalf of disqualified or jailed male family members. All political parties have delayed introducing direct elections to the reserved seats in parliament, since these seats are used as patronage resources and in negotiations for forming coalitions.

**Figure 2.1 Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament, 1990–2009**

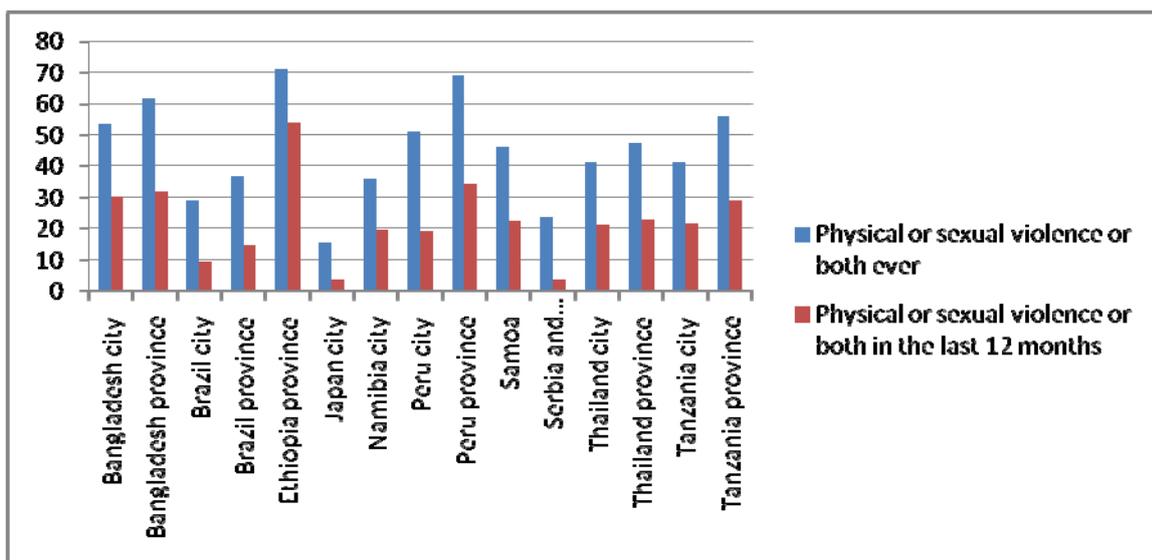


Source: UN Statistics Division (n.d.)

## 2.4 Justice and security

The most commonly used indicator for measuring women's access to justice and security in Bangladesh is the prevalence of violence against women. The most recent DHS data indicate that 49 per cent of women who are or had been married had experienced some spousal physical violence in their most recent marriage; 18 per cent had experienced rape within marriage; 53 per cent had experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence, while 13 per cent had experienced both (NIPORT *et al.* 2009: 201). While the evidence does not indicate violence against women has necessarily increased over time,<sup>4</sup> a WHO multi-country study indicates that compared to a range of other societies, Bangladesh suffers from a particularly high prevalence of violence against women (see Figure 2.2).

**Figure 2.2 Prevalence of domestic violence by intimate partner**



Source: WHO 2005

<sup>4</sup> Focus group discussions about domestic violence as part of research for the World Bank's gender survey did not indicate a perceived rise in domestic violence (World Bank 2008: 92).

# 3 Framing women's empowerment: discourses of women's organisations, political parties, NGOs and donor agencies

## 3.1 Women's organisations

The women's movement has a long history, beginning with the anti-colonial nationalist struggle against Britain and Pakistan (Jahan 1995). Women's organisations are numerous and varied, ranging from village-based *samities* with 10 to 15 members doing sewing and handicrafts, to vast national organisations such as the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad with its 150,000 members. Some specialise in areas of work such as health or education, while others have a broader mandate; some provide services, others specialise in research and advocacy or some combination. Women's organisations have different ways of articulating their core objectives and visions of change. The term women's development (*nari unnayan*) is probably more commonly used than women's 'emancipation' or 'liberation' (*nari mukti*). However, 'women's rights' (*nari adhikar*) is also increasingly common language.

This section focuses on three national women's organisations which were chosen as they are considered to be pioneers of the Bangladesh women's movement:

- Bangladesh Mohila Parishad (BMP), established in 1970; the largest and the oldest women's organisation, with strong grassroots links
- Naripokkho (NP), a small membership based activist organisation, created in 1983
- Women for Women (WFW) established in 1973, a research and policy advocacy organisation with a small membership base.

The analysis is based on organisational documents including leaflets, brochures, training material, annual reports, the constitution, and other publications. Of the three organisations WFW had relatively fewer documents detailing their position on the question of women's equality and empowerment. However the organisation's position is translated into the various programmes it undertakes and is elaborated in various speeches and interviews, which were not used as background material for this paper, as it was based on written materials.

Of the discourses examined here, the women's organisations conceptualise empowerment with the greatest sophistication with respect to awareness of the workings of political power and the complexities of women's lives, and the overlapping and multiple nature of discrimination. They also conceive of women's empowerment and their own roles within that process as essentially collective and solidarity based processes: individuals and their experiences and agency matter, but mainly to the extent that individual awareness leads to mobilisation, collective action, and wider social transformation.

### 3.1.1 The language and meanings of empowerment

All three organisations use concepts of discrimination, inequality, deprivation, exploitation and oppression to explain women's present position and condition (or status), and to justify the need for change. The vision of the change required varies, with BMP and NP articulating the need for political and structural change in culture, society, state and individuals, and WFW defining the change within the parameters of state action – laws, policies and development programmes. The emphasis on collective change, solidarity and inclusiveness

differentiate women's organisations from other organisational perspectives on women's empowerment discussed in this study.

WFW uses the terms women's empowerment, women's development and gender equality interchangeably. The GAD discourse and gender mainstreaming concepts and approach are frequently used. It identifies itself as an 'organisation working towards empowering women and promoting gender equality', through increasing awareness of 'gender issues with a view to enhancing the status of women' (WFW 2004), including 'issues related to the disadvantaged status of women in Bangladesh'. Their strategy is to focus:

[O]n the specific problems impeding [women's] integration in development efforts in particular... effective advocacy for gender equity through dissemination of policy oriented research findings... and develop gender sensitivity among planners, public functionaries, development agency personnel and programme implementers.  
(WFW 2002: 5)

For BMP the language is of women's equality, liberation, and again, empowerment, situated within a larger political vision of:

[C]ommitment to independence struggle's secular thinking, Bengali nationalism, democracy and a society established on equality between women and men.  
(BMP 1998: 1)

It places itself in the 'tradition of women's participation in the Liberation Struggle and all other national struggles in which various historical women have participated' and is committed to establishing a 'secular, equal and humane society and state' (BMP 1998: 1), embedding concepts of women's equality and empowerment within the nationalist movement and socialist ideals of equality. BMP also stresses that the project of democratisation is only complete when society can ensure women's equal participation in all forms of decision making at all levels.

By contrast, NP has consciously avoided the use of the term 'empowerment' except in specific contexts, conceptualising the larger problem in terms of women's human rights, citizenship rights, accountability, position and condition. Its stated goal is '[T]o establish women as human beings with dignity and as citizens with rights in family, society and state' (NP 2003: 5). Its mandate is to work 'for the advancement of women's rights and entitlements by building resistance against violence, discrimination and injustice' (NP 2003). The long-term vision is articulated in terms of women's liberation or emancipation (*mukti*) by ensuring substantive equality and justice.

### **3.1.2 Pathways of empowerment**

All three organisations use the term 'empowerment' cautiously, with a sophisticated understanding of its complexity, multidimensionality and long-term nature. There is an emphasis by all three on bringing about collective change that would benefit all women and that also entails establishing solidarity with other discriminated or disadvantaged groups. Common pathways include political empowerment, access to services, economic justice, building solidarity across diverse groups to mobilise for structural change, etc. There is an understanding that the various dimensions of empowerment are complementary. Progress in the public sphere can be impeded by lack of progress in the private sphere, so that increasing education opportunities may not translate into better employment opportunities; private violence can prevent participation in the public sphere; and women's domestic responsibilities can keep women out of paid work or politics.

Both BMP and NP acknowledge the collective nature of women's empowerment. This implies that the pathways of empowerment will need to bring about collective or structural change. For instance NP differentiates between women's condition (material status), which varies across classes, and women's position, which reflects women's legal, social and official status in relation to men regardless of class differences:

In spite of there being class differences among women, there are no differences in their position in the family, society and the state. Instead of being known as an individual a woman's first identity is as a daughter, wife or mother.  
(NP 2003: 1)

Accordingly NP points out that while most development interventions seek to improve women's condition by increasing their access to social services, this only benefits individuals. However as women's position is a collective construct, NP argues that the transformations it seeks to bring about should be collective and should benefit all women (NP n.d.).

On the other hand, BMP sees empowerment as occurring as part of a wider change and states that women's empowerment is part of a progressive movement towards national liberation and democracy and 'the struggle for the transformation of society' (BMP 1998: 1, Constitution Article 3). This position may be a reflection of the organisation's closer relations with political parties and the liberation movement.

Another dimension of the collective aspect of empowerment is the principle of solidarity with other marginalised groups and between all types of women by all three organisations. The most inclusive and articulate position is highlighted by NP:

If we wish to have a society based on fairness we will also have to be fair. If we want equality we will have to let go of our privileges. We have to protest all forms of unfairness and injustice. We have to change the blue sky to a sky under which there is no room for those who abuse power and exploit others. There people will live with human dignity and human rights will be ensured in our daily lives.  
(NP 2003: 4)

In keeping with these stated ideals of solidarity, NP promotes diversity of representation and inclusion within the women's movement. The Doorbar Network of small women's organisations under NP's leadership has made efforts to include women's organisations from marginalised and minority groups, and to support the mobilisation of unrepresented groups such as sex workers, *hijras*,<sup>5</sup> Urdu speaking communities and older women. BMP too believes in solidarity with certain minority groups and has a principled stand on defending minority rights to protect principles of democracy and secularism, including mobilising for the rights of Hindu and ethnic minorities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Similarly, WFW has also organised around minority community issues, including actively engaging in campaigns to change religious personal laws and promote minority rights.

Both NP and BMP assume that increased awareness, analysis and collective action can transform gender and social relations. They both view transformation as originating from individual awareness that ultimately translates into wider mobilisation and collective action. WFW, on the other hand, being more of a research and policy organisation, do not emphasise collective action as much. NP also stress that action must originate from women's personal experiences and increased awareness. This implies that it is women who are best placed to articulate their agenda and demands, '*Amar kotha ami bolbo, amar moto ami bolbo*' ('I will speak for myself, I will speak in my own way' (NP 2003). BMP, however, puts less emphasis on an experiential analysis of women's situation.

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<sup>5</sup> Transgender groups.

The emphasis on women speaking out for themselves is also a pathway of empowerment. This marks a break from an earlier tradition in which civil society leaders were asked to speak on behalf of women. This was particularly true of BMP which would seek and ensure visible participation and support in their various programmes from political and 'civil society' allies that they felt close to. Similarly WFW, as an organisation composed of academics, was also more prone to using their social and political allies to further their position.

Another insight from women's organisations about pathways of women's empowerment is that it is multifaceted and has to be understood holistically. The sophisticated and complex concepts of empowerment in use by these women's organisations include recognition that pathways are not linear and progress in one area can be hampered by lack of rights in another. BMP texts note the need to establish women's rights and equality in all spheres, and while they do not explicitly make the link between private and public domains of empowerment, members recognise these to be equally crucial for women's empowerment (Nazneen and Sultan 2009).

NP, WFW and BMP have repeatedly stressed that without equality in the family, equality in other areas is undermined. In order to bring about transformation in other spheres discrimination in the private sphere must be addressed. All three organisations are alert to familial discrimination against women and girls in terms of education, early marriage, dowry, and unequal rights in marriage, divorce and inheritance; and lack of respect and security within the community. Violence is seen as a special issue for all three organisations: it spans the family, community, workplace and the state and acts as a barrier to the full enjoyment of other rights. Therefore pathways of empowerment would involve overcoming such barriers and constraints.

Because of women's lower/inferior position [they] are subjected to sexual and various other types of violence, both in the home and outside. This violence and the threat of violence constantly inhibit women. [Their] world is constrained. These restrictions are reflected in the language and in the behaviours towards women and girls in the family and in society. (...) NP believes that the reduction of violence against women is not only a matter of law and order; it requires changes in attitudes, behaviour and culture. (...) In order to build a society based on equality, the family, society and state need to be rid of violence.  
(NP 2003: 3)

Another well recognised pathway to empowerment is political participation. All three organisations have most consistently used the term 'empowerment' with regard to women's political empowerment as key to changing women's position and increasing their power in relation to men.

Women's increasing political empowerment and representation and authority of women in decision-making and all social programmes is necessary to establish a society and state based on the equality between women and men.  
(BMP 1998: 5, Constitution article 19)

All have undertaken long-term programmes to promote women's political participation and increased participation in decision making in all spheres, from policy making to school committees. BMP had previously concentrated on women's representation in parliament, later taking up issues of women in local government. WFW has also been active in the past in raising the issue of the inadequacy of women's representation in parliament and demanding more proactive measures from government. However, NP had taken a broader view of political participation to include various forms of organising and mobilising by women's organisations. It supported the women's movement's demands for greater representation in parliament, but saw this as less of a priority because of the limits on

parliamentarians' agency arising from political culture and party organisation. Instead, local government bodies were seen as closer to the people, easier to influence and easier for women to enter. However WFW, BMP and NP argue the need for women to be present and active in elected bodies, and in making these bodies responsive and accountable to women.

A key institutional domain of which women's organisations have been consistently critical compared to other actors is that of conservative religious groups. Both BMP and NP have had to confront the political use of Islam to restrict women's freedoms and rights. A defining moment for NP was challenging the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution which in 1988 declared Islam to be the state religion. NP's belief that only a secular constitution which would guarantee human rights and equality could promote and protect the rights of women led to its protest against the declaration of Islam as the state religion, arguing that religion is a personal belief, and the state should be for everybody: the slogan was '*jar dhormo tar kachai, rastrair ki bolar achey*' ('your religion is your own, what business is it of the state?'). NP's stand was not against any particular group or political party but on the issue of political use of religion, and state endorsement of an ideology that restricts women's freedoms. BMP also strongly endorses the fundamental principles of the Bangladesh Constitution, including secularism, and there have been various confrontations with religion-based parties over issues such as the National Women's Development Policy. More than other political and civil interest groups, women's organisations have been upfront in identifying threats to women's rights and empowerment from the political use of religion and have protested this.

### **3.1.3 Whose concept?**

The concepts, language and meanings of women's empowerment used by the women's movement have a rich and diverse set of influences – nationalist struggles, the international women's movement, international and national development discourses. While both political inheritance and national history matter (as the BMP's use of socialist and left political movement language shows) the influence of the UN world conferences on women is clearly being felt here, in that core international rights and development concepts have been integrated into national discourse. This has involved an adapted approach to donor 'rights-based' frameworks.

All three organisations have adopted a rights-based approach, often combined with explicit references to the international human rights framework and UN conventions and declarations such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), etc. NP texts and discourses consistently refer to women's rights and 'our rights'. Of its five thematic areas, two refer directly to women's rights, 'violence against women and women's human rights' and 'women's health and reproductive rights'. BMP's shift to rights discourse has been more gradual. There was initial resistance towards liberal feminism, given the organisation's roots in the socialist movement, which has now given way to engagement in the politics of women's rights, as set out by the UN conventions and frameworks. This translates into a role for BMP which emphasises advocacy for governance and political reform alongside advocacy for women's political participation and empowerment.

WFW's affiliation with the UN and international discourses around women's rights is even stronger and is concomitant with the organisation's engagement in regional and international processes. It similarly refers to rights, CEDAW, and international human rights instruments and processes.

Nations and communities increasingly became more conscious of the rights-based approach towards poverty reduction, the successive key UN conferences (...) forged women to voice their demand to enjoy their equality in all spheres of life. (WFW 2005)

In spite of the undoubted influence of the international discourse there is a strong feeling among the women's organisations reviewed that the national roots of the women's struggle and thinking about women's empowerment pre-date CEDAW and the international UN conferences. Despite debates around how far women's groups are influenced by external and particularly western sources, all three organisations profess strong continuities with an enduring national feminist tradition, tracing connections back to key Bengali feminists such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain from the beginning of the twentieth century.

Another contributing influence particular to Bangladesh is the entire development arena. The prevalence of the 'women's development' discourse is related to the massive development efforts in the country since liberation in 1971, with the emphasis on rehabilitation, reconstruction and finally development. Women's development became an integral part of national development early on, with its conceptualisation evolving over time. This led to many women's organisations privileging the term of women's development over women's empowerment. However, where the women's organisations significantly differ, even in their understanding of women's development, is their emphasis on solidarity and collective empowerment, which most of the other discourses tend to exclude.

### **3.2 Development NGOs**

The development NGO discourse on women's empowerment in Bangladesh, with its particular emphasis on social justice and equality is superficially similar to that of women's organisations. Bangladesh has a high concentration of development NGOs, with about 80 per cent of villages containing some NGO programme (World Bank 2006). The expansion of the NGO sector was fuelled by donor funding in the 1980s and 1990s, when NGOs were seen as alternative service delivery channels in Bangladesh (Sanyal 1991; World Bank 2006), particularly given state inefficiency in distributing public goods and the rise of the neoliberal discourse which privileged the market and stressed rolling back the state. Various basic services, both economic and social, are provided by development NGOs such as healthcare, non-formal education, legal aid, microcredit, social safety net programmes, agricultural extension and social forestry, safe water and sanitation etc. NGOs have managed to highlight their role in promoting poor women's development as service-users, economic agents and development workers through their various programmes. They are also successful in espousing gender goals in their programmes through reducing gender disadvantage in accessing services, provision of training and skills, and awareness-raising on gender related matters (Goetz 2001). In fact, they have emerged as complementary avenues for poor women to access basic services alongside state run services over the last two decades. However development NGOs have been criticised by scholars for emerging as 'new' patrons and maintaining a clientelist relationship (Karim 2008), for not effectively challenging patriarchal structures, and for not developing formal structures that ensure downward accountability to women (Nazneen 2008).

This research focuses on two large service delivery NGOs, BRAC and PROSHIKA. It analyses the key organisational documents, organisational mission and vision statements, annual reports, gender policies, and gender training materials, for researching the organisational discourse on women's empowerment. The reasons for choosing BRAC and PROSHIKA are (a) their sheer size, outreach, and influence on women's lives in the Bangladesh development context; (b) that they serve as models for other NGOs in designing gender sensitive mechanisms; and (c) they have come to represent a particular variant of women's empowerment, with BRAC leaning more towards individual economic

empowerment whereas PROSHIKA promotes a collective empowerment model; their comparison provides an opportunity to explore a small number of differences in NGO discourses on women's empowerment.

Both organisations conducted gender training for their members, but the key focus was on staff training to ensure empowerment and equity for women employees (Nazneen 2008) which is illustrative of their position on women's empowerment. It should be noted that for most cases the gender training materials and policies have not changed since the late 1990s and only in certain cases have new materials been added. We draw on other research on the NGO and women's empowerment agenda in Bangladesh to illustrate some of the arguments presented here (e.g. Kabeer and Mahmud 2010; Goetz 2001; Rao and Kelleher 1997).

### **3.2.1 The language and meanings of empowerment**

For both organisations, discussion of women's empowerment was central to most organisational documents reviewed. This is not surprising, given both of them have an overwhelmingly female clientele base and have always claimed their mandate as the advancement of the poor, particularly women and marginalised groups. In fact, improving women's status through ensuring access to services and awareness-raising are perceived as desirable goals by both organisations.

Yet, there are significant differences in how women's empowerment features in the documents reviewed. BRAC uses the term *gender equity* along with *women's empowerment* throughout its key documents as well as more specifically, *women's rights*, and *gender justice*. Their core vision and mission statement prioritises gender equity, envisioning a society that is 'free from hunger, poverty, environmental degradation and all forms of exploitation based on age, sex, religion and ethnicity' (BRAC n.d.). This vision of freedom from exploitation, including sexism, is elaborated in its mission statement:

BRAC ... is actively involved in promoting human rights, dignity, and gender equity through poor people's social, economic and political capacity building.  
(BRAC n.d.)

Gender equity is identified as a core BRAC value along with other values such as human dignity, fairness, discipline, participation and professionalism (BRAC n.d.). The issue of capacity building and poverty are frequently linked to BRAC's discourse on women's empowerment, which will be discussed later. The emphasis on rural women is visible in BRAC's official documentation. Its 2007 annual report features images of smiling busy women, more often than of men or children, and typically in rural settings. These images of rural women working or with their families are of BRAC's key client base, and depict its emphasis on the empowerment of individual women through capacity building and reducing poverty.

In contrast, PROSHIKA uses the terms *improving the status of women* and *advancement of women's rights* in addition to *women's empowerment*, but does not refer to *gender equity* in its web materials or organisational vision or mission statements (PROSHIKA n.d.). However, *gender equality* and *gender justice* appear in its internal gender policy documents (PROSHIKA 1997). Gender equity is implicit rather than explicit in PROSHIKA's vision of, 'a society which is economically productive, equitable, socially just...' (PROSHIKA n.d.). Similarly, PROSHIKA's mission statement indicates that it seeks 'an extensive, intensive and participatory process of sustainable development through empowerment of the poor' (PROSHIKA 1997). PROSHIKA's key organisational objectives explicitly refer to women, including 'improvement of women's status' (PROSHIKA 1997) (others are poverty alleviation, environmental protection, human dignity, participation). This does not imply that PROSHIKA does not prioritise women's empowerment, but that it perceives women's empowerment as

part of its holistic approach towards empowerment of the poor. Around 35 per cent of PROSHIKA's clientele are men, which significantly differs from BRAC's primarily women-based membership. These differences are reflected in images from PROSHIKA's annual report of rural women in meetings, working in groups, and engaged in productive activities, in the majority of the cases along with men, as distinct from the single images of women in BRAC's report.

### **3.2.2 Pathways of empowerment**

Both these organisations prioritise women's empowerment and in some cases gender equity within certain sectoral activities. These include microcredit, income generation, skills training, education, health, and human rights training (BRAC 2007; PROSHIKA n.d.). The numbers of female members or female staff serving in these areas are highlighted in the annual reports of both organisations and are indicators of gender inclusion. However, women's empowerment is absent from discussion of other areas such as small enterprise development (other than poultry), agricultural technology usage, and environmental issues, perhaps reflecting the challenges of promoting women's participation in these areas (Nazneen 2008).<sup>6</sup>

For both organisations, rural poor women are empowered through engagement with the market and taking part in productive activities, reflecting the central importance of microfinance. Yet households and communities are also identified as sites of empowerment, as participation in household decision making and community activities are also seen as outcomes of women's empowerment. Analysis of their annual reports suggests that empowerment is seen as an outcome of the inputs they provide organisations (e.g. skills and human rights training, access to credit, legal aid and public services). BRAC and PROSHIKA reports are full of stories of women improving their material conditions or community status. This indicates that different dimensions of needs are being addressed and women feel empowered in different ways. However, it is very much an organisational and linear illustration of how change takes place, indicating that empowerment is seen as an outcome. A typical narrative is:

Our life improved after joining BRAC. I got a loan from BRAC and invested my loan in three businesses. I dream of sending my children to school...  
(BRAC n.d.)

This linear reading also has a strong focus on individual change, and BRAC acknowledges that the 'emphasis of its work is at the individual level' (BRAC 2007). This is not to deny BRAC's social development programmes which indicate collective empowerment pathways of change for women through provision of human rights training, legal aid and community organisations to monitor gender violence, yet the emphasis is on training individuals to become aware of and change their attitudes. Though PROSHIKA stresses group based activities in community related matters (access *khas* (government) land, participating in official meetings etc), its activities for women at present focus on financial activities and skills training, possibly due to funding constraints (see Nazneen 2008).

### **3.2.3 Whose concept?**

Both organisations have been influenced by the national and international development discourses on poverty reduction, human development, participation and rights in framing women's empowerment within their agenda. Among these various discourses it is poverty reduction which is used by both organisations to frame their agenda. BRAC's organisational

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<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, this report does not include analysis of project documents and activities reports which may well have explored women's empowerment related issues.

overview states that 'Women and girls have been the central analytical lens of BRAC's anti poverty approach...' (BRAC n.d.). It justifies its focus on rural poor women on the basis that 'destitute rural women, while being worst affected by poverty, can play a crucial role as agents of change...' (BRAC n.d.). Aside from poverty alleviation, BRAC also refers to the achievement of 'MDG goals' and second generation development challenges in its discourses on women's rights. Similarly, PROSHIKA's women's empowerment agenda is tied to 'freedom from poverty' and human development (PROSHIKA n.d.). PROSHIKA does not emphasise MDG goals, but stresses participation and community organising by the poor:

Empowerment means the poor are united and organised, become aware of the real causes of their impoverishment, build leadership among them and mobilize resources...  
(PROSHIKA n.d.)

National women's rights issues and agendas and the WID discourse have influenced how these organisations develop programmatic goals to promote empowerment. There is a strong emphasis in BRAC's discourse on ending gender-based violence, especially through legal rights training and legal aid provision. PROSHIKA also highlights the need for preventing gender-based violence through the provision of human rights and gender training. In their trainings, both organisations conceptualise violence in a comprehensive manner which includes physical and psychological violence and focuses on violence within the family and community as is conceptualised by the women's organisations. However, the programmes are designed to benefit individual women rather than the wider structures that underpin the gender inequities in the system. This means it pursues accountability to women on an individual rather than a group or collective basis.

Both organisations, despite their focus on improved individual empowerment outcomes, particularly economic empowerment, tie women's role to household welfare. This reveals the influence of the instrumentalist focus of development discourse on these organisations. PROSHIKA (n.d.) points to women's economic self sufficiency helping 'reach the family'. BRAC (2007) also highlights how the family benefits through women's participation in economic activities. There are two points to be made about this instrumentalism around women's power: firstly, the evidence strongly supports the idea that women's improved access to services and income generation activities have a positive impact on household welfare. But secondly, despite their practical focus on attitudinal change through training, organisational texts also include language about patriarchal structures (Rao and Kelleher 1997; BRAC 1997). However awareness of more complex patriarchal structures does not translate into the more linear organisational strategy for empowering individual women (Nazneen 2008).

### **3.3 Political parties<sup>7</sup>**

Gender equity and women's empowerment entered political party discourses in the 1980s, yet women's status and advancement have been highlighted by political parties during the era of the anti British and Pakistani movements, linked to nation building and development issues. Gender equity does not have strong currency in electoral politics, despite the presence of vibrant feminist groups and the state's emphasis on various women's empowerment programmes. As with the development NGOs, an emphasis on family welfare, an instrumentalist approach towards women's empowerment, and a linear reading of the empowerment process are present within the centrist political party discourses. The surprising finding is that the religious political party seems to have a more comprehensive and considered approach towards women's empowerment.

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<sup>7</sup> A detailed version of this section was published in Nazneen (2009).

We look here at the three main political parties, the Awami League (AL), Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami. AL and BNP, the two major centrist political parties, do not differ significantly on ideological and political issues and have alternated in power since 1991, apart from a military-backed caretaker government during 2007 and 2008. Jamaat-e-Islami is the main Islamic party, which gained political influence through alliances with AL and BNP in the last 20 years. Recently however, Jamaat has been facing difficulties with its top leadership being persecuted for war crimes committed during the war of liberation in 1971.

This research uses primary data in the form of party recruitment and mobilisation policy documents, leaflets and booklets published on women's empowerment, party constitutions, election manifestos, and pre- and post-election speeches by the party leaders. The research also relied on newspaper scans to gather data on the gaps. Five newspapers with different political leanings were scanned for party positions on national women's policy, election speeches etc.<sup>8</sup>

### **3.3.1 The language and meanings of empowerment**

All three parties refer to women's status, needs, and rights in their constitutions and election manifestos, which perhaps indicates that they acknowledge these as issues. However, the approach, emphasis, language and placement of these issues vary. All three have a separate section in their election manifestos detailing their policy objectives for meeting women's needs, but in all, children's issues are dealt with in the same section as a direct legacy of the welfare approach. The centrist parties use 'women's empowerment' (*narir khomotoyon*) while Jamaat uses women's rights (*narir odhikar*). In fact, Jamaat never refers to women's empowerment in their election manifesto or in any other policy document. In place, the Jamaat women's agenda is set within the *Sharia*-based rights discourse, separate from the development discourse. However, they do specify the particular roles and duties of female workers in their Constitution (see later section) and in other policy documents demonstrate a comprehensive view on objectives and boundaries regarding women's issues.

Among the three, BNP's Constitution only refers to women as a group when it discusses human resources and labour power. The BNP party objectives are, 'To make appropriate and proper use of human resources including labour power of women' (BNP n.d.), and is plainly instrumental in its approach towards women.

The AL party objectives refer to women's rights and empowerment in the following manner:

To stop oppression against women; to protect women's rights as well as dignity and to empower them by using female participation in all spheres of the state and social life. (AL Constitution n.d.)

Female participation remains a key theme that the AL highlights in other policy documents. Yet the participation is limited to social and economic spheres, and does not include equality in the private sphere.

The AL and BNP policy documents and manifesto also speak of development, growth and modernisation, an unsurprising emphasis given the domination of poverty alleviation and development issues on the policy agenda. All three parties in their election manifestos take credit for improving the position and status of women in Bangladesh, and thus contributing towards development. Both BNP and Jamaat stress their role in improving women's access to education through the female stipend programme. The AL highlights their role in formulating a National Women's Development policy.

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<sup>8</sup> The newspapers included *Prothom Alo*, *the Daily Star*, *Janakantha*, *Sangram* and *Inquilab*.

### **3.3.2 Pathways of empowerment**

As could be expected the AL and BNP, in their election manifestos of 2001 and 2008, mainly focus on conventional and uncontroversial women's issues such as maternal health care, girl's education, political participation, violence against women in the public sphere and certain forms of domestic violence such as dowry related violence. The security needs of female garment workers; welfare needs of widows and elderly women; and building dormitories for working women were among the 'new' issues that were added in 2001. For both parties, the 2008 manifesto focused less on women's issues compared to the 2001 manifesto. This perhaps is an influence of the wider context in which gender and women's issues dominate the development and political discourse less now than in the post Beijing period when the 2001 manifestoes were drafted.

Interestingly, Jamaat also stresses the development angle in its election manifesto. Many of its policy recommendations related to women are the same as BNP's policies in areas such as women's education, violence against women, etc. This is not surprising since these two parties were part of a ruling coalition. However, Jamaat also has a comprehensive view on women and development issues. In addition to a specific section on women's rights, it included women's issues in other sections on social security, sports, public health and family planning, and nutrition. This incorporation of women's issues under different sections is absent in the manifestos of the other two parties.

Moreover, Jamaat highlights the development impact of each policy on women. For example, the sports policy states that:

For physical and mental development, measures will be taken so that all men and women can have access to sports and entertainment facilities that are 'appropriate' for them.  
(Jamaat 2007: 20)

Admittedly, the operative word in this sentence is 'appropriate' which is vague and can be interpreted in many different ways.

The election manifestos also reveal that women's empowerment or the establishment of women's rights (for Jamaat) is seen as an outcome of various institutional measures, such as, the reservation of parliamentary seats, enactment of new laws or strengthening existing laws on violence against women; or provision of government services. Although both the AL and BNP focus on women's role in the private and public spheres, the emphasis is still on the reproductive roles of women within the family, and women as agents participating in the market. The instruments of women's empowerment that are prioritised in the manifestos of all three parties are: microfinance, legal reform, access to public services, and employment. Face to face mobilisation (prioritised for attaining party goals), collective activities within civil society, and politics are not emphasised.

### **3.3.3 Whose concept?**

The political party discourses on women's empowerment indicate both the influence of multiple sources and their own attempts to negotiate and fashion a position. These multiple sources include how women's status was linked and interpreted within the nationalist struggles and modernity; the national and international development discourse; gender and development debates; Sharia-based rights discourse and demands made by the feminist movement within Bangladesh.

All three parties have incorporated ideas from the development discourse on women's empowerment. For example, they have used terms such as 'female-headed households' and

maternal health in their manifestos. BNP and the AL refer to the UN conventions on women, while Jamaat only refers to the CRC, and to human rights. Some of the issues they have incorporated reflect the demands raised by the women's movement, such as increasing the number of reserved seats, prevention of acid violence against women, etc. None of the parties refer to addressing inequality in the private sphere, a key demand of feminists.

However for all three parties, negotiating these multiple discourses means that there are dissonances within their own discourses on women's empowerment. For example, both the AL and BNP state they will take steps to remove gender inequality, yet both also take an instrumental view without any reference to women's collective empowerment or changing social structure. The BNP manifesto justifies its policy recommendation for women by stating:

Women are half of the total population. They are a relatively backward (*poshchadpdo*) section of the society. No nation can be economically and socially developed leaving half of its people illiterate, dependent, and lacking in self confidence.  
(BNP 2001)

The inclusion of concepts such as 'dependence' and 'self-confidence' imply acknowledgement that women's empowerment incorporates other dimensions and illustrates the influence of the arguments forwarded by the women's movement during the anti-colonial period and how the women's agenda was placed within the discourses on national development and state building. However, the manifesto later states that, 'BNP wants to ensure that women are able to attain their appropriate (*jothartho*) social status and dignity' (BNP 2001), leaving room for interpretation about what is 'appropriate' for women. Improving women's status does not necessarily imply a focus on women's empowerment. Interestingly, in 2008 BNP made no such justification, merely stating that it wanted to 'improve the position of the other half of the population', marking a de-emphasis on women's issues.

The AL's instrumental policy recommendations also contradict its key objective to ensure women's empowerment through 'participation in all spheres of life' (AL 2001). The AL states that it will aim to:

Ensure equal rights of women within the state and society... eradicating gender inequality, using UN declarations and the Platform for Action (PFA) as a basis...  
(AL 2001)

However, the AL manifesto also states it will not act in ways that are contradictory to the *Quran* and *Sunnah* which indicates the influence of religious discourses. This makes it difficult to tackle the reform of family law, a major source of gender inequality in Bangladesh. Interestingly, in 2008 the AL removed any references to the Beijing Platform for Action, but the emphasis on not taking steps contradictory to the *Quran* or *Sunnah* has persisted.

Jamaat does not claim to address gender inequality between men and women. It states that men and women have complementary roles as helpmates based on Sharia rights discourse. Its policy recommendations are made in the light of ensuring 'sufficient (*upjukto*) respect for women and their rights' (Jamaat 2007: 21). Jamaat's language leaves room for individual interpretation. For example, the sports policy outlined above leaves undetermined the question of what is appropriate for men and women. Jamaat has identified reproductive health as a key policy area but only focused on improving quality of service delivery, not on women's rights. Its policy to ensure employment for women stipulates that employment will be 'based on merit', and it excludes discussion of the current policy on quotas for women in the public service. This careful positioning demonstrates how Jamaat has incorporated the present reality where a large section of the female population is in paid work, even though this does not sit smoothly with its idea of complementary gender roles.

For Jamaat, it wants to ensure the 'highest' rights and dignity accorded to women under Islam (Jamaat 2007: 21). Yet it is aware of the challenges it faces from the women's movement in Bangladesh and the dominance of the present discourse on women's rights and development. Speeches by Nizami, a top Jamaat leader, and booklets published by Jamaat on women's recruitment reveal views on the feminist movement and women's participation, including that (a) women's participation in 'various social, political and cultural activities, particularly those that are un-Islamic has increased' (Nizami 2004: 22); and (b) 'ideas on women's rights, progress and development has created confusion among the ordinary women about Islam' (Nizami 2004: 22). Nizami argues that since recruitment of female workers is at a nascent stage Jamaat needs to convince women to join its ranks by 'drawing attention of the women, gaining their confidence, showing them what true Islam is' (Nizami 2004: 22). This means being able to incorporate the dominant concepts and ideas on women's development issues related to work and violence against women in the public and private spheres, etc. without challenging the basic tenets around the complementary role played by the sexes. This requires couching the language in ways that highlight issues such as dignity and rights without bringing in empowerment or challenging the established interpretations of Sharia.

For the two centrist parties, the AL and BNP, the dissonances within their discourses on women's empowerment reveal that they have tried to 'make the appropriate noises' that would allow them to present themselves as a progressive (*progotishil*) and 'modern' force for women. But despite references to the UN conventions or women's participation in public spheres, their focus remains instrumental, justifying women's empowerment on the grounds that it leads to the effective use of women's labour in contributing towards nation building. The vibrant women's movement in Bangladesh has had limited impact on electoral politics, despite the inclusion of issues raised by them, such as the prevention of acid violence (added after 2000) or increasing women's seats in parliament. The centrist parties remain aware that including controversial issues such as the reform of personal laws would lose votes from conservative quarters and permit their opponents to depict them as un-Islamic. The focus on development issues such as employment, maternal health, and old age pensions remains uncontroversial, with readily demonstrable impacts on family welfare.

### **3.4 Donor agencies**

Aid dependence has a strong influence on public policy and policy discourses in Bangladesh, and as seen above, has influenced development NGOs and political party discourses on women's empowerment. In recent years the levels of aid dependence, has declined but donors continue to exert a powerful influence over public policy choices. The aid donors reviewed in this study were selected on the basis that their organisational language and strategies shape a range of development discourses in Bangladesh, particularly the official language. They include the World Bank, Department for International Development (DFID), USAID, and the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (SIDA). While most aid donors are likely to have a position on gender, this is not always articulated clearly in all aid donor documents, nor is it the most prominent theme for these organisations. As the focus here is on the contribution of these concepts to public discourse and the environment for public policy making, this paper gives more space to those aid donors who generate the most public documents on this topic, and who most clearly articulate their position on women's empowerment (or gender equality or women's rights).

In all cases, efforts were made to analyse key statements of the agency's policies and activities with respect to Bangladesh. These included backward-looking reviews but also forward-looking plans and development strategies. Because gender or women's empowerment (and other issues) were in some cases covered very summarily, a small number of additional documents were selected for analysis on the basis that they represent a substantial gender analysis or account of the theory of change underlying the approach to

women's empowerment. These were not always 'official' documents, and some carried disclaimers. However, all are formally associated with the agency in question, having been commissioned or published by the agency, and while not representative of the corporate position on women or gender, are likely to represent issues on which at least parts of those agencies are focused.

Discussion of 'women's empowerment' was not central to any of the policy documents reviewed.<sup>9</sup> This does not in itself suggest that the advancement of women's rights or gender equity were not seen as goals of importance, but that these documents represent one contribution to a more enduring discussion about women and social change dating back to the liberation of Bangladesh and its aftermath.<sup>10</sup> Single documents do not necessarily set out afresh a full problem statement of gender disparities, but incorporate unspoken assumptions, often shared across aid agency and domestic actors. Three of these appear to be (1) agreement that gender equity is a desirable goal, although this is manifested in varying focuses in different sectoral areas; (2) an assumption that interventions to advance women's interests or rights are possible; and (3) that while Bangladesh has made some impressive gains in the status of women, there remains a long way to go.

### **3.4.1 Language and meanings of empowerment**

The phrase 'women's empowerment' appears most often in relation to the Government of Bangladesh's (GOB) Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), to illustrate the alignment of the aid agency goals in Bangladesh with those of the government itself. In its own view, USAID's strategic statement:

[f]ully conforms to key GOB policy elements contained in the most recent draft GOB PRSP... USAID/B programming will likewise conform strongly to GOB priorities, emphasizing good governance through improved implementation capacity, local governance and reduced corruption; economic empowerment of the poor – especially women and other disadvantaged groups – and human development for the poor by raising their capacity through education, health and nutrition.  
(USAID 2005: 1)

The World Bank's Country Assistance Strategy 2006–2009 states that the PRSP strengthened the focus on women's empowerment (World Bank 2006: 23), and DFID's Country Assistance Plan 2003–6 identifies 'women's advancement and closing of gender gaps' as one of five 'avenues' for poverty reduction as set out in the Interim PRSP of 2003 (DFID 2003: 8). SIDA's Bangladesh Country Report 2006 notes that:

Of particular interest for the Swedish development cooperation is the sub-group dealing with the Policy for Women. Under the last BNP-led coalition government, which included Islamist parties, the former PRSP aligned policy document was exchanged for a more protection- and service-oriented document corresponding to more traditional views of women's role. The sub-group as well as various donor groups regularly raise this issue with GoB.  
(SIDA 2007: 11)

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<sup>9</sup> The key policy documents reviewed included: the World Bank Country Assistance Strategy 2006-2009; DFID's Country Assistance Plan 2003-6 and Interim Country Assistance Plan 2007-2009; SIDA's Country Reports 2006 and 2007 and its Country Strategy 2002-2005 (the current strategy was agreed in November 2008 and is not yet available); and USAID's Strategic Statement FY 2006-2010 and Budget Justification document for the South and Central Asia region.

<sup>10</sup> See Hossain and Kabeer (2004: 4095) for a discussion of how the crisis of the post-liberation period challenged the 'patriarchal bargain'; a body of research into the status and condition of women in Bangladesh was initiated around this time, starting with Sattar (1974).

This is the only recognition within the donor documents reviewed that the project of women's empowerment represents a political challenge facing opposition from the political elite, in which provision of protection and services may not challenge 'traditional views of women's role'.

Women's status and gender equality or equity appear in all the key policy documents to varying degrees and with divergent emphases. Within DFID's two Country Assistance Plans (CAPs) alone, the emphasis given to women's status and gender issues diverges widely: the 2003–2006 CAP centres on putting 'women and girls first', by mainstreaming a concern with gender across its activities:

[W]ithout a specific focus on women and girls the achievement of the gender related MDGs will be missed and... a specific focus on women and girls is likely to be one of the most effective development interventions. Some of the supported activities will demonstrate a direct impact on women and girls; others will impact at a broader level which will enable more effective participation by women and girls.  
(DFID 2003: 7)

By contrast, in DFID's 2007–2009 Interim Country Assistance Plan attention to gender and women is more specifically focused on exclusion from services, safety and violence, and extreme poverty. The later document represents a shift towards a concern with higher-end governance issues within the context of the suspension of the democratic process and a military-backed caretaker government from January 2007. This shift is also marked within the World Bank's 2006–2009 CAS statement. In neither document is there a successful integration of concerns about gender disparity with concerns about high-end or core national-level governance processes.<sup>11</sup>

The framing of the problem of gender disparities or women's low status is linked to the attainment of the MDGs in the World Bank, DFID and SIDA documents. That the MDGs dominate these texts makes political sense, as the donor agency can appeal to an international movement in preference to its own concerns with women's rights. It makes sense in terms of monitoring over time and across country, which matter to international bureaucracies seeking to show results across diverse contexts. As quantitative indicators of maternal mortality or educational access have become shorthand for women's present wellbeing and future development prospects references to such indicators encode unspoken and widely agreed assumptions about women's empowerment. Yet the dominance of MDG indicators puts a disproportionate emphasis on the presentation of outcome indicators of gender disparity, which often appear disconnected from the politics of public policy making and service delivery. Both DFID and the World Bank mention accountability as a concern with respect to achieving more gender-sensitive service delivery, although the specific problem of women's capacities to demand accountability is not addressed. SIDA's 2006 Country Report is the only document which places governance at the centre of the issue, noting that while Bangladesh had already achieved the MDG of gender parity in primary and secondary schooling, it needed 'to address some serious governance issues and in areas such as maternal mortality and child malnutrition' (2007: 4). While the DFID 2003–2006 CAP notes that Bangladesh will fail to achieve the gender equality MDG using the example that only 5 out of 300 parliamentary seats are occupied by women, no link is drawn between this failure of political representation and the long list of gender unequal social and health outcome indicators presented elsewhere in the document. There is some recognition that women's political weakness underlies national failures to attain MDGs, yet no explicit link between these and wider governance issues.

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<sup>11</sup> There has been a far stronger focus by both DFID and the World Bank in other documents and policy positions on women in local government, women's voice and accountability and responsiveness in public service delivery to women.

### 3.4.2 Pathways of Women's Empowerment

All the aid agency documents acknowledge important achievements have been made on advancing women's interests or gender equality in Bangladesh. All note gender parity in primary and secondary education. Some note Bangladesh's 'pioneering' role in microcredit, and most also discuss the role of the RMG industry in creating formal sector employment for two million poor young women. There is little evidence of any recognition of the underlying political and social pathways of change, or the resistance they have provoked. An exception is this from SIDA:

The status of women in Bangladesh has gradually improved over the last 20 years. Contributing factors include improved education standards and a degree of social liberalisation, primarily in the labour market, where women are increasingly in evidence. By and large, however, Bangladeshi society remains one in which traditional, patriarchal attitudes prevail; women are expected to care for the family, including children and older relations, while men are responsible for supporting them. Despite improvements in health care and education, social and economic discrimination of women continues. Moreover there are signs that violence against women, in the form of abuse and rape, is on the increase. One reason for this, apart from the general poverty and low awareness of *gender equality issues*, could be the tensions between groups and individuals generated by ongoing social and political changes.  
(SIDA 2002: 3)

It is interesting that in a global climate of anxiety about Islamic extremism, none of the more recent documents contain reflections of concern that progress on gender equality may be jeopardised by a militant backlash.

On the timetable for women's empowerment, agency documents reflect a recognition that progress has already been made in some difficult areas, but that some equally difficult future challenges remain. The argument could be set out as that a degree of poverty reduction and economic empowerment for Bangladeshi women has been seen as a necessary precursor for other forms of empowerment, which may (later) include political and wider social spheres. In the World Bank's rich and detailed recent assessment of gender in Bangladesh, *From Whispers to Voices*, the vision of women's empowerment is of a two-stage process. Future challenges can be seen to represent 'second-generation' gender equity challenges (World Bank 2008). So while Bangladesh has made some important gains in terms of numbers – there are millions of girls in school, immunised children, registered marriages, loans taken – key social, political and governance institutions remain unreformed and unaccountable to women. These second generation challenges include institutional and cultural reforms that may be less amenable than quantitative goals of expansion of services.

There is a strong emphasis on the material dimensions of women's wellbeing, discussions of gender equality and women's status are crowded into thematic discussions of poverty and extreme poverty (particularly DFID) and of public service delivery, particularly around maternal and infant or child health services and education. There is a shared assumption that poverty reduction success entails a sharper focus on women. USAID's strategic statement explains that gender is a cross-cutting theme (along with corruption and youth) because 'Absent strong promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, the goal of poverty reduction remains elusive' (USAID 2005: 11). DFID's Interim CAP (2007) concludes that:

Gender inequality and other types of exclusion limit access to jobs, assets, political influence, justice, nutrition and services for many. When inequality is high, economic growth delivers less poverty reduction.  
(DFID 2007: 5)

The World Bank's CAS (2006) envisions its role as:

Helping the Government meet the MDGs while also enhancing the quality and efficiency of social service provision to the poor, particularly women, by strengthening sector governance and accountability and enhancing 'voice' and participation. The program will support governance reforms and investments in health, education, water and sanitation, environment, microfinance, strengthening of local government, and safety net approaches.

(World Bank 2006: 4)

These perspectives on gender and poverty show that much faith remains that women's empowerment can occur in markets and classrooms, and that household domestic or social relations can change. There is some unevenness in the extent to which 'rights' are treated as the mechanism through which change can be effected. This appears to relate closely to the interests of domestic constituencies in aid donor countries. With respect to women garment factory workers; for instance, while DFID's CAP 2003–2006 is concerned with the impact of the phasing out of preferential global trade agreements on women workers, SIDA and USAID both mention a focus on women's labour rights as critical to women's employment gains in the export industry. Across the documents was a shared and explicit concern with women's rights to protection against violence and possibly rising concerns about women's personal safety. These reflect a growing theme within aid donor discourse in Bangladesh that recognises that human security, and particularly that of women and girls, is a problem in its own right, as well as through its instrumental links to aspects of economic development. Domestic violence, justice sector reform, and trafficking in persons are all noted as domains in which women's and girls' rights are abrogated.

There remains a focus on attention to women's rights and interests where these are seen to be connected to household welfare, as with the development NGOs and political parties, but no directly instrumentalist arguments about why gender equality is a goal worth pursuing.

As a whole, the documents suggest less faith in women's participation in politics as producing positive change. This is despite the growing acknowledgement that politics and governance are integrally connected with gender equality in its material dimensions. The DFID CAP 2003–2006 summarises the connections between political representation and material wellbeing as follows:

Gaps are also apparent in terms of economic activity and political participation. Women's earnings are almost 50% less than men's. Their representation in professional and technical jobs and in executive and managerial positions is poor, and is particularly striking in the political sphere where only 2% of parliamentary seats are held by women. Women often find it difficult to fully participate in the growth process, for example by restriction on their movement outside the home or village or because they are less well educated. Where they do take advantage of economic opportunities, for example in the garment industry and increasingly in international migration their lower status makes them vulnerable to increased abuse and personal risk. Their very low level of representation in political life make (sic) it difficult to achieve protection or redress.

(DFID 2003: 5)

The Interim CAP of 2007–2009 contends that 'corruption and messy politics' explain persistent poverty and inequality in Bangladesh, without addressing these as gendered issues or problems with gender-differentiated outcomes. There is some reference to women's participation in local *Union Parishad* politics, particularly in the World Bank documents, but this is recognised as having been limited by the token nature of women's participation in decision making. No reference could be found with respect to women's

participation in mass party politics, nor any suggestion that this could be a route to women's empowerment. By contrast, there is considerably more reference to work with civil society as a route towards strengthening women's voice at local levels. This is most notable in SIDA's strategy document (2002–5). A similar emphasis is identified in an evaluation of DFID's strategy for gender equality and women's empowerment (Waterhouse and Neville 2005).

The exclusion of party politics from consideration is of interest given that the experience of democratic rule has been so predominantly of a female executive. Perhaps this reflects the somewhat misogynistic debate within Bangladeshi elite civil society that elides governance failures with the gender of the political leadership (the so-called '*Begum* problem'). Donors may be reluctant to engage directly in that debate, but its exclusion is of particular interest given the idea of women's participation as a corrective for corruption (Goetz 2007). A related exclusion is the issue of religious backlashes against advances in women's rights, and how to tackle this. Only SIDA noted the potential for Islamist politics to derail progress towards women's advancement.

### **3.4.3 Whose concept?**

As noted above, there is a residual instrumentalism in the view of women's empowerment as directly and causally connected to their economic role. Bangladeshi women are cast as the potentially productive or deserving poor, without whose full participation in development, poverty reduction remains elusive. The elision of 'Bangladeshi women' with 'poor Bangladeshi women' in donor discourse drives the argument that poverty reduction largely means women's economic empowerment in this context.

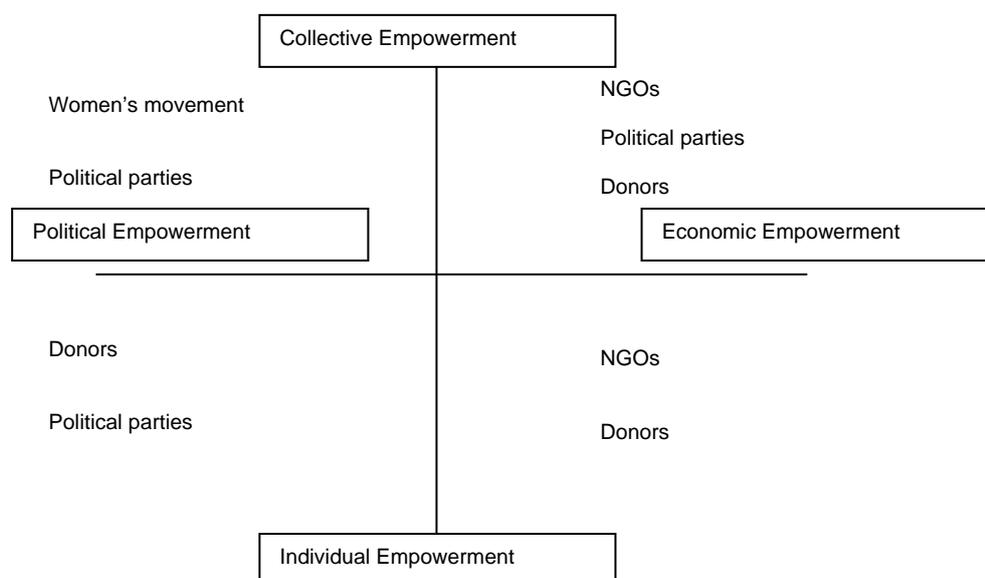
This emphasis on the material dimensions of power is not necessarily misplaced in a country with as significant a poverty problem as Bangladesh and in which gender and poverty interact to reinforce and multiply disadvantage and exclusion. However, this entails a loss of focus on process, particularly political processes at the national level. Overall, there has been a substantial degree of mutual 'fit' between the domestic and international agendas on women's empowerment within Bangladesh. The donor discourses are generally respectful of Bangladesh's achievements and the domestic position, and defer to the national political and policy leadership on sensitive issues of women and gender. It is also of interest to note that blatantly instrumentalist arguments about the importance of women's development appear to be less viable than they once may have been – even in the context of Bangladesh, where they may enjoy local political traction and wide social acceptance. That such arguments seem currently less viable may reflect the influence of rights-based approaches and the women's movement on donor discourses; it may not, however, prove to be a permanent shift.

The documents reviewed nevertheless feature a highly selective look at women and gender, from which key issues are excluded, such as women's national political participation. A second issue is the silence, to date, on how to integrate women's empowerment concerns into core governance reforms, to make the state more accountable to women.

## 4 Conclusions: have we come a long way?

The discussion above shows that there are multiple discourses with divergent meanings and political implications for women's empowerment in Bangladesh. There is a superficial similarity, with all actors using concepts such as rights, entitlement, advancement, to discuss women's empowerment. However they have used these concepts to mean very different things. How Jamaat-e-Islami, the Islamist political party, defines women's entitlements is not the same as how entitlement is defined by the women's organisations.

**Figure 4.1 Revisiting the double continuum of women's empowerment**



Going back to Figure 1.1 on the 'double continuum of women's empowerment' we will use it to discuss the main dimensions of difference among the various discourses. We have a range of meanings along a continuum from empowerment as a mainly individual trajectory with a clearly economic pathway, to views of empowerment as essentially collective, fundamentally political, and about the distribution of power. The NGOs remain very much on the right hand side of the figure, seeing their direct role as individual and collective empowerment of poor people, particularly women, mainly in economic terms. Donor discourses similarly focus on individual empowerment, but also see women's empowerment as situated within the economic growth process; the political focus seems fixed on local politics and service delivery issues. However, the donor discourse is generally concentrated in the bottom half of the quadrant. The women's movement occupies the top left-hand corner, the space in which women's empowerment comes to have a strongly collective and political meaning. Political parties appear to have a more varied presence on this map. Political party discourse generally focuses on the upper half of the diagram. All the actors with the exception of women's organisations take an instrumental view on women and women's rights and needs, and yet women are, in different ways, envisaged as part of the overall strategy, not as marginal to it. To some extent their view of women's empowerment is constitutive and an indicator of Bangladesh's progress.

The focus on instrumentalism indicates that there are continuities with the previous discourse on women's empowerment among donors, development NGOs, and political parties. These

continuities persist partly because these discourses have a strong orientation towards what can be done *for* women (and not working *with/alongside* them) so that they become effective agents of development. This orientation translates into an emphasis on individual women's capacity building, household welfare, and exclusion of collective action and structural change, resulting in energies and activities being focused on particular sectors such as education, microcredit, health, skills training etc. This does not mean that a focus on these sectors is unnecessary, or that the contribution of women to the development process should be undervalued. Given the high levels of poverty and a society where maintaining one's familial and social relationships are key assets for women's survival and moving ahead, an emphasis on economic empowerment and family welfare demonstrates a clear analysis of the context within which women's empowerment takes place. However, an emphasis on these aspects excludes exploring alternative routes for women's empowerment.

Women's empowerment entered the NGOs' and aid agencies' discourse in Bangladesh in the 1980s when the efficiency and anti-poverty approaches to WID gained ground (Moser 1989). The emphasis on demonstrating what Bangladeshi women can do for the development of Bangladesh became crucial in the agencies' programme design. For the development NGOs, the need to remain apolitical to avoid state repression also influenced them in excluding collective action from their programmes, many of these programmes may have been directed towards the state for its accountability failures. For the political parties the instrumentalist logic allows them to avoid any political controversy that may arise from being accused of implementing a 'Western' and anti-Islamic agenda. They may be reluctant to take on more structural approaches to women's empowerment fearing that they may be politically costly.

What has changed in recent decades is that this emphasis on instrumentalism is more subtle than it was when Alam and Matin (1984) wrote their piece. This change may be a result of the following. First, the influence feminist critique may have had on the donor and development NGO discourse both at the international and national levels. These critiques may have resulted in a change among the development actors towards toning down the instrumentalist discourse. Second, the entry of Bangladeshi feminists into national offices of the donor agencies and the development NGOs has influenced how women's empowerment is approached by these agencies (Nazneen *et al.* 2011). This partially contributed to the following developments: (1) a focus on some non-traditional areas other than economic empowerment (such as legal aid, trafficking, etc); (2) funding of some women's rights organisations (i.e. BMP) and networks for collective mobilisation (i.e. networks such as Doorbar, a network of female-headed locally-based organisations, working primarily on preventing violence against women, with a goal to creating an alternative platform for the women's movement). Undeniably, funding of these programmes/organisations had to be justified within the overall development discourse prevailing within these agencies. However, the rise of the rights-based approach in the 1990s facilitated the justification of these shifts. In addition, the consultation mechanisms and processes that were created to prepare for the Beijing conference, and the ascendancy of the 'good governance' agenda which required extensive consultation with civil society actors created scope for women's organisations to interact with development NGOs and donor agencies. All of these changes permitted Bangladeshi feminists and their allies within these agencies to take a more creative interpretation of the dominant instrumentalist approach (Nazneen *et al.* 2011). These developments led to a shift towards women's empowerment being presented in a less overtly instrumentalist manner in the public documents of these development agencies.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This does not imply that the women's empowerment agenda is always deemed important. Since 2000, the 'women's agenda' has been discussed only once at the Bangladesh development forum, a forum which brings Bangladesh government and all the donors together (Nazneen *et al.* 2011).

The Bangladesh case shows that the instrumentalist discourse has been useful for promoting individual empowerment of women since this focus stresses increasing women's agency, i.e. the 'power to' dimension. The indicators discussed in Section 2 reveal that there have been significant changes and improvements in women's conditions. The success Bangladesh and Bangladeshi women have achieved in making headway in education, healthcare, and labour force participation, has been facilitated by the various programmes and policies implemented by all of these actors and the wider discourse on how empowerment occurs. However, this progress in improving women's wellbeing has yet to be matched by progress in dealing with the 'second generation challenges', i.e. institutional and cultural changes.

The analysis of these multiple discourses shows that except for women's organisations, others have left out the different aspects of power that are related to 'changing the rules of the game'. This is because of the nature of the instrumentalist approach, which deliberately avoids the more structural aspects of women's position and power. Admittedly, the donor agencies, development NGOs and political parties emphasise women's participation in different spheres, such as women's political representation in different government bodies or participation in implementing various development programmes, as shorthand for women's participation in decision-making structures. However the nature of women's participation envisioned in these discourses is largely limited to being consulted by these actors, which does not necessarily lead to structural change.

In light of the above, what has changed in the discourse on Bangladeshi women's empowerment? Have we really come a long way in this new millennium? What becomes clear from the earlier discussion is that there is no one actor that determines the discourse or sets the agenda around women's empowerment. The way knowledge is produced on women's empowerment in Bangladesh has changed. The research and development agenda is no longer exclusively driven by the donors or a Northern research agenda, which was the case in 1984 when Alam and Matin wrote their article. We have shown that the ideas associated with empowerment (i.e. rights, entitlement, advancement, emancipation) are not Western imports. These have strong links with domestic political traditions, as clear from how women's organisations and political parties use these concepts. Undeniably, the state (and NGO) gender and development agenda in the 1970s and 1980s was strongly influenced by donor funding (Goetz 2001). Analysis and critiques of this influence are extensively discussed by Bangladeshi feminist researchers and activists located both in and outside Bangladesh (Jahan 1995; Chowdhury 2001; Shehabuddin 2008; Nazneen and Sultan 2009; Halim Chowdhury 2009). This critique was at a nascent stage when Alam and Matin (1984) were writing.

There is a tendency to read the history of women's empowerment discourse in Bangladesh by focusing on how the international discourse on women's rights (i.e. UN conventions) and gender planning approaches have influenced the Government of Bangladesh, development NGOs, and women's organisations and how their actions are influenced by the prevailing funding situation (see White 1992; Karim 2008). Given the epistemic power that donors have in setting the development agenda and the history of donor dependency this reading is a correct but limited one. This analysis leaves out the fact that how these national actors think about women's empowerment is also influenced by the strong links women's empowerment has to domestic political traditions. It also includes an implicit assumption that these national actors, particularly women's organisations, do not *critically* reflect upon how feminist practices may be limited by the epistemic power wielded by donors (see Rozario 2004) or the 'depoliticisation' of the women's and other social movements that has resulted from an

excessive policy focus<sup>13</sup> (see Halim Chowdhury 2009). Moreover, it denies these national actors agency in influencing (if not moulding) the women's empowerment and development discourse in Bangladesh. Very few studies, whether academic research or evaluation/assessment reports, have focused on how women's organisations, social movement oriented NGOs, or other actors have creatively used these international discourses on empowerment to create pressure on the state to address women's strategic interests (Nazneen and Sultan 2010). Certainly, we do not suggest that women's organisations or NGOs are not influenced by the GAD discourse or their need to secure funds has not led to shifts in their programmes on gender. What is overlooked is how successful Southern practices, such as *shalish* models (alternative dispute resolution), women's networks (i.e. Beijing networks, sex workers network, women migrant workers associations, etc.) have influenced the rethinking of the GAD agenda for Bangladesh by donors and Northern scholars. In fact, there are multiple exchanges among the national and international actors and influences in knowledge production. Some of the actors, such as the donors, may have a more dominant voice but the other voices, such as that of women's organisations or development NGOs cannot be discounted. Concepts such as women's empowerment take on a life of their own with various actors and historical periods endowing various meanings to the same word. In Bangladesh, while the donors and international actors have influenced the meanings received by national actors such as the NGOs, political parties and women's organisations, these too have influence in shaping the new meanings that the concept of women's empowerment takes on.

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<sup>13</sup> There is also an implicit (at times explicit) assumption made there is an absence of critical reflection among the Bangladeshi urban-based, educated middle class feminists on issues such as class, religion and ethnicity. It is also assumed that the feminists in development organisations/women's organisations have emerged as 'new patrons' of the rural/non-Muslim/non-Bengali women. While the activities and practices of many feminist organisations can be labelled as such, a strong critique of the limitations of the feminist movement also exists, which unfortunately remains underexplored in these texts.

# Annex

**Table A.1 Estimated maternal mortality ratios (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births), selected comparator countries**

Country	1995	2000	2005
Bangladesh	600	380	570
Cambodia	590	450	540
India	440	540	450
Indonesia	470	230	420
Malawi	580	1800	1100
Nepal	830	740	830
Pakistan	200	500	320
Tanzania	110	1500	...
Vietnam	95	130	150

Source: Maternal Mortality Statistics 1995, 2000, 2005 (WHO 2001, 2004, 2007).

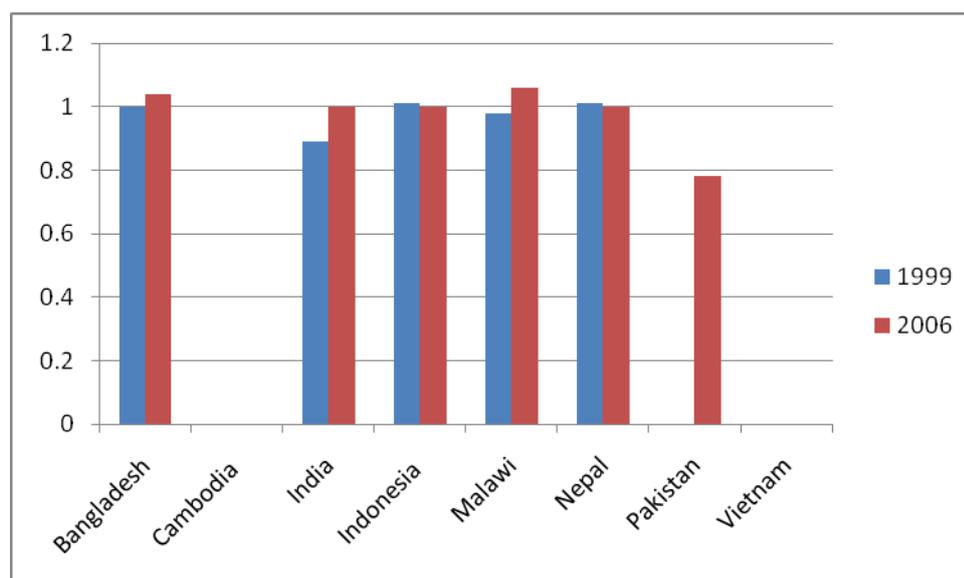
Note: These estimated MMRs come with the health warning that they cannot be used for trend analysis, they are presented here to give a sense of how Bangladesh appeared to be faring against comparator countries at three points in time.

**Table A.2 Births attended by skilled personnel**

Country	1990–1999	2000–2008
Bangladesh	14	18
Cambodia	34	44
India	42	47
Indonesia	43	73
Malawi	50	54
Nepal	9	19
Pakistan	19	39
Vietnam	77	88
Low income countries	39	41
Lower middle income countries	62	70
Upper middle income countries	90	95
High income	98	99
Global	61	65

Source: WHO (2009), *World Health Statistics*

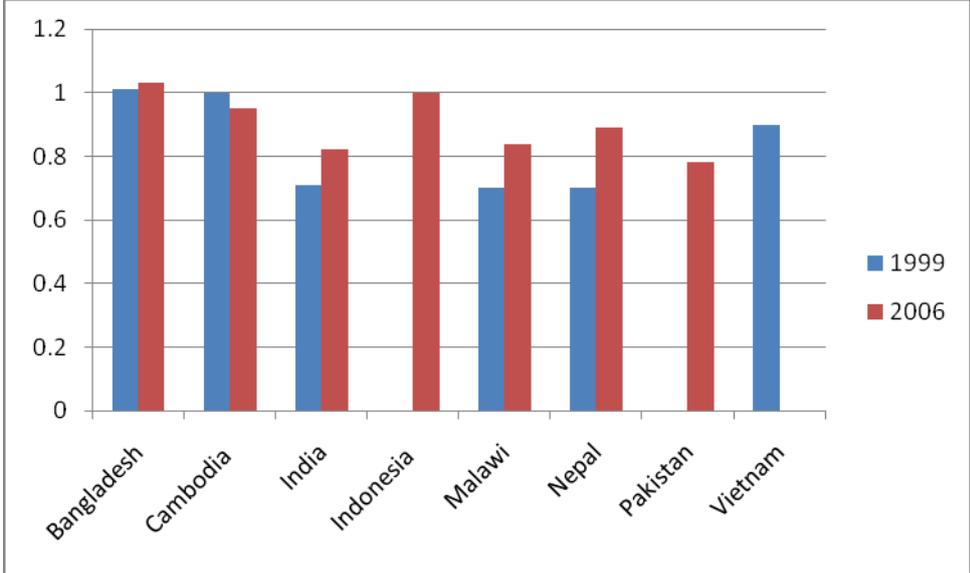
**Figure A.1 Gender parity index, primary enrolment, selected countries**



Source: UNESCO (2008)

Note: A score of 1 means enrolments are equal by gender; less than 1 means fewer girls than boys; more than 1 means more girls than boys.

**Figure A.2 Gender parity index, secondary enrolment, selected countries**



Source: UNESCO (2008)

Note: A score of 1 means enrolments are equal by gender; less than 1 means fewer girls than boys; more than 1 means more girls than boys. Secondary enrolment includes both junior and higher secondary

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