

Building Solidarity Against Patriarchy

Santi Theresa Rozario



CARE Bangladesh
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Abbreviations

ASK	Ain-O-Salish Kendra
BAF	Bangladesh Adivasi Forum
BLAST	Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust
BNP	Bangladesh National Party
BNWLA	Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (name of NGO)
Brotee	(name of NGO)
BUILD	Building Union Infrastructure for Local Development (part of IFSP)
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
Doorbar	National network of women's organizations, coordinated by NariPokkho
ESDO	Eco-Social Development Association (name of NGO)
FFS	farmers' field school
IFSP	Integrated Food Security Program (CARE program)
LCS	Labour Contracting Society
NariPokkho	(name of NGO)
PHL	Partnership for Healthy Life (CARE program)
RDRS	Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service, NGO in Northern Bangladesh
REFLECT	Freirian participatory approach employed by ActionAid Bangladesh
SHABGE	Strengthening Household Access to Bari Gardening Extension (CARE program)
SHAHAR	Supporting Household Activities for Hygiene, Assets and Revenue (CARE program, part of IFSP)
SHOUHARDO	Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities (CARE program)
UBINIG	Unnayan Bikalper Nitinirdharoni Gobeshona (Policy Research for Development Alternatives) (name of NGO)
UP	Union Parishad (local council, representing a group of villages)
VDC	Village Development Committee

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I take full responsibility for the interpretations and analysis presented in this report.

Santi Rozario

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Report

This report relates to CARE's work on women's empowerment in Northwest Bangladesh, and is intended to assist in planning for the proposed CARE-DFID Partnership Programme Agreement. The overall goal for the Partnership Programme Agreement between CARE and DFID is to achieve the following:

Through the combined efforts of development actors at multiple levels, by 2015 women in Bangladesh live in an environment where they are *valued* and *respected*, and where discrimination and abuse are significantly reduced in comparison with levels in 2004, enabling them to influence decisions that affect their lives and to contribute more substantially to national and local development. [emphasis mine]

The proposed Partnership Programme Agreement proposes to reach this goal through the following five intersecting and overlapping strategies:

1. Empowerment of women and girls through *education*
2. Increased *economic and employment opportunities* for women
3. Greater inclusion, participation and influence of women in *governance*
4. Promotion of *solidarity* and collaborative action for fulfilling women's rights, challenging patriarchal attitudes and ideologies
5. Improved *reproductive health* and resilience to the impact of *HIV/AIDS*.

This report is concerned primarily with the fourth item. My brief (see Appendix 1) was to identify, analyze and document existing solidarity movements and organizations that address gender discrimination, as well as to describe the relevance of the approaches being used. I was also asked to identify the key beliefs within Bengali culture which support the local system of patriarchy. The material in the report is based on meetings in Dhaka with representatives of organizations involved in promoting women's rights, scholars and researchers working on gender issues in Bangladesh in September and October 2004, and on a five-day field visit to CARE activities in Rangpur, Dinajpur and Bogra in early October 2004, as well as on my own previous ethnographic research in Bangladesh on related topics from 1983 onwards. A list of meetings and field visits is provided as Appendix 2.

1.2 General Comments

Anyone who has any real understanding of Bangladeshi patriarchy will appreciate that making an effective challenge to patriarchal ideologies in Bangladesh is extremely difficult. The ideology that supports patriarchy in Bangladesh centres on concepts such as *izzat* (honour, focusing in particular on the control of women's sexuality), *lajja-sharam*

(shame) and *parda* (*purdah*, restrictions on women's mobility). These concepts pervade the whole society and indeed support the class structure of the society, since the practicalities of survival mean that the poor are less able to meet the demands of honour, shame and *parda* than the better-off. What this means in the present context is that all those who stand to gain from the hierarchical class structure of Bangladeshi society, women as well as men, feel threatened by any attack on these principles.

In particular, patriarchy would not survive without the cooperation of women, especially women from the "middle" and "upper" classes, both in the villages and in urban contexts.¹ These women cooperate in part at least because they stand to gain from the hierarchical class structure. It is through their "purity" and "honour" (*izzat*) that their men can retain their own honour and position within the class hierarchy. And of course the honour of their men has a flow-on effect on themselves.

Of course, these women also suffer from Bangladeshi patriarchy. Poor and illiterate women are not necessarily more adversely affected by patriarchy than the middle and the upper middle classes, although it is true that their poverty often makes their situation much more unbearable in material terms. In some ways, the physical constraints of patriarchy (*parda* etc) are more directly experienced by middle class women. It is not necessarily easy for middle class women to fight patriarchy. In a society such as Bangladesh, which lacks any effective State-provided social security system, most women are ultimately dependent on the men of their family for support, and they cannot afford to alienate them. Marriage is regarded as essential for all women, and this in its turn is linked to patrilocal residence, patrilineal inheritance, and the lack of any socially-approved place for a woman outside her husband's home.

At the same time, the relatively high status of middle and upper class women in the system is tied up with their accepting the assumptions on which it is built. It is not surprising that most of them go along with what Kandiyoti has called the "patriarchal bargain" by which they receive security and projection in exchange for accepting their own subordination (Kandiyoti 1988: 282-3).

Yet it is the middle and upper classes, women as well as men, who continue to keep the gender ideology of Bangladeshi society in force, not least by their attitudes and behaviour to those who step out of line. This includes lower-class women who are forced for survival to take on jobs that are seen as compromising their purity and *izzat* (e.g. garment factory work), as well as women of all classes who choose not to marry. Perhaps above all, women as well as men fuel the demand for the ever-increasing dowry payments that quite literally devalue women in relation to men. Until these middle-class

¹ I use the term "middle and upper classes" (or just "middle class") as shorthand for households whose material status is relatively secure, who are able to meet survival needs without difficulty, who are in a position to invest in secondary and perhaps tertiary education for their sons and daughters, etc. The class structure of Bangladeshi society is complex and I do not have room to deal with it in detail here. There are significant differences between the rural class structure in the Northwest, the focus of the present study, and the Southern and Eastern regions (Dhaka, Comilla etc) (Wood 1981). Villages in the Northwest typically have higher degrees of inequality, and are often still dominated by elite groups whose position goes back to their *jotedar* status during the colonial period and before (e.g. Bode 2002: 9-12, Bode and Howes 2002: 39ff; "Village 2" in Rahman 1986). Villages in the South and East often have fewer families with large land holdings and a more fluid class structure, following what Wood refers to as a "minifundist" pattern (e.g. Rozario 1992). Yet in both areas the wealthier families define themselves and justify their position in terms of honour, purity and the observance of *parda*. The same is true in the cities, with the partial and limited exception of a small Westernized and more internationally-oriented component of the urban elite.

gender values and behaviours change, it is unlikely that there will be a real change to Bangladeshi patriarchy as a whole.

In Section 5 of this paper, I go into more detail about how I see these processes as operating. I also examine the increasing presence of Islamic values within Bangladeshi society. This development, itself in part a reaction to Bangladesh's vulnerable position in the new global economic and political order, and to the progressive polarization between Islamic and Western societies, poses both new difficulties and some new possibilities for women.

1.3 Empowerment and Solidarity

So how do we achieve women's empowerment in such a situation? In fact, I would like us to focus not so much on "empowerment," a concept now very loosely adopted by everyone for everything they do these days (Rozario 1997). "Empowerment" can easily be interpreted as something that can take place at the individual level, without any real changes to the existing oppressive structures (class or patriarchy). However, if oppressive structures persist, individual empowerment is usually not sustainable, for the reasons we have seen above. The forces which maintain women in their present situation, and which lead to the ways in which men regard them and behave toward them, and in which they regard and behave toward each other, are unchanged. This is why the proposed Partnership Programme Agreement's emphasis on the creation of *solidarity* (or *collective* empowerment) is so important.

Most development work in Bangladesh has been concerned with individual empowerment, as is demonstrated by the preoccupation with micro-credit among most Bangladeshi NGOs.² Increasingly, the model of development is one of a neo-liberal free market economy, in which competition is the name of the game. This means that the onus is on the individual to change his or her situation. If she fails to succeed, it is her fault, it is because she is illiterate, she is poor, she is lazy, she is unable to take advantage of the opportunities that are supposedly available to her.

Here it should be remembered that the Bangladeshi social system, based on patrilineal kinship groups with in-marrying women, itself tends to isolate women from their own family support networks and create competition rather than solidarity between them. Women are constantly criticizing other women for their failures. If a woman is beaten up by her husband, it is her own fault. If he gambles away the family income and refuses to meet the Grameen Bank repayments, so that the family is plunged further and further into debt, it is her fault too: she should be able to control him. Village women's conversation among themselves constantly reiterates these themes. A middle-class

² The explicit assumption behind micro-credit schemes of the Grameen Bank type was that, given a small input of credit, poor women would become successful village-level entrepreneurs. The reality, as has increasingly been noted, is rather different, with women often acting as little more than guarantors for their husband's access to finance, the building up of increasingly high levels of household indebtedness, with particularly negative effects on women, the further inflation of dowry demands, and the general exclusion of the poorest sectors of the population. While the women's groups associated with Grameen Bank and other micro-credit schemes were initially seen as contexts for building up women's solidarity, in practice their effects were largely divisive, except in reinforcing the solidarity of the wealthier women, who controlled the schemes, against the poorer, who were increasingly excluded from them (Rozario 2001a, 2002a).

urban woman is also likely to see herself as at fault through some innate weakness of her own – her inferiority not only in relation to her husband, but also to other middle-class women who give the outward appearance of being happily married and having good gender relations with their husbands. While development organizations and the relatively small number of middle-class feminists may understand the problem in cultural or structural terms, most women are unlikely to see it in this way.

By contrast, solidarity entails the collective movement and collective empowerment of a group. This can only happen when women start to become aware of their common interests and the ways in which they are all constrained by Bangladeshi patriarchy and its associated ways of thinking. So I believe that to cross the present barriers facing Bangladeshi women, we need solidarity (or *conscientization*, to use Paulo Freire's term for collectively-based empowerment) among women and organizations working with women's rights at every level: national and regional and at village level.

As Kate Young has noted, real empowerment implies the “radical alteration of the processes and structures which reproduce women's subordinate position as a gender” (Young 1993). Thus the underlying challenge facing us is, how do we promote solidarity and collective empowerment?

This report talks about solidarity and collective empowerment in several different contexts: solidarity among women's organizations, solidarity among poor rural women, solidarity between the urban middle-class women and poor rural women. To begin with, what signs of collective empowerment are there in the present practices of Bangladeshi women's organizations?

2 Women's Organizations and their Strategies

2.1 Introduction

I was given a series of tasks in my Terms of Reference (see Appendix 1), the first being “to learn about and analyze the strategies that are being used by women’s organizations/forums to address women’s rights,” and in particular to answer the following:

- Identify existing forums and organizations that are involved in promoting women’s rights.
- Identify the key rights issues that are being addressed by these organizations. Do these issues represent the key causes of the oppression of women or are they more symptomatic? Do they also address socioeconomic discrimination between women, and among women within the family?
- Are the various movements connected to any actual solidarity movements at the village level? How are these movements perceived by the poor? Are they relevant to their concerns?
- What has been the effectiveness of these movements and what are the issues, which constrain their effectiveness.

Section 2 deals with these issues. I met over twenty-five representatives of organizations involved in promoting women’s rights during my research for this paper, either individually or at a group meeting at the CARE staff house (on 14th October 2004). I also discussed these organizations and others with several other scholars and researchers.

All the organizations represented, along with many not represented at the 14th October meeting, are working to improve the position of Bangladeshi women in one form or another. CARE gender staff are undoubtedly familiar with the kind of work in which these organizations are engaged. Representatives of the organizations were asked at the meeting to nominate three issues their organization addressed. As the results showed (see Appendix 3), these are very diverse. Appendix 4 summarizes the different strategies recommended by a number of the organizations. They all have numerous success stories to share of their activities.³

The issues addressed include general and broad development issues such as economic empowerment, political empowerment, social mobilization, women’s legal rights, insecurity of indigenous women, promotion of use of local-based knowledge and non-chemical agricultural practice and so on.

³ E.g. NariPokkho and the Doorbar network’s extensive work on violence against women, including acid throwing, rape and other form of sexual harassment; many cases where Mohila Parishad (MP) organized rallies and movement and managed to get the cooperation of all the organizations, etc. The legal organizations are of course often part of this wider women’s movement, and are often instrumental in organizing or facilitating these actions.

Broadly speaking, there are legal organizations whose focus is on legal advocacy and judiciary activism to ensure rights of women and children in different aspects of their lives. Others work more directly with development NGOs and describe themselves as concerned with broad inter-related issues of economic and political empowerment. Some have a special focus on “social mobilization”. Bangladesh Adivasi Forum (BAF) has a special focus on indigenous women. UBINIG’s focus is fairly radical in trying to encourage peasants to use local-based knowledge and chemical-free fertilizers and so on.⁴

With the exception of a small number of key issues, I did not get the impression of much orientation towards collaboration around common causes. The most significant common issue was violence against women. It was clear in discussion that for all of the organizations, whether they nominated it or not, violence against women was a major issue which they have been working with in one form or another. During the discussion, a number of organizations also mentioned their work on violence against women of minority communities, although nobody had nominated this explicitly. This of course connects with BAF’s concern with insecurity of indigenous women, as well as with the insecurity of other non-Muslim communities around the country.

It seems clear that the most effective way to build solidarity so far has been through broad issue-based campaigns such as those centering around violence against women. However, violence against women has limitations as an issue around which a fundamental critique of women’s role in society can be mounted (see below).

Beside violence against women, there are relatively few issues on which all women’s organizations have achieved solidarity among themselves.⁵ The most prominent has been on the issue of right to direct election of women to the 30 reserved seats in the Parliament.

2.2 Divisions in the Women’s Movement

During my interviews, especially when I was able to see individuals separately before or after the 14th October meeting, it became clear that the picture of a united women’s movement is misleading in other ways as well. While the women’s movement in Bangladesh has come a long way in terms of its ability to make many women’s issues into big public concerns, the recent political climate in the country is evidently taking its toll on the women’s movement. Bangladeshi politics has become progressively more and more polarized between the Awami League and Bangladesh National Party, with the Jama’at-i-Islami and other Islamist organizations also playing an increasingly prominent role. Signs of this polarization were evident in the response to the bombing of the Awami League rally on August 21st this year, with some organizations supporting the Awami

⁴ The issue-based nature of some organizations can make it very difficult to build up cooperation. For example, UBINIG will apparently not work with BRAC because of BRAC’s use of genetically-modified seeds.

⁵ Another issue where I was told that there was apparent solidarity among a number of organizations was during the 1999 female students’ movement against sexual harassment, including rape, on the grounds of university campuses. At the time, the Awami League was in power and it seems that Sammilito Nari Samaj had called for rallies. However, I suspect that many other organizations refrained from taking part in these rallies for fear of seen to be going against the Awami League, and by implication giving support to the Bangladesh National Party.

League's call for a *hartal* and others, including the Sammilito Nari Samaj, not doing so.⁶ Another issue which is failing to attract the support of all the women's organizations is the demand for a Uniform Family Code, with those who are sympathetic to Jama'at-i-Islami failing to support this campaign.

It is difficult to get a clear picture of how these alignments operate in a brief visit, since organizations have an interest in presenting themselves as unaligned, whatever the true state of affairs. However it seems clear that, in the present climate, there is an increasing tendency for women's organizations, like other parts of civil society right down to the village level (e.g. Bode 2002, Bode and Howes 2002), to line up on one or the other side of the political divide, pro-Awami League or pro-BNP. As the Uniform Family Code issue illustrates, the opposition between "Islamic" and "secular" values is also increasingly important.

Other women's organizations are apparently responding to this polarization by concentrating narrowly on their "own" projects. Both these developments are of serious concern as CARE looks to commence a large-scale programme to promote women's empowerment and solidarity.

There are other problems in terms of the solidarity of women's organizations. There were suggestions from two of my interviewees that the younger generation (under 35) are not joining any movements. Several people commented that "you see the same face again and again". One woman said, "One gets burnt out".

2.3 Is the Women's Movement Addressing the Root Causes of Oppression?

When we ask whether even the more successful campaigns around women's issues are really dealing with the *root causes of the oppression of women*, this increasing enmeshment of women's organizations with party politics already gives us reason to doubt their ability to do so effectively.

At one level, anyone working towards women's solidarity or empowerment is clear on what the main problem is for women. It is, in one word, "patriarchy". Everyone has some understanding too about what patriarchy consists of. However, its specific form in Bangladesh has to be understood in terms of the structural factors sketched in Section 1 and discussed in more detail in Section 5: patrilocal residence, patrilineal inheritance, the lack of a socially-sanctioned identity or role for mature women outside of the marital institution, the consequent pressure for marriage at any cost, leading in the context of the increasing monetarization of the rural economy to the rise of dowry and the progressive inflation of dowry payments since around the late 1960s. It is these factors which explain much of women's problems, including not only violence against women, polygamy, trafficking in women (Blanchet 2002), divorce and abandonment, but also child marriage, the poor health of women who commence giving birth at an early age, and so on.

⁶ *New Age*, Aug. 30th 2004; e-text at www.newagebd.com/2004/aug/30/front.html, accessed 18th Oct. 2004. ASK and BNWLA also failed to support the *hartal*, though this can be understood in terms of the need for these legal organizations to maintain a neutral position.

In part, the more extreme consequences of these factors, and of the increasing divide between the rich and the poor in Bangladesh, have been relieved somewhat for many poor women by the new employment opportunities available outside the home, in contexts such as garments factories. The need to take up such work to maintain household income has meant that many poorer women are no longer confined in their households; they are mobile and economically much more viable, though their salary and work conditions are still poor, and their men are also very poor.⁷

The growth of the garment industry and of other work opportunities for women outside the home has been pointed to as an indication of a major structural change in the position of women in Bangladeshi society, and in some ways it undoubtedly has opened up new opportunities for women. However, I believe that we can overstate the degree to which they mean a fundamental change in gender attitudes and in the position of women. In many ways, the old attitudes remain in place, despite a shift in the boundaries of what is regarded as acceptable behaviour for some women.

This can be seen clearly when we turn to look at the situation of urban middle-class women. Although a significant percentage of middle-class women are out in the workforce, the vast majority are still restricted in their mobility. These women's families do not generally have any problem in allowing them to go to colleges or even universities, but what they do after their degrees is another matter. Working outside the home, except in a limited range of acceptable occupations, remains generally unacceptable.

The relative rigidity in the lives of urban middle class women can also be understood by their desire to maintain a distance from poorer women. Their relative seclusion (except to go out for education, to those limited jobs where "decency" can be guaranteed, or perhaps to go shopping for gold and other display items!) guarantees the honour of themselves and their men in the family. In this way it distances themselves from the poor, who are forced to compromise their honour by working in garments factories or other situations regarded as being morally questionable. Thus middle-class women co-operate in their own seclusion, to retain the family's, as well as their own, class distance from the lower classes.⁸ With the increasing Islamization of Bangladeshi society, the adoption of the *burqa* is a logical extension of this process. The need for the poorer classes to work outside the home in the kinds of jobs (e.g. garment factories) where the *burqa* is not a practical option means that wearing the *burqa* again symbolizes a claim to status over those who cannot afford to do so.⁹

⁷ According to Salma Chaudhuri Zohir, the mean age of female workers in the garments industry was 19.5 in a 1997 BIDS survey. 50.2% were married, 38.7% currently married, 11.1% widowed, separated or divorced. 67% were migrants from rural areas. (Zohir 2001: 83, 85). In a study of 784 factory workers by Rita Afsar in 1996-98, three-quarters of the 595 women "belonged to functionally landless households and on an average, had 0.5 acres of cultivable land". 43% were currently unmarried and about one-eighth were widows, separated or divorced. About half were under 20 years of age. (Afsar 2001: 109, 112).

⁸ Though many middle class women may not have any choice, e.g. if their husbands are not happy with their getting engaged in a particular job, they are not able to challenge their husbands.

⁹ At the same time, it should be noted that there are many different reasons why the *burqa* may be worn. Some of these are discussed below in Section 5.5.

THE DRIVER

I asked a young unmarried driver for a Bangladeshi NGO whether the situation has changed much for women in Bangladesh. He said, “Yes, the situation has changed a lot.” Now women are everywhere – many women work, women are given higher priority for jobs compared to men (except for government positions) and so on. When asked how working women are viewed by the society, he said, “I would not want my wife to work. I might be poor, but I still would not want my wife to work.” Asked why, he said “No, I won’t.” Urged that two incomes surely would be better than one income in making a family comfortable materially, he said, “A woman can do anything once she has money in her hands.” However he volunteered that “working in primary school is OK.” Asked why, he said “she can live in the village”. Asked what about working in city primary schools, he said that’s OK, but he seemed to draw the line at high schools or colleges. He also said, “I might be poor, but I want to marry a woman from a poorer family.” Asked why, he didn’t say – I prompted, “Is it your *izzat*”, he nodded. All the women in his family (his mother and aunts, and sisters I suppose) use *burqa* and he will definitely get his wife to use *burqa*. He said that it’s not good for women to go out without *burqa*, because they will tempt men. When asked whether they should cover their face as well, he said of course. I said “Well, men might tempt women too, shouldn’t they cover themselves?” He laughed and said men have to behave themselves...

In fact, it is normal that when lower class families begin to improve their economic condition somewhat, their men often emulate these middle class values. Thus it seems unlikely that we can expect the root causes of patriarchy to vanish as a result of economic changes alone. This makes the question of whether women’s organizations are dealing with the *root causes of women’s oppression* particularly significant.

2.4 Dealing with Symptoms Not Causes

In fact, it seems to me that much of the time women’s organizations are dealing with the symptoms rather than the root causes of women’s oppression. This judgement implies a certain view of what the root causes are, which is essentially what I have implied above and discuss further below (sub-sections 5.1 to 5.4). The root causes of oppression in my view are the ideologies and practices within Bangladeshi society which systematically favour men and devalue women, and which prevent them from playing a full part within society. In the absence of a real engagement with these ideologies and practices, which are bound up with the whole structure of inequality within Bangladeshi society, and the building of effective solidarity between women irrespective of class and social background, much of what women’s organizations do is limited in its effect. Here we might consider the major campaigns in recent years concerning violence against women and the issue of direct election of women.

It is important to recognize that the campaigns against violence against women did achieve some gains. Specific cases were taken up, e.g. Yasmeen and Sheema, and some limited justice was achieved (e.g. the three men who were committed in the case of Yasmeen in 1995 were finally hanged sometime this year). To the extent that the women’s organizations are collaborating successfully with their partner NGOs or other legal aid organizations, they were certainly achieving something within the locality where

they are working.¹⁰ However, while these mobilizations may be successful in creating a stir in the particular locality where rallies take place, or in the country through the media, my impression is that they have not been able to make any real contribution to building women's solidarity in a long-lasting and effective way.¹¹ This is because the solidarity of women can only develop across the class divide when middle-class women, both rural and urban, feel that their interests as women are the same as the interests of the poorer women. Middle-class women, urban or rural, are generally at much less risk of encountering the kind of fate that Yasmeen or Sheema suffered, if only because of their more restricted mobility.

Solidarity among poorer women is also restricted by the actual structure of women's activism, which mostly takes place within organizations that are competing, in a sense, against each other. Both women's activist groups and the wider NGO sector consists of individual organizations that are, to a considerable degree, in competition with each other for funding from donors. Their primary interests are increasingly in the growth and sustainability of their organization. This is a special problem for those NGOs (the majority) which are delivering micro-credit following the Grameen Bank model, a model which promotes competition among women, rather than solidarity (Thornton et al. 2000; Rozario 2002a).¹²

2.5 Violence against Women: Tackling Domestic Violence

In relation to violence against women, while almost every organization addressed the issue of violence against women in one way or another, it was far from clear how many of them were addressing the issue of *domestic violence* as opposed to violence against women in public spaces.

In Bangladesh now there is widespread concern about insecurity of women and girls in the streets. The papers are full of news of different and often hideous forms of violence against women in the public space; these range from verbal abuse and teasing to pulling women's saris or scarves, to physical harassment, rape, gang rape or murder. Such violence is indeed a serious problem and needs to be addressed. Thus some of the successful mobilization of organizations and women in protest on violence against

¹⁰ All the main organizations based in Dhaka have partner NGOs in different parts of the country and apparently working on gender-related issues. NariPokkho-Doorbar apparently works with some 470 organizations, and this number is supposed to increase to 550. Similarly, BRAC, Proshika and RDRS have extensive coverage in rural areas. Manusher Jonno is apparently funding some 64 organizations, and all the legal organizations (ASK, BLAST, BNWLA, Madaripur Legal Aid) have numerous collaborative ventures with locally based NGOs and organizations.

¹¹ At the same time, I am aware that my five-day field-trip to the north-west allowed only a brief glimpse of a number of organizations operating at the village level. A longer and more thorough study would give much more evidence on which to base a judgment of this kind, and on which to assess what kinds of approaches might be more promising.

¹² During a review of the Big NGOs for DFID in 2000 I found that BRAC has good health centres in the North, but these health centres treated non-members differently, charging them higher fees. Also during my visit to Rangpur this month I found that the BRAC-ASK legal aid service is free for BRAC members but not for the non-BRAC members. On discussion about this with ASK members, they said this service is supposed to be free for all village women. Although these are service-related and not necessarily social mobilization issues, such different treatment of village member by the NGOs has an implication for the women's own cooperation and collaboration on women's issues.

women involved the cases of Yasmeen and Sheema.¹³ These were both cases of young vulnerable girls who were raped by police. I was informed that the movement in Yasmeen's case was more successful, as it was during BNP rule, and both BNP and Awami League supporters apparently managed to join their efforts together. The rally protesting against Sheema's rape in custody during Awami League rule in 1996 was less successful. The reasons for this seem to be complex. However, in both cases, one could perhaps suggest that it was easier to mobilize the women's groups because the violence had taken outside of the private household.

While there are NGOs and other organizations which address the issue of domestic violence, my argument here is that, as far as I know, a case of domestic violence has not been used successfully as a focus for mobilizing a coalition of different groups. This is scarcely because such violence is uncommon. In fact, there appear to be high rates of domestic violence against women in all parts of Bangladeshi society.

I suggest that the unwillingness to address this issue effectively is because domestic violence is a far more divisive and sensitive issue for Bangladeshi society than violence by police or violence in public spaces, since it raises the question of the abuse of the patriarchal power structure within the family. Thus domestic violence is perhaps still a sacred, "no go" area. Yet, there are studies and statistics that suggest that the vast majority of violence against women takes place within the homes.¹⁴ The reason why domestic violence is not taken seriously, or rather is tolerated by the society, is that women are perceived by the society as the property of men.

Such a notion of women as the property of men is in turn related to women's perceived dependency on men (economic, but also moral or cultural). By *moral dependency* I mean the social perception of the need for there to be a man to protect the honour of a woman. This is why unmarried or divorced women are such a problem for Bangladeshi society. I return to this theme of women's perceived dependency on men in later sections (especially subsections 5.1 to 5.4) because an effective strategy to counter women's oppression and build solidarity among women must at some level engage with this issue. A closely related issue is the question of dowry, which came up frequently in my field trip in the Northwest (Section 4 below). This again is discussed further in Section 5.

¹³ Yasmeen was picked up by police on the pretext of giving her protection, and later raped in the police cell. In the case of Sheema, a Hindu girl, she was seen to be violating the social norm by running away with her Muslim boyfriend before marriage. She was taken off the bus they were travelling in, and later raped by police.

¹⁴ E.g. Schuler et al. 1996; Blanchet 2000; Bhuiya et al. 2003; Koenig et al. 2003.

3. Spontaneous Grass Roots Movements

3.1 Introduction

I was asked (Appendix 1) to “identify and describe spontaneous “grass roots” level movements among rural and urban women. What were the key issues, which inspired these movements? How did women connect with one another? Did they sustain and if not, why not?”

I did not come across or hear about any sustained spontaneous grassroots level *movements* among rural women as such. Again, it should be remembered that my field visit was quite brief, and that a more extensive visit might have produced some examples. While I have not come across much evidence for such movements in my field research elsewhere in Bangladesh, this is not something I have particularly focused on in my previous work.

I did however come across two kinds of situation that are worth considering for their potential in this direction: spontaneous protests and village cooperatives.

3.2 Spontaneous Protests

There are occasional spontaneous protests at the grass-roots level, though these generally do not develop into anything like a sustained movement. For example, I have heard stories about village women with whom CARE has been working being able to get a small group together to go to the *upazila* hospital to make demands for their health services when someone was sick. They do this by raising their voice and referring to particular stakeholder meetings that they were part of where hospital representatives were present. They demand that the hospital representatives keep their word. It seems that in such cases poor women are developing their own strategies to shame the middle-class service providers into meeting their responsibilities. The issue of shame comes up when the village women seem to “know” what they are talking about, and can raise their voice as women in public spaces in front of other staff members. The person in charge then obliges and give them drugs or health services to avoid “public” display of further loud arguments with the poor village women.¹⁵

The most superficially impressive story of this type that I was told, however, turned out to be a case where the success of the women’s actions owed more to the connections of the NGO staff involved than to the mobilization itself:

¹⁵ Effective movements of this kind are probably much more common in the urban context. One example is the female students’ movements against sexual harassment at Jahangirnagar University in 1999 (Rozario 2001b). Female garments workers have also shown considerable willingness to resist and protest in relation to working conditions (e.g. Dannecker 2002: 201-253).

THE VALUE OF CONNECTIONS

At a meeting with the representatives of some of the partner NGOs at the CARE head office, the Executive Director of ESDO shared a story of a successful mobilization by village women in relation to malpractice involving distribution of wheat within the Food for Work Programme in that locality. Apparently ESDO staff had merely informed the villagers what their entitlement is and that they should not be satisfied with anything less than their due share. Anyway, apparently the village women, with the help of their men, went and surrounded the office of the Thana Nirbahi Officer, the District Superintendent was called in, who failed to disperse the group, and decided to distribute the wheat personally to the villagers. Soon after, the Thana Nirbahi Officer was also transferred. This was presented as a successful story of mobilization, and I was very impressed, but then I found out that the Executive Director had connections at the higher level of the government hierarchy. Hence this result. Indeed, one of the ESDO's VDCs I visited proved that the poor women were totally under the thumb of the village elite, who were also the members of the VDC. Although the women were gaining some economic benefit, they told me their problems lay with illiteracy, overpopulation and laziness. They did not mention anything that might challenge the local class hierarchy, e.g. their very low pay for their work in the fields of the rural rich. They would certainly have been unwilling to challenge patriarchal values in general.

3.3 Village Cooperatives and Mutual Saving Schemes

Many villages now have what they call "village cooperatives". These can consist of men and women, or of men-only or women-only groups. The aim is to save into a common fund, then taking turns to borrow the money. Interest is charged, often as high as that charged by Grameen Bank or BRAC. However, the point here is that the money is under their control and the interest earned remains in their common fund. Because these are small-scale, village-based operations, the participants have control over the situation. Such co-operatives are common in many parts of the developing world, and are known as ROSCAs (Rotating Savings and Credit Associations) elsewhere (e.g. Ardener and Burman 1995).

The village cooperative model for micro-credit is a very different one from the Grameen Bank-style model, because it grows out of the villagers' own initiative, and remains under their control. Arguably, it has much more potential for building up solidarity.

4. Review of CARE's Approaches to Discrimination and Violence against Women

4.1 Introduction

I was asked (Appendix 1) to “review CARE’s approaches to addressing discrimination and violence against women. What are the changes in attitudes that have occurred among men and women due to these initiatives, and within communal decision-making bodies i.e. *shalish*. What are the key issues and perceptions that are being addressed?”

It is hardly possible to get a comprehensive picture of CARE’s extensive and varied field activities, and to evaluate their results, in such a short time. CARE has been working in Bangladesh since 1955, when the region was still under Pakistani rule, and it has been engaged in women and development work since at least 1980. There are some thirty CARE projects or programmes under way in Bangladesh currently or in the immediate past.¹⁶ Many of these are targeted partially or entirely at women, and most involve issues of discrimination against women in one way or another. In addition, the current Long Range Strategic Plan emphasizes rights and social justice in general as one of the key strategic directions for CARE Bangladesh, and particularly emphasizes the protection of women’s rights given the high level of violence against women in Bangladesh (Moffat 2002, Siddiqi 2003). As we have seen, the reduction of discrimination against and abuse of women is also a central aim of the proposed DFID-CARE Partnership Programme Agreement, which is intended to cover all of CARE’s DFID-supported activities except Manusher Jonno. The Partnership Programme Agreement commits CARE to undertaking to achieve the “Promotion of solidarity and collaborative action for fulfilling women’s rights, challenging patriarchal attitudes and ideologies.”

These developments are also linked to the recent move within CARE towards a rights-based approach. My experience is too limited to say much about how far the rights-based approach approach has affected CARE’s activities as a whole. My impression is that this development is still at a fairly early stage (see also Siddiqi 2003, Bode and Brewin 2003). However, it adds further pressure towards CARE’s taking on an active role in relation to discrimination and violence against women.

Compared to other major NGOs in Bangladesh, CARE has advantages in taking on such a role. The relatively egalitarian policy of CARE in the workplace is well known, and talked about among its staff members. Indeed some male staff members may feel resentful that female staff sometimes get priority in certain areas. It is clear that CARE is committed to gender equity, and that there is support at senior levels for the mainstreaming of gender throughout CARE’s programmes. At the same time, there are still challenges for CARE to implement genuine gender equity at the workplace, with at least one report drawing specific attention to the organizational culture of CARE (Moffatt 2002). However, I have not focussed on CARE’s organizational culture as such and will refrain from making comments in this regard. My concern in the pages that follow is for

¹⁶ I found it quite difficult to get a comprehensive listing of current CARE projects. The above figure is based on listings on the CARE Bangladesh, Care International USA and CARE International UK websites, supplemented by the 2003 CARE Bangladesh Annual Report and Bode and Howes 2002: 132-136.

the extent to which CARE's commitment to "challenge patriarchal attitudes and ideologies" is carried through in its projects in the field.

My field experience involved meetings with people and groups involved in the Rural Livelihood Program (primarily SHABGE FFS groups), BUILD, PHL and the Rural Maintenance Program, and I also had a brief meeting with a Safe Mother *dai*. In Dhaka, I also spoke to people involved with Shouhardo and Manusher Jonno. In addition, I have made use of a number of recent CARE reports which deal with issues of discrimination and/or violence against women (e.g. Blanchet 2000; Waterhouse and Huq n.d.; Huq and Hassan 2002; Moffatt 2002; Bartlett 2004). All the same, I feel that the material available to me is a long way from adequate to make a definitive judgement about CARE's approaches and their effects. What I present below is more in the way of a series of sketches from my field visit, amplified by my reading and my interviews in Dhaka.

To start with, though, we have to be aware that an organization like CARE has limited freedom of action when it comes to taking up radical and confrontational policies. CARE works in cooperation with the Government of Bangladesh both at the centre and in the regions. It also has to work in cooperation with local power elites at the village level. Yet any real "challenge to patriarchal attitudes and ideologies" is likely to be perceived by these power structures and elites as a threat. As I noted in Section 1, and show in more detail in Section 5, the attitudes and ideologies that support gender discrimination in Bangladesh are closely linked to those that justify and support the local power elite.

Thus there are limits to direct confrontation. At the same time, it may be possible to use the considerable credit obtained from CARE's less controversial and threatening activities, such as health, agriculture, road-construction and other infrastructure building, to push the boundaries in other areas, or to exploit differences between elite groups to create space for change (cf. Bode and Brewin 2003).

However, it is also important to be aware that poor and disadvantaged sectors of the rural population may have good reasons to be wary about committing themselves to radical and confrontational projects. Apart from the risk of retaliation by the local power elites, many poor villagers, women especially, have little time to spare from housework and income-generating activities, and may be reluctant to commit themselves to frequent lengthy meetings where there is no immediate gain in view. This is part of the challenge for SHOUHARDO in their proposal to implement the Freirean REFLECT approach.

CARE has a solid reputation in rural Bangladesh for its extensive focus on destitute and vulnerable communities, especially on women, in remote areas. At the grassroots level, much of Care Bangladesh's initiatives focus on poor and vulnerable communities, where the emphasis is on capacity building of both men and women in coping with and improving different aspects of their lives. Within this community-based approach in recent years special focus has been placed on women, leading to some separate women's projects and groups. Among these are the FFS women's group at Rangpur and the women learning *salish* at Dinajpur mentioned below.

In its work with the vulnerable and destitute, CARE has been able to make significant difference to the well-being of the poor in the communities it worked. One thing that struck me most is its policy of getting women involved in all forms of non-traditional income-earning activities, and its success in achieving this. These activities are often linked with infrastructure-related projects, such as road construction and tree plantation on the roads in the context of the Rural Maintenance Program and BUILD. CARE has

worked quite effectively with local partner NGOs as well as with the local government bodies (LGED) in these ventures. While, in part for the reasons given above, CARE cannot be said to be a radical organization which is in the business of challenging the local power hierarchy as such, its focus on capacity-building programmes is having some sustained impact on the rural communities.

With its new emphasis on a rights-based approach and on women's rights in particular, CARE has ventured into areas that has the potential to challenge some of the structural features of rural society. How successful has it been in doing so? Below I will share some of my findings from my visit to CARE grassroots-level programmes.¹⁷

4.2. Rural Livelihood Program Farmers Field School Groups

Farmers Field Schools form an integral part of the SHABGE and GO-Interfish components of the Rural Livelihood Program. The following case-study is based on a visit to an FFS women's group in Rangpur.

WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY ON SOCIAL ISSUES

In Rangpur, I visited a lively group of women and was told they were engaged in good work in relation to women's solidarity. What I learned overall was that women have gained a lot from the FFS program. They have been able to improve their economic position through successful kitchen gardening by following CARE's eco-friendly method of growing vegetables etc. They have also been empowered sufficiently to be able to visit and interact with the various local government offices (UP), hospital or even the CARE offices, when in need, to demand their due services (especially in relation to the hospital, where they are able to go in groups and object if the staff refuse to give them medicine or medical care, see above). Thus through its focus on maximum use of land and technology transfer to enable village poor to generate a sustainable income, this project appeared to have made a difference to the women's economic well-being with some flow-on effect in other social areas.

The women told me about a girl who was married off when she was 15. This was because the father was sick and he wanted to see her married before he died. There was a dowry claim, but because they could not pay, the girl was not taken to the husband's house for a while. However, then the father died, and the CARE women's group apparently successfully pressured the husband's family to accept the girl without dowry. Apparently the girl also had a baby before the father died. This is a story at least from two years ago and the women said the girl is doing well in her husband's house.

¹⁷ Apart from my visit to a PHL group which was actively involved in work on violence against women, the groups I visited were not explicitly engaged in rights-based approach work (or RSJ, Rights and Social Justice, to use CARE's preferred acronym). Siddiqi 2003 summarizes RSJ developments in CARE up to early 2003, while Bode and Brewin 2003 give an account of a project which implemented a rights-based approach in relation to a dispute over access to a pond by poor families.

On another occasion, the CARE women's group apparently successfully intervened in a case where a widow (referred to as *pagli* or "crazy") was about to marry off her little eight- or nine-year old daughter to a man who already had two wives (one woman kept saying he had a grey beard and was old!). The man was visiting some relatives in the village and the marriage was to take place immediately. The women stopped this from happening and prevented the mother from giving the daughter away to the old man.¹⁸

In this case, there has been some positive impact on women's relationship within the village community, and sometimes also with their husbands, flowing on from the project activities, and there seems also to be some willingness to confront the worst abuses of the marriage system. However, it was striking that the women felt totally helpless on the issue of dowry. They said the same things I have heard from village women in many places in Bangladesh: "How can we marry our daughters? Who will take my daughter without dowry?" They also had some problems of domestic violence, but they did not seem to be giving much significance to this, or to the problem of child marriage, as an issue that they could confront as a group.

In relation to dowry, the women initially denied outright that they practised dowry or others in the village practised dowry. There was a group of young teenage men, as well as some mature men, sitting around when I visited. I then got them involved in the discussion of dowry. When I said that I found it difficult to believe that there was no dowry practice, a young man started to speak: "There is no marriage without dowry. There is no way any marriage can take place without dowry."

When I asked why women should pay dowry (don't they think women have value in their own right?), the boys said "*Meyeder dam meyeai komaikhey – jekhaney jao, shekhaney meye, rastai, cinema holey, shob jaigai*" ("Women themselves caused their own devalorization – they are now everywhere, on the streets, at the cinemas, everywhere"). I read this to mean the boys feel the women's mobility has diminished their value!

Such statements from young men show that while they have now accepted that their women will go out to work, they still feel that going out is not OK, that it reduces the value of women somehow! This makes me think that my argument some 15 years ago that dowry is a justification for the loss of purity/honour of women through their increased mobility still plays a part (Rozario 1992; see Section 5).

This group has received some legal information from CARE staff who have been trained in family law.¹⁹ However, it became clear that the village women then wanted legal aid which CARE could not provide. Apparently BRAC has a legal aid cell nearby. I had heard earlier that they charge fees to non-BRAC members, but CARE staff here told me that apparently anyone can access this service. Perhaps CARE need to see if such legal aid services can be made more readily accessible to village women.

¹⁸ This appears to be the same story that was told to Andrew Bartlett, presumably by the same group.

¹⁹ This appeared to be more common-sense advice from CARE staff than formal legal training.

Unfortunately, legal aid is not going to make much difference to the practice of dowry with these women, as we see from the statement of a young man: “I can tell you this, if there is one case against dowry from this village, no man will come forward to marry any girls from this village”. This is because the village would gain a reputation that its people go to court about dowry. I believe this young man has a point, unfortunately.

So, as has been pointed out to me by many people, neither girls nor their families take legal action when dowry is demanded for their marriage. It is only when the woman gets into trouble after marriage, when she gets beaten up, thrown out, her husband decides to take a second wife, or when she gets divorced because she can’t bring any more dowry, or her parents could not pay the full amount etc, that she or her family might take legal action.²⁰

Another really significant side effect of dowry practice in rural Bangladesh is child marriage, and of course early pregnancy and ill health of young mothers and their babies. I have heard in every village many times that the amount of dowry they have to pay is lower when a girl is young (they used the word “*kachi*,” in Bangla this means “unripe”). The advocate I met in Dinajpur noted that it was common for a “32-year-old” man to marry a girl of 12 or 14 years of age. This also has implications for the social perception that there are “too many women” and “too few men,” which is often presented as the logic behind the practice of dowry. Of course, the preference for *kachi* girls relates to men’s obsession with women’s “purity” (in a broad behavioural sense, but also including virginity). The increased mobility of women is now tolerated, but women now also have to pay a price for this mobility, or at least their daughters have to, through dowry.

So, dowry is integrally linked to the vital need for a woman to have a husband. Without a husband, she does not have a protector or guardian, and she therefore counts for nothing in village communities. It’s not that much better for the single middle-class women in Dhaka city. This is what I mean by the notion of “moral” dependency of women on men, which is particularly relevant in understanding the dowry practice among the middle classes.²¹

I was struck by the similarity between my observations of FFS women’s groups in Rangpur and Dinajpur and Andrew Bartlett’s findings. In at least one case, it seems that we were taken to see the same group, the one described above. This made me wonder how typical the group might be, particularly in its success and in the articulateness of its members. No doubt the group dynamics vary depending on class composition, but also on the personality of individuals. So, in another SHABGE group I had visited, women did not have much knowledge of the family law, nor did they have any real contact with the local government organizations (UP, or the hospital). However, they clearly were gaining from the SHABGE project, successfully raising poultry and growing vegetables, since CARE staff have been working with them. Thus they had some form of economic empowerment but this was not translated into social and political empowerment.

In summary, these projects have been very successful in meeting many of women’s basic needs, in the economy, relative food security, relative better health services, sometimes a little more respect within their own communities. Yet what could be called

²⁰ Such dowry-related issues have been widely discussed. In relation to the kinds of problems considered here, see especially Blanchet 2000, Huq and Hassan 2002, Kar et al. 2003, Kabir 2003.

²¹ See Subsection 5.4 for a more extended discussion of dowry in Bangladeshi society.

their strategic interests, in transforming the overall position of women in village society, remain unmet. In particular, dowry is a very serious and worsening problem for all these families, yet none of them felt able to challenge it.

This is perhaps to be expected given that CARE's "technical entry point" approach means that there is an avoidance of any real conflict within the family or community. Perhaps it is not surprising that dowry is something women still feel totally helpless about, for it is a structural issue and involves all classes. The structural barrier includes both the inability of the poor members of the rural communities to challenge the rural class hierarchy (issue of higher wages for day labourers, some form of distribution of land) and of course "patriarchy" (including universal marriage, dowry, patri-locality and patrilineality). Addressing the strategic interests of the poor women is a necessary condition for sustainability of women's genuine collective empowerment or solidarity.

4.3 BUILD Income-Generating Projects

BUILD's Road Improvement, Roadside Tree Plantation, and Rural Market Development have been able to generate many income-generating projects for women and to involve large numbers of poor women in non-traditional activities. These jobs in road construction, earth digging or harvesting side by side with men have involved women taking the courage to defy patriarchal norms of female seclusion or *parda*. Thus one of the patriarchal norms that many rural and urban poor women have successfully defied is the institution of *parda* (the norm of seclusion of women and general confinement within their homes). CARE can take much credit for enabling this by providing employment opportunities through the Rural Maintenance Program, BUILD and other schemes.

Of course, women initially accepted these non-traditional forms of work because of poverty. Nevertheless, with the relative economic empowerment these jobs provided, the women also began to gain a certain amount of confidence in operating in the men's world. Their confidence links to the new source of income they never had before. In the past they might have work in other peoples' households, or in some labouring jobs in the field, but their pay was very low.²² Again, as with other women, this income has a positive flow-on on some form of social and communal empowerment.²³ Social empowerment might include the ability of the women to send their children (including daughters) to school, which might have a bearing on the child marriage. However, peoples' concern about the insecurity of girls on their way to and from school means that this social gain may not be sustainable unless something can be done to improve the security situation for girls.

At the same time, women's economic empowerment is often limited to meeting their needs in terms of mere survival. This is a huge achievement for these destitute people who say they can now have three meals a day, compared to the times when they and their children would eat only once a day or often starve. Nevertheless, is CARE going to be satisfied with this level of empowerment, in which the poor are somehow making do, better than before, but a long way from becoming comfortable? The nutritional intake of

²² With some partner NGOs, the women were still receiving very low pay for their daily labour (tk25-30).

²³ At the same time the nature of job might (and the continual division of labour at the home front) means that women's burden of work has increased and this might have an adverse affect on their health, although overall their health status has increased somewhat due to better access to health facilities?

these peoples' food is still minimal. Even with the Livelihoods security approach, the emphasis is on people selling their produce to get some cash, rather than consuming it themselves. This is understandable in a situation of scarcity, when there is so much demand for cash all around (saving for dowry, for example!). Time for rest or relaxation with the family members, children or husbands is perhaps out of the question.

Nevertheless, women were definitely happier now that they were earning more than twice as much as they would have been earning – and this is a real achievement of these projects.

Unfortunately, as with all the other groups, dowry, divorce, polygamy and violence and child marriage continue to plague these women and their families. Gibson et al's recent findings support my overall impression in relation to these issues. They argued that dowry remains by far the biggest problem. The amount given as dowry has inflated, and they observed that women and girls were saving money for dowry, often from their micro-credit. I had similar findings from my earlier research on micro-credit (Rozario 2002a). To refer to one of their quotes on the dowry issue, "When one discussion in a village was cut short, several women came rushing up as we left, crying "Dowry – number one problem!" (Gibson 2004: 16).²⁴

Gibson et al, like myself, also found, not surprisingly, that women in the middle classes are not joining the paid workforce or any NGO activities because the kind of job available would require breaking the norm of *parda* and *izzat* for women. Thus, while it's increasingly more acceptable and tolerated within rural society for poor women to do this sort of work, it is still quite unacceptable for middle classes.

In fact, this is not just a question of *parda*, but also of security. The issue of insecurity came up all the time with everyone I talked to over the last few weeks; people are now obsessed with this problem, and quite understandably.²⁵ It seems likely that the increased use of head-cover or *burqa* (which has its own wider implications for women's rights, see subsection 5.5) can be seen as a reaction to this phenomenon. Here, there are perhaps elements of a specific backlash against women and girls who are seen as going beyond the proper boundaries for their behaviour, within the generally deteriorating security situation of Bangladesh. If so, what can CARE or other development programmes do to help?

²⁴ This report is perhaps worth quoting at more length on the topic of dowry: "Although dowry is illegal in Bangladesh, it is alive and well – to the point that the issue invariably came up in village discussions, and was the source of universal worry... There is widespread agreement that the size of dowry demands are increasing. The increasing burden of dowry is without question leading to financial pressures on girls and their families; some girls claimed to be saving towards their own dowries, many families cited dowry as a major use of micro credit loans, and increasingly educated girls are seen to require 'better' (and more expensive) husbands. Villagers reported that a generation ago, dowry was more of a symbolic exchange between families, and the actual size of a dowry was not likely to be a major financial transaction. They expressed concern that today, dowry has taken on a relatively new financial and social emphasis that was unheard of 20 years ago. There are also bound to be significant psychological impacts on girls, who are constantly exposed to their parents' talk of the pressure of finding money for a dowry, and the seemingly public knowledge of each dowry transaction in the village." (2004: 16). My own findings in recent years (see Subsection 5.4) agree closely with these comments.

²⁵ In cities, it is now common for 'middle class' mothers to spend their days sitting in front of the schools of their children (they ferry them back and forth for fear of kidnapping or violence of other types).

4.4 BUILD Market Program

I also met some male and female members of a Labour Contracting Society who had very recently been allocated shops in one of the markets in Bogra through a joint LGED-CARE program. This scheme, which is part of BUILD, involves reconstructing markets in villages and small towns to incorporate shops for poor rural women. There was apparently a similar move by the Government in 1984, but a 2002 study showed that most of the so-called “women’s shops” were in fact being used by men.²⁶

The step to establish poor rural women in shops in rural markets is quite radical in terms of local values and attitudes. Provided that LGED-CARE keep up their side of the bargain,²⁷ such steps might help these vulnerable women (and men) to sustain their economic gain. This in turn should give them some political leverage in the bazaar, both within the communities and with the local government institutions. I was told all this is already happening, but I am not too convinced that things have moved on so fast!

4.5 Women Union Parishad Members

The BUILD project with UP Complex and Capacity Building of Local Government has also had a positive impact on the relative social empowerment of female Union Parishad members. In relation to IFSP impact on gender issues at the beneficiary level (projects including BUILD, the Flood Proofing Project, the Disaster Management Project, and SHAHAR), Tango International has noted that the general pattern of “female presence does not translate into female participation” (Tango International 2002: §6.7.1). Indeed in some cases the actual decision to participate is taken by a husband or a male relative. On the other hand, they have identified some more positive outcomes, whereby female members of locally elected bodies have become more involved in local arbitration and dispute management.

I had the opportunity to meet three female members of a Union Parishad in Rangpur which was a BUILD partner. My findings are mixed, but somewhat more positive than Tango International’s. I met these female members in their office together with the chairman and the domineering role that is in general played by the chairman everywhere was evident. Yet when the women were finally given the opportunity to talk it was clear that BUILD has made a lot of difference to their capacity to play their role more effectively. In particular, it has helped build their confidence in arguing and debating their case with the male members, although they are a long way from getting their due share of development funds and so on. Listening to their stories about their involvement in cases of domestic violence against women, it was clear that local women were looking up to these female members for support and that these women were able to provide some of that.

Indeed, they thought if BUILD capacity building program was replicated in all the other Unions in the District then they would be in a better position. They could work with other female UP members. They told me that they found the joint capacity building programs

²⁶ See *Daily Star*, September 14, 17 and 19 September 2004 for reports on this scheme.

²⁷ At the time of my visit, the twelve-member team was still waiting to receive its overdue Tk.25,000 profit from the Labour Contracting Society.

with the male members most empowering. In the joint meeting in front of male members they were informed of the rights of the female members. Although discrimination still continues, they feel at least they are getting some support from the Chairman, and they can argue their case, sometimes successfully. They thought once the female UP members in other unions feel as confident as they do, there is a chance they can achieve more and work more effectively for their constituents.²⁸ There was a clear sense that there needs to be solidarity with other female UP members in order for them to be able to serve the poor women and men who are looking up to them.

4.6 Working With Imams

While in Taragonj in Rangpur district, I also had an opportunity to meet with a group of imams with whom Rural Livelihood Program staff were working.

THE ROLE OF IMAMS

I was able to visit a number of imams and some other village leaders at a meeting held at the school complex in Chilka, Taragonj (Rangpur). When the CARE gender staff had initially told me that they had already established some links with the imams at local levels, I must say that I was not very hopeful. But my meeting with this group was quite encouraging. Two imams present were educated up to B.A. and seemed to have fairly clear knowledge about the Islamic texts on the issues of dowry, child marriage, divorce, inheritance, polygamy etc. They also knew what *ijtihad* was when I tentatively started to speak about this controversial concept in Islam.²⁹ There were a number of imams and many other men gathered together in the school in Chilka and the meeting with them was encouraging. It seems some work has commenced with the imams, who have been facilitating some of CARE's work with the FFS and other communities.³⁰ CARE staff in Taragonj see the local imam and the others in the locality as facilitating their work, by talking about them in the mosque after the Friday prayers. (This was primarily in terms of endorsing CARE staff's messages on hygiene.)

We had a lively discussion on all sorts of things relating to women: including violence against women, dowry, early marriage, and so on. Apparently the imams now say that they will not marry couples where dowry is involved. However, they also conceded that they may not necessarily know what the

²⁸ They asked me to ask CARE to see if their salary situation could be reviewed, as their present salary is minute (Tk 700 total), 50% of which is supposed to come from the central government, which never gets to them, and "to collect the other 50% (Tk 350) they have to spend Tk 75 in rickshaw fares! They also pleaded that because they serve three wards each while the male members serve one ward each, that female members' salary should be triple the amount of a male member.

²⁹ *Ijtihad* is the process of interpretation of the Qur'an and *hadith* so as to make them relevant to current circumstances. The question of whether *ijtihad* is permitted, or whether the process of interpretation came to an end in the 11th and 12th centuries, is of great significance in relation to whether Islamic texts can be made relevant to the contemporary world and used to argue for an improvement of the situation of women in Islamic societies.

³⁰ Initially, the local imam used to follow the CARE workers to see what they were doing with the men and the women. When he found out what they were doing, he became interested.

secret negotiation between the two families involved may be. They do see this as a big problem – but I am not convinced that they are discussing this issue in their mosque sermons.. However, when asked if they would cooperate with CARE in this, they were more than willing. With some political backing from the government and donor agencies (along the lines given to the Family Planning Programmes back in the 1980s) one can see the imams playing an important role in dealing with the problem of dowry.

About violence – they thought that it has in fact decreased! But then there were other men who gave recent examples of terrible violence of men against wives. For example, one told of a man pouring hot rice with starch straight from the stove over his wife, because food was not quite ready for him when he was hungry! By and large the imams thought violence has decreased in the street – at least in their area – and that domestic violence is only a problem with the uneducated! I tried to explain that the problem is more complicated than this – because it takes place in the middle or upper classes too. Then more examples came up....

Similarly, they said that the three *talaq* for divorce have to take place in three separate months – and that in any case the Qur'an regards divorce as a very bad thing.

I comment further on the potential for working with imams and Islamic authorities in Sections 5 and 6.

4.7 Folk Drama at a Dinajpur PHL Project

In her Care Bangladesh Gender Assessment Report (Moffat 2002), Linda Moffat makes a specific recommendation in relation to the Long Range Strategic Plan 2002-2006 (Long-Range Strategic Programme) that Care Bangladesh become more involved in advocacy and more connected to other organizations and networks. She recommends that violence against women, which has been repeatedly identified by “gender-focused organizations as the greatest gender-related concern in the country,” can be chosen as a single advocacy issue to cooperate “with an existing network of experienced advocacy and development organizations” to achieve Care Bangladesh’s goal of development in relation to women.

This recommendation was partially adopted by the PHL project in Dinajpur that I was able to visit this month. Except for a very brief meeting with a “trained” traditional birth attendant with an empty delivery kit (!), I didn’t get much sense of how PHL’s Safe Mother Initiative was working out.³¹ However, I got to see a lot that was going on in an effort to arrest violence against women. I saw a folk drama in which the evils of dowry and violence were presented, then interventions by a female NGO worker and religious leader and the final resolution were dramatized. The *moulvi* was given a very positive role. He was able to intervene and prevent the three *talaq* taking effect and also challenged the local leader on his insistence that a *hilla* marriage was required, and so

³¹ There is an extensive literature on training schemes for traditional birth attendants in South Asia, and most of these schemes have been limited in success for reasons which a number of authors, myself included, have discussed at length (see Rozario 1995, 1998, 2002c).

on. He helped the husband see that he was being unnecessarily cruel to this wife. There were songs in between. During couple of breaks, the performers tried to get the response of the audience, by lecturing them on the detrimental impact of violence and dowry etc. as well as giving some information about the availability of legal aid service (free for the very poor).

It was good to have the local young boys involved in this drama. However, as can be expected, there were no women performers; men were playing the female roles. Anyway, such dramas and folksongs can be used more widely as a vehicle to promote women's empowerment.

4.8 PHL Forum to Prevent Violence against Women

PHL's Violence Against Women program is also involving the community members in other ways: for example there are some village-based Forums to Prevent Violence Against Women, which consisted of college students (two women and two men) housewives, member of UP, former female member of UP, businessman, village *shalish* member and so on. The former female UP member was very vocal, as was one of the other housewives. One young man seem to be taking the lead, while the two college women were relatively quiet unless spoken to directly. I am told that this forum has been meeting for a year and they have been able to help a number of women in distress, either through negotiation with the husbands, or by sending women to the BLAST advocate, who meets clients twice a month at the upazila hospital. Anyway, the Dinajpur PHL has adopted a number of innovative strategies: folk-drama, folk-songs, use of local community, and facilitating the victims getting legal aid when necessary.

I also visited the *upazila* hospital when a BLAST female advocate was seeing her clients. She said her clients are largely from poor background, that middle classes do not bring such cases to her. I was told by a CARE staff member in Rangpur that going to the court or resorting to law brings stigma to a woman.

I was impressed by the Violence Against Women forum, which was serving an obvious need. However, I am concerned about whether these forums will be sustainable when CARE staff stop facilitating.³² Also, it seems the women can't go to the village *shalish* sessions because these are held at night-time. The Forum needs to put pressure on village leaders to hold the *shalish* sessions during the day, as well as working to build up the awareness and competence of the *shalish* members.

As with the new economic activities for women, it worth noting that it is the poorer women who are taking advantage of the legal aid cells, not the middle class.

³² During our visit a case was brought to the Forum. A Hindu wife had been beaten up badly by her husband again. She had been before the village *shalish* before. This time she did not want any more negotiation. She is the second wife, and it seems her husband does not support her, and instead has several times forced her to sleep with other men, as a way of getting some income for himself. So the battered wife this time was adamant that she does not want any further negotiation. She was agitating that she wants to go and see the people at BLAST. But the male UP member was trying to say that a negotiation should be the way. We left before a decision was made but the local CARE staff member thought that the two vocal women with the help of the vocal male student will ensure that the case goes to BLAST if that's what the victim wants. If this is the case, it would seem that this forum was doing a good job, although the dynamics at the meeting is probably very different when the CARE staff is not present and the village leaders are!

4.9 CARE's Partner NGOs and Gender Issues

Tango International points out in its IFSP report (2002) that the headship of partner NGOs are usually male (there were only two women leaders out of the 46 partner NGOs) and that the selection criteria do not specifically focus on the partner NGO's gender policy and gender record. This might have implications for women's empowerment, as I found with one such partner NGO. This was a meeting of an ESDO Village Development Committee in Rangpur district. The meeting was dominated by the richest villagers, with the president and the secretary (who was his wife) both from this group. Although the poor members were gaining some economic benefit in the way of getting subsidized tube-wells for a group of 15-20 households, *pucca* latrines, and the opportunity to work on the road construction to earn some money, and were also benefiting from the new road and so forth, the basic structural constraints remained untouched.

There was a clear sense of paternalism on the part of the president and his group towards the poor women. I felt that they were speaking not as fellow members of the VDC, but as the well-off and educated³³ who were there to "help the poor". Yet it was not clear what benefit the poor were getting other than the tube-wells and road-work. These were significant, but not something that would lead to poor men and women's empowerment in relation to the rich.

In such a situation, where the president of the VDC owns some 100 *bighas* of land and the poor are absolutely landless, totally dependent on the president and his group to facilitate the economic activities which they now value, the question of challenging the very low wage rates for both men and women in the area does not arise.³⁴ Gender issues came up in terms of problems to do with divorce, violence and dowry, but these were seen to be simply problems of illiteracy, poverty and laziness. The domination by men of women was not an issue. Meanwhile, the substantial amounts of money being directed towards the village remained in the control of the most wealthy villagers.

4.10 Conclusion

As noted, Section 4 represents little more than a series of sketches of the current impact of CARE's work to counter gender discrimination and violence as I saw it in the village context. While this account may seem disappointing in some respects, it should be remembered that CARE's commitment in this area is relatively recent and that we should not expect radical change to take place overnight. While my observations suggested some distance between the ideals of the Long Range Strategic Plan and CARE-DFID Partnership Programme Agreement and the realities of CARE groups in the Northwest, they also revealed several situations where CARE had made a real difference for the better to poor village women and men. They also showed some positive directions which

³³ Most of these wealthy villagers were college graduates or had at least HSC level education.

³⁴ Male labourers only get Tk 50 or even less in a lean season. Sometimes in busy times they might get Tk 100. Women get about half what the men get! When I questioned these low wages for both men and women, and asked whether such questions are raised in their meetings, there was an embarrassed silence. I changed the subject without dwelling on it for it was clear what the state of affairs was: business as usual.

could be developed further, such as the role of the imams and of the folk drama, and the high level of interest in aid in relation to legal matters and *shalish* disputes. Some of these points will be taken up and discussed further in Section 6. In Section 5, however, I shall look more systematically at the set of ideas and values that define the position of women within Bengali patriarchy, and the changes and transformations associated with the increasing Islamization of Bangladeshi society over the last few years. These form an essential background against which any policies and approaches to improve the position of women in Bengali rural society must be considered.

5 Women in Bangladeshi Society and Culture

5.1 Introduction

I have been asked (Appendix 1) to “describe the Bengali, as well as, the contextualized Muslim view of girls and women that sustain the existing patriarchal system”. I was also requested to look at changes in these views, in particular in relation to the growth of Islamist or conservative movements³⁵: “Are the perceptions and/or expectations of the female gender changing in the context of increasing fundamentalism? Identify existing campaigns or awareness raising movements that address these perceptions. Are there any campaigns, which promote the accurate interpretation of the Koran and Islam law? Provide recommendations of how these can be addressed. For example, is dowry the cause for perceiving girl children to be a burden, or does the low esteem given to females stimulate existence of dowry.” I shall also use this section to present my understanding of the social processes which sustain Bengali gender ideology, since I think we cannot really confront the ideology without understanding how it is enmeshed in everyday social practice. This will involve looking at questions such as marriage, dowry and the dependency of women, which I have already referred to in passing on several occasions.

The question of the overall gender ideology of Bengali patriarchy, with its systematic devaluation of women and its denial of their right to an independent existence without male guardianship, has already arisen a number of times in the preceding pages. It is worth noting that while similar ideas are found in other Islamic countries, this is not a specifically Islamic ideology. Within Bangladesh, these attitudes are shared by the majority population of Muslim Bengalis (around 88% of the population), by Hindu Bengalis (about 10%), as well as by the much smaller populations of Christian and Buddhist Bengalis.

Among many of the Adivasi (“tribal” or indigenous) population, made up of numerous small groups and numbering perhaps 1% of the population overall, there are gender values which are rather different and often more favourable to women. However, the two indigenous participants at the Group Discussion on the 14th of Oct. (Sanjeeb and Pabitra) emphasized that some of the practices of these Adivasi communities which lead women to have a more favourable position³⁶ are gradually breaking down under pressure from neighbouring non-indigenous communities and other “modern” forces.

Here I will focus on the patriarchal practices of Muslims, Hindus and Christians. There are differences in the personal laws of the three religious groups in terms of rules of divorce, maintenance, inheritance and custody of children (see Pereira 2002). These clearly make a difference to their legal entitlements within their fathers’ and their

³⁵ There has been much argument about whether “fundamentalism” is an appropriate term outside its original (Christian and U.S.) context, with many writers, particularly from Muslim backgrounds, objecting to the use of the term for contemporary Islamic movements (e.g. Aftab 1995; Sayyid 1997). I generally speak below of “Islamist” rather than fundamentalist movements.

³⁶ E.g. matrilineal and matrilocal kinship patterns whereby property remains in the female line, and men join their wives upon marriage

husbands' households. For example, the laws regarding divorce differ between Islam, Hinduism and Christianity, with divorce being relatively easy for men under Muslim law.³⁷

However, although in theory there are many differences among the three religious groups in terms of women's rights and entitlements, the end result for all amounts to much the same. All three religious groups are highly patriarchal and are also affected by the local cultural values which continue to play very important roles in perpetuating patriarchy.

Thus in theory a Muslim woman has inheritance rights from her parents of 50% of that of her male siblings, a Christian woman is entitled to equal share to her brothers, and a Hindu woman gets nothing.³⁸ In practice, though, Christian and Muslim women usually do not claim inheritance from their parents because of patriarchal norms. Women feel that they might need the support of their brothers in case of future difficulty at their in-laws' house. This is also related to the women's feeling of powerlessness in relation to their husbands and their families. In any case, it just "doesn't look good to claim the inheritance from your brothers."³⁹

Again with divorce laws, while a Muslim man may be able to divorce his wife or enter into a polygamous marriage, a Hindu or a Christian man in practice be able to abandon his wife with relative ease and enter into another relationship, even though divorce is in theory not allowed within his religious personal law. Equally, while divorce is in theory allowed for both men and women in Islam (although for different reasons and men are allowed to divorce more easily than women) in practice it is very difficult for a Muslim woman to get divorce when she wants it, so she is not really much better off in this respect than the Hindu or Christian wife, for whom divorce is not legally available.

A Muslim wife would be entitled to proceed towards a divorce if she can "show that at the time of marriage [her husband] had delegated her the right to ask for a divorce, or that the marriage contract contained the necessary stipulations (such as adultery, physical or emotional torture)." Even if these stipulations were there in the contract, "the legal process to gain the divorce would be protracted and financially burdensome." (Pereira 2002:xvi). Although the legal situation may provide some grounds for women to divorce their husbands, a Bangladeshi woman is most unlikely to pursue a case of divorce on such legal grounds as are available to her because of the existing gender norms of "purity" and honour (*izzat*). These would make it virtually impossible for a woman to accuse her husband of adultery or of failing to satisfy her physical and emotional needs, although it is feasible that some women might be prepared to face the court on the grounds of a husband's failure to provide for her and her children financially. In addition, women with children would be concerned about the loss of children to their husband in the case of divorce.

³⁷ Pereira (2002) analyses case studies of three women from the three religious backgrounds as they are confronted with the questions of divorce, maintenance, and custody of children. As she notes, their entitlements and rights are very different and depend on their religious affiliation because in Bangladesh "religious personal laws, considered sacrosanct, are recognized within the Constitution."

³⁸ The inheritance rule from the husband is more complex and I will not try to discuss this here.

³⁹ However, I have found that many poor women are now claiming the inheritance from their brothers – with the help of BLAST in Dinajpur. This practice of not claiming inheritance is perhaps more a feature of well-off families.

Even in the best of circumstances, few women could possibly take a court action without the moral and financial backing from their parents. Most parents would not be prepared to provide this backing, both because of the effects on the family's reputation and because it would mean that they would then have to take on moral and financial responsibility for their daughter once more. As divorce is usually a stigma for the well-off class, most try to avoid this course of action. This is often true even for men who might engage in extra-marital relationships when they feel "trapped" in an unhappy marriage, but would avoid divorce for the sake of saving their reputation and that of their family (Blanchet 2000; also comments from CARE and NGO staff).

5.2 Purity, *izzat* and The "Middle" Class

Purity and honour (*izzat*) are two of the most important components of the gender ideology which keeps patriarchy intact in Bangladesh. A family's honour and reputation is dependent on its ability to control the behaviour of its women and thereby ensure their continued purity.⁴⁰ Indeed the traditional practice of *parda*⁴¹ is a by-product of the emphasis on women's honour, which is related to controlling their sexual behaviour, best achieved through sexual segregation at every sphere after women reach puberty. While the mechanisms available to different religious groups might vary, there is no doubt that female sexual purity is of utmost importance for all religious groups. For all three groups this is related to the honour, status and reputation of a family. For the Hindus, it serves an additional function of maintaining caste purity. It is this concern about female sexual purity in all three groups that is used to justify male domination and constraints on women's autonomy.

The village discourse about "good" and "bad" girls and about "good" and "bad" families illustrates the significance of "purity" and "honour" for individuals and families. Such discourse is particularly common in the context of marriage, though it runs through all aspects of village life. For individual girls, "good" and "bad" also merge with the significance of skin-colour, so that "good" and "having light skin-colour" are close to synonymous, as are "dark" and "bad" (cf. Rozario 2002b). A "good girl" (*bhalo meye*) is a girl who is seen to be under control, who follows the rules of *parda* and sexual segregation well. "Good" and "bad" naturally have sexual connotations, but also refer to

⁴⁰ The notion of purity most of all entails the premarital virginity of women. However, a woman's purity is also related to her overall behavioural pattern, including her physical mobility beyond the face to face community. Girls after puberty are under constant scrutiny about their behavioural patterns by their elders, for neighbours are always watching and making judgments about a girl's sexual status. Potential grooms' families often find out information about the sexual status of a girl from her neighbours. The girls who are 'talkative', assertive, independent-minded, might be labelled as a *kharap meye* (bad girl). On the other hand, girls who are seen to be submissive, or well-behaved (meaning under control of elders) are labelled as *bhalo meye* (good girl). Both of these labels in turn have sexual connotation - meaning a good girl is most likely to be virgin or pure while the bad girl is likely to be impure and not a virgin.

⁴¹ It is only fairly recently that the physical *burqa* came to be widely practised in Bangladesh. In the past, *parda* was used more generally to refer to the practice of female seclusion. The strict observance of *parda* involved keeping women confined within the home and covering them in *burqa* whenever they ventured out of the home. For most women, though, *parda* meant the requirement that women behave "modestly" and that their interactions with males be restricted, apart from those men who fall in the specified categories with whom contact is permitted (Papanek 1982; Jahan 1975; Alamgir 1977). In Bangladesh only a small number of women followed strict *parda* until recently, but from puberty onwards all women were and still are required to observe *parda* in the wider sense.

all aspects of behaviour: how she walks, how she wears her hair, how she talks, whether she “knows” too much....

In addition to the girl's personal demeanour, the family's status is also very important. If a girl's sister or mother is known as not *bhalo* (“good”), this reflects on the girl's own status, her marriageability, and so on. “Good” and “bad” are also readily used in relation to the richer and the poorer families. Often people will say “*shamondho eshechey bhalo ghor thekey*” (the proposal has come from a “good” family). By “good” family here people might mean a rich family that also has good reputation. Yet at other times people may not know much about the family's reputation, but will be happy to label it as “good” simply because it is wealthy. It is also common to refer to a groom as “*bhalo cheley*,” meaning a very desirable groom with good education and a good job. A groom's sexual purity here is of very little or no concern. In the case of a girl, however, “*bhalo meye*” has a clear sexual connotation. These aspects of the gender ideology are very important, because they naturalize it and make it self-evident and taken for granted for those who live within it. People are constantly making judgements about women and families in these terms, and these judgements are of critical importance when it comes to marriage.

However, the ability of families to protect the purity of its women, and thereby its own honour, vary depending on its economic or class position. Thus poorer groups have always been compelled out of economic necessity to allow their women a certain amount of physical mobility outside their households. Traditionally, many poor women would work in the households of the wealthy, helping during the harvesting season, or doing various other odd jobs throughout the year such as plastering the mud walls and floors, sewing *katha*, processing rice into *muri* (puffed rice) or *chira* (flattened rice). Nowadays, these poor women are taking advantage of the new opportunities provided by infrastructural development projects in rural areas such as those provided by CARE, other NGO and government development work and of course the garments factories. These opportunities generally pay more money even though work conditions remain very poor. However, those sections of the society which are able to keep their own women away from the outside world as a way of ensuring their purity continue to do so.

This is where the role of the rural and urban “middle” classes becomes very important. The very wealthy in the urban centres are not under the same pressure as the middle classes, since their economic and political power is beyond the reach of rest of the society. The pressure on the middle classes stems from their interest in maintaining their distance from the lower classes in terms of status and reputation. They cannot get away with what the very rich can, nor can they afford to behave in the ways in which the poor are compelled to do, as it will mean loss of status and reputation.

In particular, because of its competitive status position with other middle class families, an individual middle class family cannot afford to overlook the social norms surrounding women's status and honour, for to do it would be to attract the criticism and ridicule of other middle class families. One could ask, why can't a middle class family ignore such criticism, why do these criticisms matter so much? At least part of the answer lies in the fact that honour and reputation still count for a lot in Bangladesh and that they have material and structural consequences. Pierre Bourdieu (1977), working in a North African society where such ideas were also very much present, refers to such notions of “purity” and “honour” as a kind of “symbolic capital”, which is interconvertible with economic capital. Thus men or families who are socially perceived as “honourable” can use their position to further their economic and political interests. In rural areas, this might mean that a man is able to successfully run for a political office, get a personal or a bank loan,

negotiate the marriage of his children in “good” , i.e. wealthy families, and so on. In urban centres, too, honour and reputation will take a person a long way. Bangladesh is a highly stratified society and people are very status-conscious. As a result, those who can afford to do so guard their status and honour carefully.

While a family’s honour also depends on men’s behaviour, it is women’s behaviour that is more important. On average it can be argued that men can add to the honour of the family more easily while women can cause the dishonour of a family more easily, especially through sexual misbehaviour and loss of “purity”. Here, young unmarried women are at the most risk, both through their own potential misbehaviour and because of the generally perceived lack of security, so it is not surprising that families are so anxious to marry off their daughters before their honour might be compromised.⁴²

The need for poorer women to work outside the home also means that they are more vulnerable to sexual harassment, assault or rape. In addition, men or boys from higher status families may be in a position to harass or rape these women with relative impunity. This means that the issue of security is particularly critical for these women.

5.3 Marriage and the Dependency of Women

Socially, marriage is of most fundamental importance to mature women in Bangladesh and it is related to the widespread perception of women’s dependency on men. Marriage defines social roles for women as it transforms them from children to adults. From the moment of birth comments are heard along the lines of “she is dark or *kalo* (black); it will be difficult to find a good husband for her.” Usually there are many comments on a newborn baby girl’s complexion, such as “she is *farsha*⁴³” (or *halka shemla*, *garo shemla*, etc⁴⁴). The preoccupation with girls’ complexion and general beauty is related to their parents’ or relatives’ concern about a girl’s chance of a “good” marriage. As a girl grows up, she hears all sorts of comments about her looks and how desirable she might be in the marriage market. Girls are also socialized in other ways from an early age to see marriage and the *shashur bari* (their father-in-laws’ house) as their only destiny.

Mature unmarried women are problematic for Bangladeshi social order as a woman’s only recognized social status is as a wife and a mother. It is through the institution of marriage female sexual purity is maintained and male dominance guaranteed. In other words, marriage helps in reproducing the Bangladeshi patriarchal order. It is the risk which is supposedly posed by uncontrolled female sexuality that makes mature unmarried women problematic in Bangladeshi culture. A mature unmarried woman does not have a husband to control her sexuality. She therefore poses a threat to the social order of things. She is perceived to be liable to disrupt the orderly function of the other members of the society by her potential sexual misbehaviour and so on. A woman’s sexual misdemeanour might ruin the reputation of a family, with adverse impact on the

⁴² I have heard a number of stories of girls being harassed both outside their households and inside. Parents are anxious that if a girl is sexually harassed and raped her reputation will be ruined irreparably and they would not be able to find a groom to marry her.

⁴³ People usually refer to a girl as beautiful (*shundari*) when she is *farsha* or fair-complexioned (the most significant criterion in defining a woman’s beauty in Bangladesh).

⁴⁴ *Shemla* means a complexion between *farsha* and *kalo* (dark complexion), while *halka shemla* and *garo shemla* are used to refer to relatively ‘light’ to ‘dark’ shades of *shemla*.

future marital alliances for other children and loss of “face” in the community in general. I have argued elsewhere at length (Rozario 1992) how a family’s and a community’s honour is ultimately dependent on the behaviour of its women. Women, by their “good” behaviour, help in maintaining the boundaries between “good” families and “bad” families, and of course between classes and religious communities. Hence the emphasis on marriage and the stigma associated with unmarried status. While the problem is greater for rural unmarried women, urban middle class women also face much pressure and ridicule from their families and the surrounding communities should they fail to conform.

In addition to the social need for marriage, there is also a material dimension. Through marriage, a father transfers the burden of having to feed and look after his daughter to her husband. Thus marriage is seen to be even more important for girls in poor families, where the extra person can represent a significant economic burden, and early marriage is more common among poor rural families compared with urban middle class families. As I have already referred to above, the bridegroom’s family will often require a higher dowry for an older women, which adds to the pressure for poorer families to marry their daughters early.

Thus the combination of social and material factors puts enormous pressure on all Bangladeshi women to marry, and on their families to arrange marriages as the earliest possible age. In recent years, the number of never married mature women have been increasing in the urban areas, but this number is still not significant enough to pose a serious threat to the institution of marriage in Bangladesh.

Marriage also entails patrilocal residence for women, meaning that at marriage a woman leaves her parents’ household to live with her husband and his natal family. A newly married woman becomes totally dependent on her husband and his family for her well-being, and is subjected to domination and abuse by almost all members of his family, especially by her mother-in-law. The unequal relationship between the families of the bride and the groom in which groom’s family occupy the superior position (due to devalorization of women) is reflected in the way a married woman is treated in her in-laws’ household. The position of women in their in-laws’ household has become even more problematic with the emergence of dowry since the late 1960s and early 1970s.

5.4 The Growth of Dowry: Valorizing Men, Devalorizing Women

When I did my doctoral fieldwork in a village in Dhaka district in the mid 1980s, dowry was only gradually becoming the norm. My discussions with Muslim and Christian women revealed that of the two generations of women in most households, the older generation were married with the payment of *pon*⁴⁵ to the *bride*’s parents, not dowry (*dabi* or *joutuk*) to the bridegroom’s. This shows how recent the practice of dowry is in the area of my research.

⁴⁵ In Bangla *pon* implies marriage-money, given either to the bridegroom or to the bride. Sometimes differentiation is made between these two types of marriage-money is made by *kannyapon* for bride-price and *barpoon* for groom-price. In my book I used the word *pon* to refer to *kannyapon* or bride-price, the way it was used by the village women themselves. This *pon* apparently was used for the wedding expenses in the bride’s house. Thus during the *pon* system bride’s family spent very little at weddings, reflecting the relatively higher status of women compared to the present situation. *Pon* should not be confused with *mohr* or dower which is a compulsory requirement for a Muslim marriage contract.

In my research in the mid 1980s I identified three interrelated reasons for the emergence of dowry. They still make a lot of sense today in understanding the perpetuation and inflation of dowry:

The Demographic Imbalance: Surplus of Women and Shortage of Men

When asked about the reason for a shift from a *pon* to a *dabi* system, villagers usually pointed to the shortage of men and surplus of women. Other researchers in Bangladesh and India also have had similar responses. Indeed during my field visit to the CARE project areas in October this year, women and men gave me exactly the same response. Yet, it is well-known that, demographically, the sex ratio for all age groups in Bangladesh shows considerably more males than females.⁴⁶

There are, however, social reasons for the rural perception of a female surplus. Although 18 has been set as the minimum legal age of marriage for women, in practice women are still married from the age of around 14, sometimes even earlier. On the other hand, before marriage can be considered, a man today has to be at least 20 and preferably to have established himself by gaining economic autonomy or having a monthly income. Thus, while a woman becomes marriageable from the age of 14, a man is usually not available until he is about 25, sometimes much older. A man often requires considerable time to establish himself satisfactorily and become a desirable groom. Thus, at any given time, the number of women available in the marriage market is always greater than the number of available men. So, although the absolute number of women is smaller than that of men, the socially-imposed difference in the age of marriage creates a real imbalance in the number of men and women available in the marriage market.

The Socio-economic Transformation: Dowry as the Product of Modernity

The emergence of dowry is directly linked to the socio-economic changes in Bangladesh over the last few decades. While agriculture was the main source of livelihood for most people, men were tied to the land and marriage was seen as one way of gaining extra labour. However, the number of men dissociating themselves from agricultural work has been increasing. The importance of land has not decreased, but educated men have become interested in different kinds of work. They go to the city for higher education and employment and become accustomed to an urban culture. This urban migration became necessary following the decrease in the size of landholdings and the increase in landlessness as well as the new aspirations of upper middle and middle class men. Such male urban migration is linked to the transition of Bangladesh from its precapitalist agricultural relations to its incorporation into the capitalist world economy. Working on the land has lost its former high status, while prestige became increasingly attached to income from urban centres.

This pattern of urban migration and the associated penetration of capitalist relations of production into the countryside affected the value system, including the status of women. Associated with these socio-economic changes is a shift in the prestige system “from one based on land and aristocratic values to one based on the accumulation of money,”

⁴⁶ The following are 2002 estimates: at birth: 1.06 male(s)/female; under 15 years: 1.05 male(s)/female; 15-64 years: 1.05 male(s)/female; 65 years and over: 1.18 male(s)/female; total population: 1.05 male(s)/female. From www.discoverybangladesh.com/meetbangladesh/statistic.html (accessed 22 Nov 2004).

with the possibility of translating occupation and commercial success into a new status hierarchy (Lindenbaum 1981:396).

As many men began to take advantage of these new changes, acquiring education, wealth and new status, women began to pay a price for men's success. Until recently education and urban employment were largely restricted to men. This led the parents of grooms to see it as appropriate to make a *dabi* or "demand" for cash or other items from parents of brides as a return on their investment. Such *dabi* from the groom's parents requires the cooperation of the bride's parents. While in most cases the bride's parents have to meet the *dabi* made by the groom's parents, in some cases the bride's parents volunteer a dowry for a son-in-law with a good education and urban occupation. Such practices have been referred to in the Indian context as the "status game of hypergamy" (marriage to a person of equal or superior caste or class) for brides (Caldwell *et al* 1983). This certainly applies to the way dowry practice got going in Bangladesh. The shift from bridewealth to dowry occurred first at urban centres among the wealthy families and then among the rural upper and middle class (Lindenbaum 1981). The *nouveau riche* of Bangladesh spent their wealth on conspicuous consumption rather than investing in productive activities. As black-marketeers, contractors, bureaucrats, army officers, politicians and the like, they acquired considerable wealth in a very short period of time (Ahmed and Naher 1986, 1987). Lacking the status of the landed aristocratic class, they engaged in status hypergamy through marriage. They spent enormous amounts at the weddings of both sons and daughters, and paid big dowries at their daughters' marriages to display their wealth and to secure a groom with a good education and occupation. Although the urban middle and lower middle class could not afford to be as spendthrift, they began to emulate the *nouveau riche*.

In the villages where I undertook my doctoral research, returnees from the Middle East had initially engaged in a similar practice of hypergamy by giving large dowries for daughters and displaying their wealth through elaborate weddings for sons and daughters. Such a conspicuous display of wealth through offering dowry by some families gradually influenced other grooms' families to make a *dabi* for their educated sons as well as placing families of brides under pressure to either meet such *dabi* or sometimes voluntarily to offer dowry so that prospective groom's family will not be tempted away by the offer of a large dowry elsewhere.

The Ideological Justification: Valorization of Men vs Devalorization of Women

With increased urbanization and education, men began to postpone marriage until a much later age. Village men formerly married between the ages of 18 to 22, but now they do not marry until 25 to 30. Yet while men identify with modern value of economic autonomy before marriage, they still define women's status in traditional terms. They still value female sexual purity, and consequently do not marry women of their own age, whom they consider likely to be sexually suspect. Men in their late twenties and thirties now prefer to marry women between the ages of 15 and 19. For every man who marries a much younger woman, there is a corresponding unmarried woman of his own age. While a man can remain unmarried until he is 30 or even 40, a woman who is not married by the time she is 20 is labelled as unmarriageable. This attitude often prevents women from having aspirations to higher education or outside employment.

As the number of never-married women began to increase, parents became anxious about the marriage prospects of their daughters, prompting them to make dowry

payments. This is often the case even where the parents of the prospective groom have either no expectation of dowry or do not demand one. Through dowry, men are looking for compensation for taking the risk of marrying women whose purity is becoming increasingly difficult to control. As Caldwell *et al* (1983:359) argue, “dowry provides a powerful mechanism in South Asia, unlike the rest of the Third World, for mitigating the impact of the marriage squeeze”, i.e. the imbalance of marriageable men and women.

The ideological basis of dowry is maintained through the notions of purity and honour. The responsibility of guarding the purity of mature women is seen as such a burden that even when unmarried women are economically viable the parents are anxious to marry them off. The economic contribution of mature unmarried women is not a desirable alternative to their marriage. Caldwell *et al* (1983) report that in South India the size of dowry increases from menarche onward and older women’s families pay higher dowry. They point out that even among the lower castes young girls are withdrawn from outside paid work for fear of damaging their marriage prospects. My findings from my short field visit to CARE projects in the NW reveals that this analysis still applies in rural areas. As I have pointed out above, parents of *kachi meye* can get away with paying a smaller dowry. Thus, I would argue that the ideological justification for dowry centres around the concern about women’s virginity. It should be noted, however, while there is a cultural preference for men to marry “pure” women, other assets (fair complexion, wealth, education) of women play almost equally important roles in determining their desirability as brides. Nevertheless, the point here is that whether or not all men succeed in marrying a so-called “pure” woman, the ideology of “purity” has the effect of enforcing female subordination and maintaining *dabi*. The notion of purity has the effect of distinguishing between “good” (therefore marriageable) and “bad” (therefore unmarriageable) women, and thereby justifying and inflating the amount of dowry as brides’ families compete with each other to secure “good” grooms for their daughters.

Thus the shift from a *pon* system to a *dabi* system is linked to a combination of factors: the socially created surplus of never-married mature women; socioeconomic changes over the last few decades, resulting in valorization of men and consequent devalorization of women; and the significance of the ideology of purity in defining desirable brides.

Disjunction between Culture and Economy

Whenever discussing the problems facing Bangladeshi women, it is common for people to see Bangladeshi “culture” as the problem. “Culture” is an increasingly problematic concept in anthropology, and I do not want to enter into an analysis here of how “culture” in general might be defined. However it is important to understand that what is popularly seen as “culture” or “cultural” values does not function in isolation from socio-economic and political structures. In other words culture and social structure are part of the same process of social life, although there is not necessarily a neat “fit” (between culture and social structure) in all aspects of social life.

There is indeed a significant disjunction between the demands of the economy (or the wider social structure) and the system of values in Bangladeshi society. Thus, over the last two decades, Bangladeshi women have been joining the outside paid workforce in large numbers. It is clear that many Bangladeshi families can no longer afford to confine all their women to their households. To a certain extent, this women’s presence in the men’s world is now tolerated by the society, although the increased incidents of sexual harassment and other forms of violence on women in public spaces can be seen as a

form of backlash of men on women.⁴⁷ Yet women's status is still defined in terms of traditional ideologies of purity and honour, and their families now have to pay large dowries to ensure a "good" marriage for them.

The shift from bridewealth (*pon*) to dowry (*dabi*) and its escalation in recent years is a consequence of this disparity between the cultural values and the changing economic practices of Bangladeshis. Drastic changes in Bangladeshi economy have not been reflected in the ideology of gender.⁴⁸ Hence parents are desperate to marry off their daughters despite the fact that women are presently less of an economic burden than they were in the past. This explains why men want it both ways (i.e. women who are young/pure/fair/useless as well as educated/rich/income-producing). Bangladeshis want the fruits of modernity (radios, televisions, motorcycles, cars, apartments equipped with the latest gadgets) but are not willing to pay the price (increasing incorporation of women in the workforce) since this is seen as threatening their purity.

What is important to understand here is that it is in the interest of the dominant classes to try to maintain the traditional values, which continue to subordinate women and now are also responsible for the shift to and escalation of dowry. This is because the gender hierarchy is an essential component of the Bangladeshi social hierarchy in general. Hence purity, which devalorizes women and thus justifies the new dowry system, serves an important function for the Bangladeshi social order. Moreover, like purity, the system of dowry facilitates the maintenance and reproduction of status and social hierarchies. I would argue that Tambiah's analysis of Indian dowry payments also helps us in understanding the Bangladeshi dowry system: dowry payments "allow the creation of alliances and ties between elite groups of approximately similar status (or between groups whose exchange of prestige for wealth close status gaps)" (Tambiah 1989:22).

Dowry as the Source of Capital

In 1980 dowry was made illegal in Bangladesh, yet far from the practice of dowry disappearing, it has persisted and the amounts involved keep escalating. The Dowry Act appears to have had no impact here. As I have shown above, dowry came about with the new socio-economic development in the country. Subsequently, it began to escalate, as if to keep pace with further changes in Bangladeshi economy, with the greater penetration of foreign capital in the country and the exposure of Bangladeshis to the latest consumer items in the global market. In the rural areas, since the early 1980s, Grameen Bank-style micro-credit has unwittingly been contributing to the inflation of dowry amounts (Rozario 2002a). Dowry has now become very much the norm for both urban and rural families, and the question of a marriage without dowry is almost unthinkable. An important aspect of this development is the role which dowry is now increasingly taking as a source of capital for the bridegroom. Indeed for many grooms' families, access to modern goods, modern salaried jobs for the grooms, a new business

⁴⁷ Consider the comment of the boys in the Rangpur village, cited in subsection 4.2 above: "Women themselves caused their own devalorization – they are now everywhere, on the streets, at the cinemas, everywhere".

⁴⁸ This does not mean that there have not been any changes at all within the value system. The re-definition of *parda* to justify their entry into paid workforce by garments workers and women in rural areas is a good example of how there have been some shifts in this sphere. Yet, there is a quality of resilience about the ideologies of purity and honour that is clearly perpetuating the overall subordinate status of women in Bangladesh, including the practice of dowry.

venture, or expansion of an existing business is only possible through a large *dabi* from the bride's families.

Thus the issue of dowry is a complex one and I sum up the main points raised above:

1. The practice of dowry remains universal because marriage (and dependence on a husband) is thought essential for women;
2. The necessity of all women being married, along with the perceived "risks" posed by an unmarried woman to her family honour, means that families feel pressured to marry off their daughters as soon as possible;
3. This depresses the marriage age for women, so creating a perceived surplus of women in relation to men, who are not under the same pressure to marry and so generally marry later in life;
4. This in turn leads to further inflation of dowries and to the further devaluing of women in relation to men.
5. The failure of Bangladeshi government in providing security for girls at home and in public places adds to the pressure for early marriage of girls.
6. The poverty level of some families also lead to early marriage of girls, who are seen as financially burdens on their fathers.

These factors form a vicious circle, and it is hard to see how they will change at the level of poor village families when they are taken for granted by the rural and urban middle classes, who act as moral arbiters for the society as a whole. As long as they continue in their present form, they will maintain a set of values in which women are not given any real respect or value, and within which domestic violence, divorce, polygamy, and the abandonment of women and children are prevalent. This is why I have placed so much stress in this report on the issue of dowry as a central component of this vicious circle.

5.5 Islamist Movements and Women

The previous sections have dealt with the general Bengali view of women's role and status, rather than specifically Islamic perspectives. These views, and the general ideology of honour, shame and women's purity that supports them, may be justified by Bangladeshis in terms of Islam, and they have much in common with those found in other Muslim countries in South Asia, West Asia and North Africa. They may well also have been historically influenced by Islam. However it is important to note that they are not specifically Islamic. Similar views are found in non-Muslim societies in parts of Southern Europe, while Muslim societies in Southeast Asia traditionally had much less restrictive views of women's roles. As for dowry, in South Asia this has historically been associated with Hindu societies, not with Muslims.

In recent years, however, modernist versions of Islam ("Islamist" movements) have become increasingly prominent in Bangladeshi society. This has meant that more "orthodox" versions of Islam have been of growing importance and have introduced a new element into the position of Bangladeshi women. While often classed together as

“fundamentalist,” there are actually many different aspects to these developments, including a political party (the Jama’at i-Islami) which seeks to introduce an Islamic state in Bangladesh, an influential mass movement (the Tablighi Jama’at) which stresses strict Islamic observance, modernist versions of Sufi traditions, and a conservative backlash among rural imams.⁴⁹

As far as women are concerned, however, the Islamic resurgence in Bangladesh has led to increasing pressure to a new development, the widespread adoption of the *burqa*. I have discussed the politics of the new veiling in Bangladesh at some length elsewhere (Rozario 2004) so will treat these issues fairly briefly here, but they clearly require some discussion.

The widespread use of the *burqa*, like the prevalence of dowry payments, is a new development in Bangladesh. While the new *burqa* can be seen to be part and parcel of the religious revivalism everywhere in the world, and as a form of resistance to western imperialism, the *burqa* in Bangladesh, as elsewhere, has implications for women’s rights in society.

I have undertaken some initial research with a group of veiled Muslim women at a University campus in Bangladesh and was struck by how little evidence I came across of these women taking a critical orientation towards women’s role and rights in society. Their position is in stark contrast to a group of Muslim women I worked with in Australia. In Australia, Muslim women knew their Qur’anic text and women’s rights in Islam very well, and were consciously using their knowledge of Islam to further their interests as women within the community. It seems the newly-veiled Muslim women in Bangladesh, although educated, are following the lead of male Islamic authorities much more blindly.

What is worrying about the increasing number of middle class women who are opting for the veil is that in many ways it prevents them from exercising their rights as women in society. Indeed, the university women I spoke with were aware of this, and told me that they knew when they started to veil that they might not be able to find employment. Their argument was that Bangladeshi society, unlike a proper Islamic society, does not have the appropriate contexts, e.g. women-only institutions, where they could work. Sexual segregation is the most important requirement for these women, and Bangladeshi society does not provide for it. After all, as they pointed out, even the Prime Minister does not veil.

There is a variety of reasons why women are now resorting to the veil and to adopting a more Islamic identity. We might consider, for example, the following:

- *Strategic-Instrumental motives.* Women may veil to avoid harassment, to signal that they are “good” Muslim women and so to attract suitable marriage partners, and so on.
- *Personal Identity Issues.* Women may veil and adopt a more Islamic identity to counter stigma because of divorce or unmarriageability. Here being a good

⁴⁹ See Hashmi 2004 for a general survey. Ahmad 2004 discusses madrasa education in Bangladesh, and Shehabuddin 1999a and 1999b focusses mainly on the Jama’at-i Islami and the rural backlash. Metcalf 1996 discusses the Tablighi Jama’at (using non-Bangladeshi material), arguing for some positive aspects to their view of women. See also my own paper (Rozario 2004).

Muslim is a way, perhaps, to make up for failing to meet the expectations of Bangladeshi society in other respects.

- *Collective or National Identity Issues.* Women may also veil because of a genuine commitment to a collective Islamic identity. Perhaps for the majority of the newly veiled women, Islam becomes a counter-culture to the immoral decadent destructive west and/or the corruption, violence, *mastanism*, etc. of contemporary Bangladesh (which is itself seen as in large measure a product of colonialism). To wear the veil can thus be a statement of commitment to a different kind of society.
- *Status reasons.* I have suggested elsewhere (Rozario 2004) that Bangladeshi middle-class women in particular are faced with a dilemma. To safeguard their status and honour, they need to maintain their distance from the lower-class women who are much more visible in the public sphere and who also appear to be gaining at least some form of economic empowerment. At the same time, they are not necessarily satisfied at being left out of the new opportunities offered by development altogether. Within this context, Islam provides them with the ideology and value system to justify their position in relation to the various changes around them. Moreover, if the Islamic movement is successful, it may reverse the culture of development that provides the opportunities through which lower class women are perceived to be getting ahead at the expense of the middle class women.

I do not want to suggest that any individual woman's choice to veil and to adopt a more Islamic identity can be neatly pigeon-holed in one or another category. These different motivations reinforce each other and are mutually compatible. Thus women's participation in the Islamic movement and their adoption of the veil can be both a self-reconstruction (the second point), and a step towards the reconstruction of the Bangladeshi society (the third point, cf. Brenner 1996 on Java). This social and self-reconstruction can be brought about at a personal level through a more disciplined life-style, provided by physical veiling and following all the other requirements of the new purist Islam, e.g. praying five times a day, teaching this purist Islam to unveiled and non-practicing Muslims as well as to the *kafers*, meaning non-Muslims.⁵⁰ It is important to recognize the positive agency that may be expressed in women's choice of a more Islamic identity, but it is equally important to recognize that the consequences in terms of their own rights in Bangladeshi society may be much less positive. This is particularly so if the version of Islam they adopt is one that reinforces traditional Bangladeshi gender stereotypes, rather than one that explores the genuine potential within Islam for a critical perspective towards the way in which men and women interact in societies such as Bangladesh.

Thus, those of us mobilizing for women's rights in society are up against not only the age-old patriarchal structure which characterizes every sphere of the society, and the national and local level power hierarchy which are supported by patriarchy, but also a new challenge: the adoption of the new veil by a significant section of the middle class.

⁵⁰ In fact, I felt that one reason why the veiled women were more than happy to talk to me was because they saw this as an opportunity to teach me about Islam and the high value it places on Muslim women.

For example, one of the female lawyers whom I interviewed for this report thought that Jama'at-i-Islami might become an attractive option within the present political climate. People are disillusioned with both political parties in relation to law and order, and security issues, among other things. Jama'at-i-Islami provides an answer in relation to the security issue, both because *parda* gives a form of security for women when they go out, but also because Jama'at-i-Islami stands for honesty and Islamic discipline in public life. What is more, I was told that Jama'at-i-Islami is the only political party that has something on women in their party manifesto!

Some Islamic groups have been able to establish a firm support base among the disenchanted rural and urban petty bourgeois and other groups who feel threatened by the recent changes in women's position. Although, on the whole, middle class women in the urban and rural areas are not encouraged to enter paid employment, many opportunities have opened up for them in the NGO offices, as supervisors in the garments factories, women's organizations, health organizations, hospitals, schools, colleges and universities and so on. Those families who do allow their women to take part in paid employment generally insist that they work in schools, colleges, government offices, and preferably with other women.

Thus changes in middle class women's position has been rather limited compared with the poor women. In any case, these new developments are posing a threat to a certain section of the population. This section feel that women are accessing resources or jobs that they could be getting themselves, and because these new opportunities for women means that these women cannot be exploited so easily as a source of cheap labour. In addition, the new opportunities are providing women with a kind of confidence and independence that is threatening to the local class and patriarchal structures. The requirement since 1997 for Union Parishads (local councils) to include three female members (out of a total of twelve) has provided new opportunities for women to take an active part in local politics, as with other such developments is seen to be largely the result of external pressure via the NGO sector.

The reaction to these developments is expressed in various new repressive measures (such as *fatwa* by local Islamic authorities) and in many other forms of violence against vulnerable women, as well as in attacks against NGOs and credit institutions which are seen to be facilitating women's independence. Individual women who are seen to be going "too far" may find themselves the subject of a *fatwa*, forcing their husbands to divorce them and so forth (Shehabuddin 1999).

However, in the north-western region (Rangpur, Dinajpur and Bogra) where CARE and its partner NGOs have been working with the vulnerable women and men, this kind of backlash seems to be limited. At any rate, I did not encounter reports of any recent incidents during my visit.⁵¹

For Islamic groups such as Jama'at-i-Islami, however, women's rights are a western concept and is part of a whole western-imposed social order which they explicitly oppose. As long as the Islamic groups have effective influence on Bangladeshi government policy, it is highly unlikely that the government will take UN rulings on gender equality seriously. Thus, although the Government of Bangladesh has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, it had

⁵¹ This may reflect the more limited authority of rural imams in the Northwest in comparison to the Southeast (Bode 2002: 6).

reservations on certain parts and it seems clear that it has no intention of implementing the convention in the foreseeable future.

Thus many laws have been passed which have positive implications for women. These include the prohibition of violence against women, the prohibition of dowry and so forth. Yet, in fundamental affairs, the legal system remains intact, a system which not only protects Islam as such, but the Bangladeshi form of patriarchy. Thus as Faustina Pereira analyses the situation (Pereira 2002), the reservations which the Bangladeshi government entered in relation to the Convention

are specific to the shari'a and religious expression in general. The reservations pertain to Article 2, which defines discrimination against women and outlines measures to be taken by states to eliminate such discrimination, and Article 13(a) which says that states shall take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the right to family benefits. (p109).

In fact, the law against dowry has little or no effect, and so long as other fundamental aspects of patriarchy (e.g. rules on inheritance, divorce, polygamy) remain untouched, it is clear that this will continue to be the case. These unequal rules of inheritance, divorce and polygamy are now guarded more rigidly because of the overwhelming influence of Islam in Bangladeshi politics. Thus one prominent feminist lawyer whom I interviewed commented that "every debate in the country now relates to "how Islamic" is it, and of course, for human rights, women and empowerment issues, the point of reference is also Islam.⁵² She also noted that violence against non-Muslim women is also justified through such ideas and values about humanity.

ISLAMI BINODON

Some incidents from this popular TV programme:

(1) A teenage woman returns home and enters the door sounding exasperated about the kind of problems she was facing outside, in terms of harassment from men. So her family quickly found her a solution – "if you use *burqa* when you go out, then you won't face this problem". And she does precisely that and is shown to be very pleased having taken this decision and finding life much easier to deal with.

(2) As an advocate leaves his house, he tells his wife that a male client of his will call in, could she look after him. She said "What are you saying? – How can I see the face of an unrelated man - just as you cannot see the face of an unrelated woman, I can't see the face of an unrelated man!"

Such TV programs during the popular slots passing on powerful messages to the ordinary public. In the midst of so much insecurity (failure of the state to provide security to women), it is not surprising that these ideas are very persuasive, and that more and more women are seen to be using *burqa* or the head-cover.

⁵² From what I was told, the Islamist influence is spreading through all aspects of Bangladeshi life. Dhaka University is apparently now under strong Jama'at influence. Many female teachers are wearing the head cover. At schools, students are being told to use at least a handkerchief to cover their hair when they go to school, and only to wear *salwar kameez*, rather than skirts which will reveal their legs. Religion (meaning Islam) is now part of the school curriculum, with no provision made for non-Muslim students, and so on.

On the face of it the *burqa* may seem harmless, but its general adoption has serious implication for women who decide not to use the *burqa* (including non-Muslim women, for whom the *burqa* is a specifically Muslim symbol). The *burqa* represents a kind of compromise between the need for women to take part in society and the desire to keep them in seclusion: women are allowed to come out, but only so long as they wear *burqa*. However, this means that the onus of women's security is on women again. The state is not taking any responsibility: women have to behave themselves and obey the rules. As for those who are not covered (including non-Muslims), if they get violated, it is their own fault.

As I saw with the imams at Rangpur (section 4), there are positive aspects to Islam in the contemporary situation in Bangladesh, as there are with Islam elsewhere in the world. The increasing dominance of conservative and patriarchal forms of Islam at the national level however is a worrying development that has the potential to undermine much of the progress made towards women's rights. I make some further comments on the role of Islam in the concluding section.

6 Recommendations and Conclusion

6.1 Recommendations

I was asked to “provide recommendations on how to address the attitudes toward females at different social economic levels” and this concluding section is largely devoted to my recommendations. More specifically, my terms of reference noted that “[o]ften programs are directed toward the poor when often the poor are trying to emulate the middle class” and asked “Should the program focus on the perceptions of men toward women, or on women’s own perceptions of their daughters and themselves, or both?”

In relation to this last question, I think it should be clear after my discussion of values and dowry in the previous section that these are not really separable. We need to focus on both, or, more precisely, we need to adopt strategies that will have effects for both.

The recommendations in Subsection 6.1 are not given in order of priority. In the following subsection (6.2) I group these together as part of a series of strategies. The final subsection (6.3) is a brief conclusion.

* * *

To begin with, I will present a number of recommendations that grow out of my discussions with women’s organizations (Section 2), the consideration of “spontaneous” movements (Section 3), and my field trip (Section 4):

I pointed out in Section 2.5 how competition between organizations limits the development of solidarity among the women they work with. If CARE is serious about promoting solidarity among women at the regional level, it faces the challenge of getting other NGOs to try and overcome such boundaries and competition among themselves, and work together for real collective empowerment of women. This is highly political issue and may not be possible in the near future. However, it seems to be a fundamental issue, and I present this as my first recommendation:

Recommendation 1 CARE should develop strategies to facilitate a much higher degree of collaboration between institutions working for women’s rights.

An effective strategy requires key issues around which women’s organizations can mobilize. I suggested in Section 2 that violence against women, the principal issue around which mobilization has taken place so far, is limited in its potential to build solidarity across class barriers, particularly if domestic violence is largely excluded. My suggestion (Recommendations 2 to 4) is built around a combination of three interconnected issues, and derives in part from the analysis presented in the previous section.

Dowry was nominated as an issue at the meeting on 14th October only by one organization. However, during discussion it became clear that much of the violence

against women, particularly domestic violence, was related to the practice of dowry. When I asked directly at the meeting why dowry was not an issue that was being addressed by the groups, there seemed to be some resentment by one or two individuals who thought that perhaps CARE was trying to impose its own agenda or strategy to address the gender problem. However, after I pointed out that in my analysis it was one of the main reasons for domestic violence, there seemed to be general agreement that a campaign against dowry was worth undertaking, and I present this as a recommendation:

Recommendation 2 CARE should use the issue of dowry as a way to build a broad coalition that can attack one of the root causes of women's oppression.

It was clear at the 14th October meeting and in discussions with individual CARE staff and other activists that this is a difficult and controversial suggestion. As everybody knows, dowry, despite being illegal and constantly condemned by authorities of all kinds, continues to be practised almost universally by the middle classes as well as the rest of the population, and is increasing in value and importance. I discussed why this is so in some detail in Section 5.

What this shows is that an effective campaign against dowry cannot take place in isolation. Dowry exists because it meets needs in Bangladeshi society, and to counter it at least some of those needs must be met in other ways. As two members of CARE staff pointed out to me, one cannot simply get rid of dowry without putting something else in its place.

I suggest that a campaign for women's inheritance rights being transferred at the time of marriage is a natural complement to a campaign against dowry. If women were to have access to inheritance rights at the time of marriage, this would provide an alternative to dowry in terms of financial provision to the newly married couple and also serves to protect the woman's interests within her new family.⁵³ I therefore suggest

Recommendation 3 The campaign against dowry should be combined with a campaign for women's inheritance rights.

Specifically, CARE should endorse the proposal that women's rights in their parental property should be transferred as part of the marriage contract or *nikahnama* in Muslim marriages.⁵⁴

This recommendation could be combined with working towards the development of the Uniform Family Code (see below), but it could also be implemented independently of it.

⁵³ The Indian feminist writer Madhu Kishwar came to similar conclusions in the context of campaigning against dowry in India: "Our struggle ought to focus on equal and inalienable inheritance rights for daughters in parental property (...) Merely outlawing dowry without ensuring inheritance rights for women only makes women still more vulnerable." (Kishwar 2002: 36.)

⁵⁴ I am not sure of the most appropriate way to handle non-Muslim (particularly Hindu) marriages. This requires further investigation.

I would suggest that within the present socio-economic climate, the sense of moral dependency is just as important, and perhaps even more important than the issue of economic dependency of women on men. This moral/cultural dependency of women on men can be understood by the universal marriage pattern in Bangladesh, because, outside marriage, mature women do not have an acceptable identity within the society. This is not only the case with the rural population, but with the middle-class urban population, and as noted before it is intimately connected with the persistence and growth of dowry, which in its turn is a major cause of disputes leading to domestic violence. Domestic violence is an issue which affects women of all social classes and which therefore has potential for building solidarity across class barriers.

I suggest that CARE should take on the project of building a broad coalition around the issue of domestic violence against women. This is an area where CARE already has a significant record, and as noted above, domestic violence is closely related to the question of dowry, so that the campaign against domestic violence can be naturally linked to the previous two recommendations.

Recommendation 4 CARE should seek to build a broad coalition around the issue of domestic violence against women.

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In Section 3.3 I briefly mentioned the growth of “village cooperatives” and alternative forms of provision of microcredit to the dominant “Grameen Bank” model. I feel that this is a worthwhile direction to pursue. These locally-based microcredit groups are free from many of the problems of the large, centralized and hierarchical “Grameen Bank” model and can provide a context in which local communities can achieve a measure of genuine collective empowerment. There is a great deal of experience from elsewhere in the world that can be accessed in this respect (see Ardener and Burman 1995; Rozario 2001a).

Recommendation 5 CARE should encourage the growth of local credit-sharing groups as an alternative to Grameen Bank-style microcredit and as a way of building solidarity within local communities.

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In Section 4, I suggested that CARE projects have been very successful in meeting many of the basic survival needs of poor rural women, but much less so in articulating and working towards their longer-term strategic interests. Addressing the strategic interests of the poor women is a necessary condition for sustainability of women’s genuine collective empowerment or solidarity.

While I was unable to see Freirian approaches such as REFLECT in action, I feel attracted by their potentiality for stimulating women to articulate their strategic interests. This approach has been pioneered extensively by ACTION-AID, and I understand that similar techniques are being planned for CARE’s new SHOUHARDO project. Related approaches have already been employed, apparently with some success, by CARE staff on the GO-INTERFISH project in the Northwest (Bode and Brewin 2003).

I attended a seminar on REFLECT organized by ACTION-AID and discussed this with Shameem Siddiqui of CARE and Nasreen Huq and Shahamina Zaman of ACTION-AID, who are experienced with its implementation at the village level in Bangladesh. REFLECT is based on Paulo Freire's concept of "conscientization," which entails education for liberation, not education for oppression. Freire sees conventional education as simply instilling competitive capitalistic values and facilitating students' acceptance of their place within the hierarchical society, both in terms of class and gender.

While I am still not totally clear on how REFLECT operates at the village level, I understand that it involves a bottom-up participatory approach to education about their own situation, by engaging villagers in drawing graphic representations on the ground or paper. These diagrams are then translated into words by the help of the facilitator, and villagers also get the opportunity to read, write and do arithmetic. If one was to follow Freire's ideas fully, then awareness-raising by this manner should also lead to taking action to change their oppressive situation.

My discussions with different people engaged with the REFLECT model suggest that although while the approach has considerable potential, implementation is going to be a great challenge for many reasons, the most important being the political environment of the country. Nevertheless, I feel this should not be the reason not to launch the program. Minimally it will raise the awareness of many people, and as the number of these people increases, the scope for a real challenge from the bottom half of Bangladeshi society to the top half increases.

Recommendation 6 CARE should look for ways to meet the strategic interests of women in CARE projects, as well as their basic needs. The use of Freirean approaches such as REFLECT may be appropriate here.

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In section 4.5 I discussed the women Union Parishad members and the need for solidarity between them. This is an area where CARE might make further contribution. I feel that female UP members, including the ex-female UP members, many of whom I came across during my NW visit, could be a very important human resource to work with. They could be female role models for rural middle class women.

Recommendation 7 CARE should pay particular attention to the role of female Union Parishad members, and should investigate ways of building up networks of mutual support and solidarity among these members.

* * *

As I noted in Subsection 4.6, I was impressed by the group of imams I met in Rangpur. The meeting led me to think that it would be worth cooperating with Islamic authorities with the aim of encouraging selected imams in the region to help with the accurate interpretation of the Islamic texts in relation to Islam, and particularly with highlighting those aspects of Islam that support more socially liberal and positive roles for women.

It was interesting that while village girls go to Madrassas and study the Qur'an, they read it in Arabic so that they often have little or no understanding of the text. Ensuring that

everyone has access to a Bangla translation of the Qur'an would be a step forward here. However, the language of the Qur'an is often difficult and ambiguous, and has to be supplemented by knowledge of the *hadith*. Consequently, it is not just a question of arriving at an accurate translation, but also finding ways to interpret the Qur'an and *hadith* meaningfully and appropriately for today. This is a project that has been undertaken by Muslim feminists in other parts of the Muslim world with considerable success. It would be useful to establish links with organizations such as Sisters in Islam in Malaysia who have been active in this field for some time. Here collaboration with BNWLA, which has already been involved with Asia Foundation's work in this area, may be a good strategy (see below).

However, some members of the legal organizations active in promoting rights of women in law, and very active in campaigning for Uniform Family Code, may find this approach problematic. Any involvement of imams should perhaps be done in close consultation with them, so that the two sets of campaigns, both endeavouring to ensure women's rights, do not come into conflict with each other. I feel that some compromise can be made here. Cooperating with Islamic authorities to interpret Qur'an and Hadith accurately so as to promote women's rights in Islam does not of itself contradict the demand for uniform family code.

Recommendation 8 CARE should investigate working with local imams and with relevant Islamic organizations within and outside Bangladesh to encourage full awareness of the positive aspects of Qur'an and Hadith for women's rights. CARE should also explore collaboration with Islamic authorities in the proposed campaign against dowry, for women's inheritance rights, and against domestic violence. Where appropriate, similar strategies may be pursued with Hindu and Christian organizations.

* * *

The use of folk drama by the Dinajpur PHL group as a way of conveying messages about women's role in society also impressed me (Section 4.7). I felt that using popular theatre (or *jatra*) and folk-songs was an excellent method of communicating with village people. Such dramas and *jatras* attract large numbers of people, including women. However, I felt that the language used in these dramas could be improved. Rather than always portraying women in helpless situations, some positive roles could be given to women in the drama. Similarly in the lectures that were interspersed with the drama, different language needs to be used. Instead of showing *momota* (pity), women need to be given their due respect. Rather than focussing only on injustice inflicted on women, more positive qualities, such as the value of a husband taking advice from his wife on various matters, or showing husband and wife simply spending some time together, talking and eating and so on, would be valuable.

Recommendation 9 CARE should look further into the use of drama, *jatra* and folk-song as a mode of communication, and give attention to the way in which women are portrayed in these media, with a view to creating more positive and self-reliant female roles.

* * *

I commented in Section 4.9 about my concern regarding the Partner NGO I visited at Rangpur, which seemed to do little more than reproduce in its structure the gender and class hierarchies in the local community. This led me to propose the following recommendation in the draft version of this report:

Recommendation 10 CARE should consider vetting Partner NGOs more carefully in regard to their sensitivity to and practice regarding gender and class issues.

I have learned since presenting my draft report that CARE policy in this respect has changed since 2002, perhaps in response to the Tango International report which commented on this issue (2002). The current CARE policy for agreements with Partner NGO's is explicit about the need for gender awareness. Gender sensitivity is emphasized in the "code of conduct" specified for the relationship between CARE and the partner NGO, while the agreement itself contains a series of very explicit statements.⁵⁵ It seemed clear from my experience however that not all Partner NGO's take these commitments seriously.

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In the remainder of this sub-section, I present several further recommendations, bearing in mind the request in my Terms of Reference to consider attitudes to females at different social economic levels, but also covering some other issues that have not been addressed in previous sections.

* * *

Recommendation 11 Promoting solidarity among women in the locality, so they can give support to each other in times of need, is an important strategy. In particular, CARE should consider ways of cooperating with other large NGOs so as to avoid the divisive effects of competition between organizations for membership.

Women can support each other in going to the hospital, local UP offices, or other government offices at the *upazila* or district levels when they need their services. This solidarity can be enhanced by linking up women of the nearby villages in the pretext of doing something together: monthly or bi-monthly cultural shows, including dramas, if possible performed by both men and women. These functions can follow from regular meetings and discussion about immediate issues that concern the local women, in which

⁵⁵ "(4.1) The NGO needs to make an all out effort to create and develop a Gender sensitive environment in the Organization; (4.2) If not already existing, the NGO shall develop a Gender policy within 06(six)months after the MOU has been signed. Necessary guidance and assistance shall be provided by CARE, if required; (4.3) Proper reflection of implementation of Gender policy in Organizational values, program approach and organizational development needs to be ensured by the NGO; (4.4) NGO shall take affirmative initiative for gender balance in the recruitment policy and in practice; (4.5) Gender indicators shall be developed for necessary monitoring purposes towards progress of gender equity, both at organization and program level of the NGO. If necessary, CARE shall provide support. (4.6) Creation of positive influence in addressing practical needs & strategic interests on both Female and Male in all program initiative shall be ensured by the NGO." I thank Anna Minj for bringing this to my attention.

they discuss the kind of action that can be taken for a particular problem, or share ideas and knowledge they have learned separately in their regular activities.

I mentioned earlier (Section 2.4) the divisive effects of the competitive pursuit of members by different NGOs and the destructive effects that this can have on women's solidarity. This is an issue that requires systematic attention among the NGO community, and CARE could play a useful role in facilitating this.

* * *

I mentioned above the importance of female Union Parishad Members as role models (cf. Recommendation 7). NGO female field workers are also looked up to by the village women, especially when they are in crisis, domestic violence, conflicts related to dowry and child marriage.

Recommendation 12 CARE should pay particular attention to the role of NGO female field workers as potential role models for women in their communities.

* * *

Forming Strategic Alliances with ASK, BLAST and BNWLA. There is clearly a great need for legal aid among women and men in rural communities. ASK have developed a partnership scheme with BRAC to provide legal services at grassroots level. BRAC is responsible for managing the program and community mobilization. There are training programs for para-legal professionals, and also for trainers at the field level. ASK provides the training, supervision and advocacy, as well as some district-level staff. ASK are interested in working on a similar basis with CARE and I would strongly support this idea. BLAST already provides some services of this kind in Dinajpur (see above), and would be happy to collaborate if CARE wants to expand this arrangement elsewhere in the region.

Recommendation 13 CARE should seek to develop a rural legal aid service in conjunction with ASK and/or BLAST, following the model already developed by ASK and BRAC.

A related problem here is the lack of awareness of existing laws in favour of women was raised as a significant problem by many women's organizations. To a certain extent CARE is trying to address this through their women's group activities. But a more concerted effort is needed. I know BRAC has some legal training program in place and I think ASK collaborate with them with their technical expertise. Something like this can be done by CARE to expand this service to a wider population in the NW and SE where they are prominent.

Recommendation 14 CARE should seek ways, in conjunction with ASK and/or other legal services, to increase the level of awareness of existing laws in favour of women.

One area where CARE could collaborate with BNWLA is to explore BNWLA's work with Asia Foundation on women's rights within Islam. Asia Foundation held a workshop in May 2003 which brought together Muslim women from six South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, working towards expanding women's rights within Islam. This meeting also included representatives from South Africa, Indonesia, and the Malaysian organization Sisters in Islam.⁵⁶ A follow-up meeting ("Ensuring women's rights within Islamic framework") was held in Bangladesh on 9 Nov 2004, organized by the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA).⁵⁷

Recommendation 15 CARE might consider being involved with BNWLA in their work on interpreting women's rights in an Islamic framework.

I have not specifically included any recommendation regarding the Uniform Family Code. It seems to me that CARE should, in principle, be in support of the movement for the implementation of a Uniform family Code, but that the issue needs to be approached with some caution at present because of its potentially divisive nature in the current political environment.

* * *

Education and the Development of a Gender Sensitive Curriculum. I understand that UNICEF is involved in the Second Primary Education Development Program (PEDP II) that was launched this September. In addition to improving the quality of primary education for all children in Bangladesh, PEDP II is also supposed to look into the issue of gender sensitivity in the curriculum.

I am informed by the CARE's education section that CARE is at present exploring the possibilities for working with UNICEF on this program. If CARE can get involved, perhaps some technical support would be welcome in terms of ensuring that "gender sensitivity" goes beyond rhetoric or even policy to being implemented in a way that will be effective. This curriculum should aim at addressing simple issues of basic respect of human beings, boys or girls, regardless of class distinction. In later years, marriage should be presented as a source of partnership, friendship and companionship.

If the political environment allows, the ideas of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich (education for liberation, rather than inculcating values of competitiveness, and respect of existing class, status and gender hierarchy!) could also be installed in the curriculum at school.

Recommendation 16 CARE should explore opportunities to develop gender-sensitive curriculum in PEDP II and other relevant contexts. Education should stress mutual respect and partnership between men and women, and focus on liberation of human potential rather than the inculcation of competitiveness.

⁵⁶ Some details are given at www.asiafoundation.org/Women/legal.html, accessed 15 Nov. 2004. This appears to be the same meeting as one in Colombo which I was told about by Shahnaz Huda, and which she attended along with Salma Ali of BNWLA.

⁵⁷ www.southasianmedia.net/cnn.cfm?id=160376&category=Women&Country=BANGLADESH, accessed 15 Nov. 2004

* * *

Another way in which we can attempt to increase respect for women is via the mass media. It would be nice to see shows like *Islami Binodon* (see Section 5) - preferably without the *burqa*! - which show women in empowered role; husband and wife as partners, young men and women interacting as equal, women in positions of giving intelligent suggestions to their brothers or husbands about land, about disputes with family, about family business.

The media also provide a context in which religious leaders (imams, also Hindu and Christian leaders) can address women's issues in positive ways in programmes directed at rural communities. It would be good to see female UP members being given a significant role in these programmes.

Recommendation 17 CARE should investigate the use of the mass media to improve respect for women and awareness of women's value in society.

* * *

I do not have any immediate solution to the very important and growing problem of insecurity for women everywhere in public spaces in Bangladesh, but would suggest the following:

Recommendation 18 CARE should bear in mind the problems posed for women by the high level of personal insecurity in contemporary Bangladeshi society, and should seek ways to address these problems, where appropriate in conjunction with the Government of Bangladesh and other NGOs.

* * *

Use of Researchers and University Teachers. Finally, I would point to the resources available locally in terms of academic teachers and researchers in gender studies and related areas in the social sciences.⁵⁸ A number of Bangladeshi universities now have gender studies courses (including Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University and Gono Bishwa Bidhyalay). I would encourage CARE to support these courses, and also to continue to make full use of competent academic researchers in the social sciences, for example to help analyse and facilitate the new Partnership Programme Agreement and SHOUHARDO programs on women and empowerment.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ A partial listing of some of those known to me: Dr Shahnaz Huda (Law Faculty) and others at Dhaka University; Dr Naseem Hossain (Dept of Politics and Government) at Jahangirnagar University; Dr Sultana Khanam (Dept of Sociology) at Rajshahi University; Professor Firdous Azim, Dept of English, BRAC University and Dhaka University; Dr Meghna Guhathakurta of Research Initiatives (Bangladesh); Dr Nasreen Huq and Dr Rownok Jahan of Social Initiatives Ltd; Thérèse Blanchet and her research team.

⁵⁹ For example, the report that was written by Thérèse Blanchet is referred to by many in CARE as the most useful document produced in analysing gender problems in Bangladesh. This is not surprising, as it was based on solid anthropological research.

Recommendation 19 CARE should promote and support academic research and teaching on gender issues in Bangladesh and continue to make use of academic researchers in gender studies in analysing and evaluating its own work.

Two areas which emerge in the above report as particularly significant for further research are (1) the growth of dowry and the way in which it currently operates in rural and urban settings, and (2) the growth of Islamist movements, particularly among women, both in relation to the obstacles this might pose for women's rights but also the positive potentials for working towards women's rights in an Islamic framework.

6.2 Overall Directions

The preceding section includes a large number of recommendations. It might be useful to rearrange these in terms of a number of general directions.

A: Create Unity Through a Campaign on Dowry, Inheritance Rights and Domestic Violence

This group of recommendations belongs together, and is designed to identify a group of themes on which an effective mass campaign might be built that could provide a basis for unity and solidarity among activists for women's rights:

Recommendation 1 CARE should develop strategies to facilitate a much higher degree of collaboration between institutions working for women's rights.

Recommendation 2 CARE should use the issue of dowry as a way to build a broad coalition that can attack one of the root causes of women's oppression.

Recommendation 3 The campaign against dowry should be combined with a campaign for women's inheritance rights.

Recommendation 4 CARE should seek to build a broad coalition around the issue of domestic violence against women.

B: Work To Create Unity and Awareness of Strategic Needs Among Rural Women

I have grouped the following five recommendations together. The first four complement each other naturally. The fifth is important since if CARE's Partner NGOs are in effect subverting and undermining the messages it is trying to put across and the changes it is attempting to implement then this can have very damaging effects on the growth of solidarity among rural women's groups.

Recommendation 11 *Promoting solidarity among women in the locality, so they can give support to each other in times of need, is an important strategy. In particular, CARE should consider ways of cooperating with other large NGOs so as to avoid the divisive effects of competition between organizations for membership.*

Recommendation 6 *CARE should look for ways to meet the strategic interests of women in CARE projects, as well as their basic needs. The use of Freirean approaches such as REFLECT may be appropriate here.*

Recommendation 5 *CARE should encourage the growth of local credit-sharing groups as an alternative to Grameen Bank-style microcredit and as a way of building solidarity within local communities.*

Recommendation 7 *CARE should pay particular attention to the role of female Union Parishad members, and should investigate ways of building up networks of mutual support and solidarity among these members.*

Recommendation 10 *CARE should consider vetting Partner NGOs more carefully in regard to their sensitivity to and practice regarding gender and class issues.*

C: Legal Aid and Security Issues

It was clear in my field trip that legal aid and information services are highly valued by rural people. They also have obvious potential to help them to become aware of and critical about their rights within Bangladeshi society. I therefore see this as an important area for CARE to pursue in conjunction with other organizations. The security issues are also of immediate pragmatic relevance to very many rural and urban Bangladeshi women, and action in this area is likely to meet with widespread interest and support.

Recommendation 13 *CARE should seek to develop a rural legal aid service in conjunction with ASK and/or BLAST, following the model already developed by ASK and BRAC.*

Recommendation 14 *CARE should seek ways, in conjunction with ASK and/or other legal services, to increase the level of awareness of existing laws in favour of women.*

Recommendation 18 *CARE should bear in mind the problems posed for women by the high level of personal insecurity in contemporary Bangladeshi society, and should seek ways to address these problems, where appropriate in conjunction with the Government of Bangladesh and other NGOs.*

D: Media, Education, Role Models

I have grouped together here a series of recommendations that are concerned in various ways with working to encourage women and men to see women as having a more

positive and autonomous role in society. None of these is likely to produce immediate dramatic results, but together they could make a considerable difference over the longer term.

Recommendation 9 CARE should look further into the use of drama, jatra and folk-song as a mode of communication, and give more attention to the way in which women are portrayed, with a view to creating more positive and self-reliant female roles.

Recommendation 12 CARE should pay particular attention to the role of NGO female field workers as potential role models for women in their communities.

Recommendation 16 CARE should explore opportunities to develop gender-sensitive curriculum in PEDP II and other relevant contexts. Education should stress mutual respect and partnership between men and women, and focus on liberation of human potential rather than the inculcation of competitiveness.

Recommendation 17 CARE should investigate the use of the mass media to improve respect for women and awareness of women's value in society.

E: Working With Religious Authorities

Two of the recommendations concern working in conjunction with Islamic and other religious authorities. While there can obviously be problems and conflicting agendas in such work, I see this as an important direction. Religion is an important part of Bangladeshi society, and there are undoubtedly people within Islamic and other religious contexts in Bangladesh who share CARE's concerns about the status and role of women in Bangladesh. Cooperation with such people can lead to much more effective work, particularly in rural communities where local religious leaders may have considerable authority. In addition, Islamist movements seem set to become increasingly influential within Bangladeshi society over the next few years, and CARE cannot afford to be seen as simply part of the secularist opposition to Islam. This might compromise much of its ability to work effectively within Bangladesh.

Recommendation 8 CARE should investigate working with local imams and with relevant Islamic organizations within and outside Bangladesh to encourage full awareness of the positive aspects of Qur'an and Hadith for women's rights. CARE should also explore collaboration with Islamic authorities in the proposed campaign against dowry, for women's inheritance rights, and against domestic violence. . Where appropriate, similar strategies may be pursued with Hindu and Christian organizations.

Recommendation 15 CARE might consider being involved with BNWLA in their work on interpreting women's rights in an Islamic framework.

F: More Research!

The remaining recommendation simply noted the need for more research on an ongoing basis, particularly in gender studies and the social sciences. I have tried to argue in this report that if we are to act effectively to improve women's status in Bangladesh, it is important to understand the connections between the various developments in Bangladeshi society.

Recommendation 19 *CARE should promote and support academic research and teaching on gender issues in Bangladesh and continue to make use of academic researchers in gender studies in analysing and evaluating its own work.*

6.3 Conclusion

As I noted at the start of this report, mounting an effective challenge to patriarchal ideologies in Bangladesh is not going to be an easy project. I appreciate the opportunity that has been given to me to examine and report on these issues, and I hope that the material and the recommendations I have presented in this report will help CARE staff in thinking through some of the issues involved and in finding realistic and practicable strategies that can bring about some real change.

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Appendix 1: Activities and Questions Specified in the Terms of Reference for This Project

1. The consultant will learn about and analyze the strategies that are being used by women's organizations and forums to address women's rights. The information to be obtained should include the following:
 - Identify existing forums and organizations that are involved in promoting women's rights.
 - Identify the key rights issues that are being addressed by these organizations. Do these issues represent the key causes of the oppression of women or are they more symptomatic? Do they also address socioeconomic discrimination between women, and among women within the family?
 - Are the various movements connected to any actual solidarity movements at the village level? How are these movements perceived by the poor? Are they relevant to their concerns?
 - What has been the effectiveness of these movements and what are the issues, which constrain their effectiveness.
2. Identify and describe spontaneous "grass roots" level movements among rural and urban women. What were the key issues, which inspired these movements? How did women connect with one another? Did they sustain and if not, why not?
3. Review CARE's approaches to addressing discrimination and violence against women. What are the changes in attitudes that have occurred among men and women due to these initiatives, and within communal decision-making bodies i.e. shalish. What are the key issues and perceptions that are being addressed?
4. Describe the Bengali, as well as, the contextualized Muslim view of girls and women that sustain the existing patriarchal system. Are the perceptions and/or expectations of the female gender changing in the context of increasing fundamentalism? Identify existing campaigns or awareness raising movements that address these perceptions. Are there any campaigns, which promote the accurate interpretation of the Koran and Islam law? Provide recommendations of how these can be addressed. For example, is dowry the cause for perceiving girl children to be a burden, or does the low esteem given to females stimulate existence of dowry.
5. Provide recommendations on how to address the attitudes toward females at different social economic levels. Often programs are directed toward the poor when often the poor are trying to emulate the middle class. Should the program focus on the perceptions of men toward women, or on women's own perceptions of their daughters and themselves, or both?
6. Draft a document, between 20 and 30 pages in length, that consolidates the information above.

7. Compile information on additional resources and specific issues that merit further investigation.
8. Circulate the draft document for review by CARE Bangladesh senior staff. Facilitate a debriefing and discussion on the outputs of the report.
9. Incorporate comments and finalize the draft.

Appendix 2: Meetings Attended and Persons Consulted

DHAKA: Individual Meetings

Dr Shahnaz Huda, Lecturer, Law Faculty, Dhaka University.
Shaheen Anam, Executive Director of Manusher Jonno
Seminar at Action Aid.
Therese Blanchet, Anisa, Hannan
Professor Ferdous Azim, NariPokkho Member, Department of English, BRAC University,
also each at Dhaka University (on leave)
Abdul Hannan, Vice President, Islamic Bank
Nasreen Huq and Rownok Jahan, Social Initiatives (Ltd)
Ayesha Khanam, President of Mohila Parishad
Representatives at meeting of 14th October
Dr Sultana Kamal, ASK
Dr Hameeda Hossain, ASK
Dr Sara Hossain, ASK
Dr Meghna Guhathakurta, Research Initiatives, Bangladesh, on secondment from Dhaka
University, International Relations
Dr Naseem Hussain, Dept of Politics and Government, Jahangir Nagar University
Dr Shamim Ahmed, UNICEF (Child Development Section)
Shahamina Zaman (ACTION-AID)
Dr Mahmuda Islam (PLAGE)

DHAKA: Group Representatives at Meeting of 14th October

Faustina Pereira	Ain O Shalish Kendra (Legal Aid Centre)
Towhida Khondker	Bangladesh Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA)
Sheepa Hafiza	BRAC
Fawzia Khondker	Proshika
Shameem Murshid	Brotee
Rosalind Costa	Hotline (Human Rights) Bangladesh
Rabeya Hussain	NariPokkho, Doorbar Network
Sanjeeb Drong and Pobitra Manda	Bangladesh Adivasi Forum (BAF)
Marianne Flach	FSVGD (Food Security for Vulnerable Women and their Group Dependents)
Sufia Nurani	RDRS (Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service)
Shahid Hussain Shamim	UBINIG & Prabartana
Maheen Sultan	Affiliated to NariPokkho; a freelance consultant who has worked extensively with CARE
Rina Roy	CARE (Manusher Jonno)

Rokeya Kabir	BNPS (Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangha)
Pancho Boren	CARE (Assistant Country Director)
Anna Minj	CARE (Gender Unit, head)
Majeda Haq	CARE (Gender Adviser-Program)
Alka Pathak	CARE (SHOUHARDO, formerly IFSP)
Sarah Gillingham	CARE (Rural Livelihood Program)
Shyam Sundar Saha	CARE (Rural Livelihood Program)
Shameem Siddiqui	CARE (Partnership for Healthy Life)

Rangpur

FFS women's group Chowdhuri para (Taragonj)
 Adolescent Girls' Group, Jumma para (Taragonj)
 Meeting with Imams, Chilka (Taragonj)
 Meeting with CARE Staff Taragonj Office (Nahar, Kabir, Khaleda. Anju, Shemoli Biswas and others)
 ESDO Village Development Committee at Shadallapur
 ESDO Village Development Committee at Kamalpur
 FFS women's group, Parbatpur (women's solidarity issues)
 Meeting with female UP members, Chairman (Tampat UP)
 Attending part of Biennial Staff meeting, Rangpur Head Office
 Separate meeting with 3 male and 9 female staff members
 Discussion with Senior Staff members

Dinajpur

PHL (Partner for Healthy Life) project (Bochagonj)
 Village Forum to Prevent Violence against Women (Bochagonj)
 Meeting group of women trained to do shalish (Bochagonj)
 SHABGE project (old) village (Bochagonj?)
 Meeting with Advocate Sherajum Minura of BLAST, Upazila Hospital

Bogra

Meeting with Rural Maintenance Program women members - Union Parishad office
 Shabgram Market Complex - Labour Contracting Society members (BUILD-IFSP)
 Shabgram Market Complex - women's shops and their activities

Appendix 3: Main Issues Nominated By Organizations Represented at the Meeting of October 14th

Following is a list of the issues that different organizations nominated when we asked them to list two or three issues that they have been focussing on over the last five years:

Brotee (Sharmeen Murshid)

- People's research on indigenous perception, definition of gender and trying to develop standard operational definition through action research.
- Village protection against violence and human rights violation.

Doorbar Network, NariPokkho (Rabeya Hussain)

- Violence against women.
- Political empowerment of women.
- Women's rights.

Manusher Jonno (CARE) (Rina Roy)

- Violence against women focusing on domestic violence, rape and acid; we then supported initiatives of community awareness, capacity building and sensitization of related institutions at different level as well as policy formulation.
- Examining rights of extremely poor, socially excluded and marginalized people.
- We are in the process of developing a programme on workers' rights addressing private sector as an institution and making them responsive to the workers.

All these areas link with rights and governance aspect and trying to development concerted actions at different levels.

NariPokkho (Maheen Sultan)

- Violence against women.
- Women's legal rights.
- Political empowerment of women.

She also commented on the need for organizational strengthening.

Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) (Sufia Nurani)

- Social mobilization (focus on women); institutional development.
- Gender and women development; violence against women
- Health, agriculture, disaster preparedness.

Proshika (Fawzia Khondker)

- Social and political empowerment.
- Economic empowerment.
- Policy formulation from gendered perspective.

Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA) (Towhida Khondker)

- Women and children's rights providing free legal aid to distressed and deprived women and children. Overall working on violence against women and children.
- Research (law).
- Advocacy.
- Raising awareness, dialogue with local representatives.

Hotline (Human Rights) Bangladesh, (Rosaline Costa)

- Violence against women (domestic); insecurity of women at home and out of their homes; dowry, land problems, revenge.
 - Education on gender equality, sense of human respect, economic development for women.
 - Women's repression at working place (government sector); rape, trafficking, physical abuse, etc.
- Women's rights at home and working place.

FSVGD (Food Security for Vulnerable Women and the Group Dependants) (Marianne Flach)

- Food security for the VGD women.
- Development for the VGD women.
- Mainstreaming gender.

UBINIG/Prabartana (Shahid Hussain Shamim)

- Promoting Local varieties, non-chemical agricultural practice; local knowledge-based agri-production system.
- Community level seed keeping system.

Bangladesh Adivasi Forum (BAF) (Sanjeeb Drong and Pobitra Manda)

- Insecurity of Indigenous women; indigenous women face serious violations of human rights, militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and discrimination as indigenous, etc.
- Right to land, forest and natural resources; loss of ancestral lands, culture and way of life.
- Human rights of indigenous peoples.
- Promotion of human rights, legal assistance etc.

Mohila Parishad

No one came to the meeting from Mohila Parishad (I interviewed Ayesha Khanam some days later), but everyone I spoke to mentioned the strong leadership role provided by Mohila Parishad in the women's movement since Pakistan period. MP was instrumental in the campaign against dowry and the law to ban dowry that was passed in 1980. In recent years Mohila Parishad has been active in organizing mass movements against polygamy, child marriage, trafficking on women and prostitution.

Along with Ain O Shalish Kendra, MP has been agitating for a Uniform Family Code. According to its website MP is now an "organization with 21 primary committees in Dhaka city. It has about 75,000 registered members in 150 thanas of 60 districts of the country." (Bangla media) Like other legal organizations MP also remain active in ensuring the existing laws to protect women's rights are adhered to. One of their efforts in this regard is the Village Watch Team which is supposed to "ensure that women receive legal justice, health care, participation in voters regime, consultation of women in community development and other activities deemed necessary for women in development" (The Bangladesh Observer, September 24, 2004)

This large membership and network at different thana and district level could be used to collaborate with for women's greater empowerment.

Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK)

The ASK representative didn't complete the form. According to the Annual Report for 2003, ASK has been at the forefront (along with BNWLA and BLAST) of advocacy and judicial activism seeking legal changes and legal justice for oppressed groups, especially women. They operate four Legal Aid Clinics in Dhaka, and a further 230 outside Dhaka in collaboration with BRAC. They have drop in centres for working children and for full time Child Domestic Workers in Dhaka. ASK also collaborates with six partner organizations⁶⁰ in six thanas to facilitate community activism for Gender and Social Justice and human rights, and with BRAC to enable its group members to access justice in 185 rural locations in Dhaka and Rajshahi divisions.

⁶⁰ Mukti, Kushtia, Uttaran Mohila Shangstha, Sirajganj (SUMS), Prostiruti-Pabna (PP), Welfare Efforts (WE); Jhenaidaha, Shabolomby Ynnayan Samity (SUS), Women Development Organization (WD)), Purbadhala and Netrokona Sadar in Netrokona.

Appendix 4: Strategies Recommended by Organizations Represented at the Meeting of October 14th

During the meeting of 14th October I asked all the representatives of organizations the following question: “What strategies can be employed to achieve solidarity among the organizations working on women’s rights and solidarity?”

The answers were as follows (not all representatives answered the question):

Brotee (Sharmeen Murshid)

- Conceptualize and formulate an overall Gender Framework.
- Within which select issues/programs.
- Focus on specific vulnerable areas along program lines.
- Organizations should specialize on specific issues and work in depth/intensively rather than extensively.
- The common framework to build solidarity.

RDRS (Sufia Nurani)

In the RDRS working area we have 160 Union Federations (Apex bodies of organized groups). Each Federation has women’s Rights Protection Cell through which Federation addresses the issues of violence against women.

Bangladesh Adivasi Forum (BAF) (Sanjeeb Drong)

- Study, analyse and following indigenous people’s best practices with social institutions.
- Recognize indigenous peoples’ value systems, indigenous knowledge and culture.
- Study and research on indigenous traditions, way of life and history etc. and using it as advocacy tools.
- Respect indigenous customs and law system etc.

BNWLA (Towhida Khondker)

- Identify the areas and then go ahead in collaboration with other NGOs.
- Develop a community-based program including men of the family.
- Incorporate income generating program.

Hotline (HR) (Rosaline Costa)

- Coordination among various networks and solidarity group.
- Work together on issue base.
- Wider campaign using press and electronic media.
- Awareness program for grassroots level people (women and men).
- While coordinating attention should be given on:
 - Participatory decision making process
 - It should be a challenge to change the society.
 - role and position of women and men in decision-making process should be balanced.
 - Integrate the victims in the process.
 - NARIPOKKO Network Project (Rabeya Hussain).
- Doorbar network has been working on different aspects of women for the last seven years.
- The issues are discussed locally, district level, union level.
- My suggestion that collaboration and solidarity is promoted with the 470, and in future 550 organizations of Doorbar – There is this tremendous resource, we can use towards achieving solidarity.