

**WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY:  
THE VILLAGE PERSPECTIVE**

Santi Theresa Rozario

September 2005  
Rural Livelihood Program

Care Bangladesh

## Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	4
ABBREVIATIONS .....	4
<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT .....	5
1.2 METHODS .....	5
1.3 CONTRASTS WITHIN THE FGDS .....	11
1.3.1 Adivasis versus Non-Adivasis .....	11
1.3.2 Hindu versus Muslim .....	13
1.3.3 Adolescent Girls versus Adult Women.....	13
1.3.4 Northwest versus Southeast .....	13
1.3.5 Groups from RLP Villages versus Control Groups .....	14
1.3.6 The Men's Responses.....	14
1.4 METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES REGARDING THE FGDS .....	15
1.4.1 The FGD as a Research Instrument .....	15
1.4.2 The Question of Class.....	16
1.4.3 Dealing with Difficult Problems.....	17
1.4.4 Women and Men .....	17
<b>2 WOMEN'S AWARENESS OF THEIR SITUATION (QUS. 1-4).....</b>	<b>19</b>
2.1 QUESTIONS 1A AND 1B: HOW AND WHY ARE MEN AND WOMEN TREATED DIFFERENTLY?.....	19
2.2 QUESTION 2: ADVANTAGES, BENEFITS AND QUALITIES OF BEING A WOMAN.....	19
2.3 QUESTION 3: WOMEN'S PERSONAL AMBITIONS AND REGRETS .....	20
2.4 QUESTION 3A: WHY WOMEN CAN'T REALISE THEIR AMBITIONS.....	23
2.5 QUESTION 4: AMBITIONS FOR DAUGHTERS .....	23
<b>3 MAJOR PROBLEMS AS SEEN BY VILLAGE WOMEN (QU. 5-10).....</b>	<b>25</b>
3.1 QUESTION 5: THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS FOR WOMEN TODAY .....	25
3.1.1 Dowry: The Most Intractable Problem.....	27
3.1.2 Health Care (Including Delivery Problems) and Malnutrition .....	30
3.1.3 Violence and Mistreatment by Husbands.....	31
3.1.4 Child Marriage .....	33
3.1.4 Lack of Security; Restrictions on Physical Mobility .....	34
3.1.5 Too Many Children; Women's Responsibility for Family Planning .....	34
3.1.6 Unfaithful Husbands, Polygamy and Divorce.....	35
3.2 TAKING ACTION: QUESTIONS 6 TO 10.....	36
3.2.1 Question 6. Are men concerned about this problem too? .....	37
3.2.2 Question 7. How are you dealing with this issue? .....	38
3.2.3 Question 8. How can this issue be most effectively addressed within and beyond the community?.....	38
3.2.4 Question 9. What role can you play to tackle this issue? .....	39
3.2.5 Question 10 Can the government, NGOs or other organizations help? .....	40
3.3. LEGAL ACTION FOR DOWRY PROBLEMS AND SIMILAR ISSUES .....	40

<b>4 WOMEN'S INFLUENCE IN DECISION MAKING (QU. 11-15)</b> .....	<b>42</b>
4.1 QUESTION 11: IS WOMEN'S OPINION SOUGHT OR VALUED IN THE HOUSEHOLD? .....	42
4.2 QUESTION 12: WHAT KIND OF DECISIONS WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE MORE INVOLVED IN?.....	44
4.3 QUESTION 13: WHAT DIFFERENCE WOULD IT MAKE IN YOUR FAMILY? .....	45
4.4 QUESTION 14: IS WOMEN'S OPINION SOUGHT OR VALUED IN THE COMMUNITY (SAMAJ)? .....	45
4.5 QUESTION 15 IF WOMEN WERE INVOLVED IN COMMUNITY DECISION MAKING, HOW WOULD THINGS BE DIFFERENT?.....	47
4.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION.....	47
<b>5 WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY, AGENCY AND STRATEGIES (QU. 16)</b> .....	<b>49</b>
5.1 QUESTION 16: HOW DO WOMEN SUPPORT EACH OTHER? .....	49
<b>6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: POSSIBILITIES FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT</b> .....	<b>56</b>
6.1 <i>BUILDING SOLIDARITY AGAINST PATRIARCHY</i> REVISITED .....	56
6.2 FUTURE DIRECTIONS .....	60
REFERENCES.....	63
APPENDIX ONE: FROM THE TERMS OF REFERENCE .....	64
APPENDIX TWO: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDELINES .....	66
APPENDIX THREE: LIST OF STAFF INVOLVED IN FGDs AND WORKSHOPS .....	69

## Acknowledgements

This study was commissioned by RLP, CARE Bangladesh. I would like to thank Andrea Rodericks, Nils Den Tex, Brigitta Bode, Md. Abdus Sobhan, Shyam Sundar Shaha, Md. Mustafizur Rahman, M.A. Halim, all the Community Facilitators, Project Officers, Project Managers, and other CARE staff based at Dhaka and in the various regional offices in the Northwest and Southeast who were involved at different stages of the project. A list of CARE staff involved in the focus group discussions and workshops is included at Appendix Three.

I would particularly like to thank Loretta Payne, who was responsible for commissioning the report in the first place, and Khaleda Afroz, who supervised the entire project in detail and without whose assistance it could not have been completed.

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

Santi Rozario

## Abbreviations

CF	Community facilitator
FGD	Focus group discussion
FFS	Farmer Field School
GO-Interfish	Greater Opportunities for Integrated Rice-Fish Production Systems (RLP project)
IGA	Income generating activities
LMP	RLP project (Livelihoods Monitoring Project (RLP project))
RLP	Rural Livelihoods Program (CARE Bangladesh program)
SHABGE	Strengthening Household Access to Bari Gardening Extension (RLP project)
UP	Union parishad (local council)

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background to the Report

In November 2004, I wrote a report for CARE International, *Building Solidarity against Patriarchy*, on CARE's work on women's empowerment in Northwest Bangladesh, and more specifically strategies for the promotion of solidarity and collaborative action for fulfilling women's rights, challenging patriarchal attitudes and ideologies (Rozario 2004a). The report was commissioned by CARE Bangladesh's Rural Livelihood Program (RLP).<sup>1</sup> The initiative in commissioning the report came from Loretta Payne, who was Programme Coordinator for RLP at that time.

My 2004 report was commissioned because of concerns that women's empowerment issues needed to be addressed more explicitly within RLP. It was 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 NW Bangladesh (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.

The RLP subsequently commissioned a follow-up study, again at Loretta Payne's initiative, in which we worked more directly with rural women and discovered more about their own perceptions of power, and their experience of solidarity amongst themselves. This is the report on that follow-up study. As the Terms of Reference for the study (see Appendix One) stated, our aim was to learn "not only what rural poor women think are the key issues that put them in vulnerable positions but what they would propose could be done to address these".

## 1.2 Methods

It was decided to approach the study primarily through a series of focus group discussions (FGDs). The focus group discussions were to be based on guidelines, which were developed by Loretta Payne, several other CARE staff members and myself in May and June 2005.

---

<sup>1</sup> RLP is a program that integrates three previously separate rural projects, two large agricultural projects, GO-Interfish (Greater Opportunities for Integrated Rice-Fish Production Systems) and SHABGE (Strengthening Household Access to Bari Gardening Extension), and the Livelihoods Monitoring project (LMP). The current RLP was officially launched in October 2003. Its aim is to promote poverty reduction in rural Bangladesh through the Farmer Field School (FFS) methodology (see e.g. Banu and Bode 2002). The basic principle is to aid poorer sectors of the rural population to use local resources to increase food production for field crops and home gardens. The RLP program, which ends in December 2005, operates in nine districts in the northwest of Bangladesh and two in the southeast.

The FGD guidelines were trialled on four focus groups in June 2005, and further revised as a result. Appendix Two presents an English translation of the final version of the FGD guidelines. It was decided as a result of comments on the trial versions that the FGDs would cover a cross-section of RLP villages and groups, including both lower middle-class and poorer women, adolescent girls, and men, as well as Hindu and Adivasi women, and would include both areas of Bangladesh where RLP is active (northwest and southeast). The groups would include a mixture of remote and non-remote villages, and villages where both of the two RLP agricultural and natural resource projects (SHABGE and GO-INTERFISH) were in operation. It was also decided to include some villages where RLP had not been operating, as "control" groups.

In July 2005, I spent two weeks in Rangpur working with the community facilitators who were going to run the FGDs and to record the results. While there, I took part in several FGDs myself for training purposes and also carried out a number of interviews to gather case-study material. A workshop was also organised in Rangpur in which a group of women from nearby villages took part in open-ended discussions of relevant issues. We felt that it would be useful to give women a context in which they could talk freely, without their fellow-villagers being present and possibly inhibiting the discussion. This workshop proved very useful, and two more workshops were held in Dinajpur and Chakaria after I returned to the UK.

After my departure, the project staff carried out the main body of focus group discussions according to the guidelines. In most cases, one CARE staff member facilitated the group, while a second entered the group discussion onto the guidelines form, though in a few cases the same person did both. Unfortunately, I do not have detailed information about how the participants in the FGDs were selected, although with the exception of the control groups all were members of existing RLP projects.

In late August 2005, forty-seven FGD forms were sent to me in the UK for analysis. These covered ten of the twelve districts in which RLP operates,<sup>2</sup> and all of the various groups discussed. Fourteen of them, however were based not on focus groups but on individual interviews. I entered all these responses (thirty-three from focus groups and fourteen from individual interviews) into a database for comparative analysis. The record numbers given below refer to the records in this database.

There are a number of issues regarding the way in which the focus-group (FGD) methodology was used in the report, and I provide some discussion of these below in Section 1.4. However, while there were limitations to the information yielded by the FGDs, this information was complemented and crosschecked through the

---

<sup>2</sup> Dinajpur, Thakurgaon, Panchargaon, Rangpur, Nilphamari, Kurigram, and Joypurhat in the Northwest; Cox's Bazar, Chittagong and Bandarban in the Southeast. The two other districts in which RLP operates, both in the Northeast, are Lalmonirhat and Gaibandha.

individual case-studies gathered through workshops and interviews. Thus, in addition to the forty-seven FGDs, the CARE staff carried out the two further workshops mentioned above, in Dinajpur and Chakaria, and also collected some further data through informal interviews. The three workshops and informal interviews carried out by myself and the CARE staff yielded about twenty-five individual case studies. Further case-study material came from the FGD forms, since in a number of cases CFs included short anecdotes to amplify or explain specific responses. I feel that the combination of methods involved in the research gave as full an account of the women's perspectives and strategies as could reasonably be arrived at in the limited time available, though intensive field research over a longer period would doubtless yield a more nuanced and informative picture.

Tables 1.1 to 1.4 present basic information concerning the focus groups and case studies.

<b>Northwest</b>		
<i>District</i>	<i>Upazila</i>	<i>No. of people In group</i>
Dinajpur	Birganj	11
	Bochaganj	1
	Bochaganj	7
	Chirirbandar	8
	Chirirbandar	7
	Dinajpur Sadar	7
	Dinajpur Sadar	1
Joypurhat	Akkelpur	9
	Akkelpur	10
	Akkelpur	1
	Panchbibi	10
	Panchbibi	11
	Panchbibi	1
Kurigram	Kurigram Sadar	10
	Kurigram Sadar	10
	Kurigram Sadar	8
	Kurigram Sadar	1
	Kurigram Sadar	1
	Kurigram Sadar	10
Nilphamari	Jaldhaka	10
	Jaldhaka	10
	Jaldhaka	1
Panchagarh	Debiganj	1
	Debiganj	12
Rangpur	Mithapukur	9
	Pirganj	10
	Pirganj	1
	Pirganj	1
	Rangpur Sadar	10
	Rangpur Sadar	12
	Taraganj	1
	Taraganj	10
	Taraganj	10
Thakurgaon	Pirganj	12
	Thakurgaon Sadar	10
	Thakurgaon Sadar	1

<b>Southeast</b>		
<i>District</i>	<i>Upazila</i>	<i>No. of people</i>
Bandarban	Bandarban Sadar	5
	Bandarban Sadar	7
Cox's Bazar	Chakaria	9
	Chakaria	10
	Chakaria	1
	Chakaria	8
	Cox's Bazar Sadar	8
	Cox's Bazar Sadar	7
	Cox's Bazar Sadar	7
	Ukhia	1
	Ukhia	8

**Table 1.1 FGD responses by district**

The next two tables present more detailed information regarding the groups and individuals covered in the FGDs. I have divided these into two tables, one covering the 33 group discussions, the other the 14 based on interviews with individuals.

In these tables, the sixth column indicates whether the village (*para*) had a GO-Interfish project, a SHABGE project, or neither. The villages with neither GO-Interfish nor SHABGE projects were included as 'controls'; they are marked in light grey in the tables.

Type	Record No	No in group	Region	District	Project	Remote or non-Remote
Poorer Muslim women	8	12	NW	Rangpur	GO-Interfish	Remote
Poorer Muslim women	9	10	NW	Kurigram	GO-Interfish	Non-remote
Poorer Muslim women	10	10	NW	Nilphamari	SHABGE	Non-remote
Poorer Muslim women	11	10?	NW	Nilphamari	GO-Interfish	Remote
Poorer Muslim women	12	9	NW	Joypurhat	GO-Interfish	Remote
Poorer Muslim women	38	9		Cox's Bazar	SHABGE	Remote
Poorer Muslim women	21	8	NW	Kurigram	Control	Non-remote
Lower middle class Muslim women	3	10	NW	Joypurhat	GO-Interfish	Non-remote
Lower middle class Muslim women	4	8	NW	Dinajpur	GO-Interfish	Non-remote
Lower middle class Muslim women	5	12	NW	Thakurgaon	SHABGE	Non-remote
Lower middle class Muslim women	6	10	NW	Rangpur	SHABGE	Non-remote
Lower middle class Muslim women	7	10	NW	Kurigram	GO-Interfish	Non-remote
Lower middle class Muslim women	37	8	SE	Cox's Bazar	SHABGE	Non-remote
Lower middle class Muslim women	46	8	SE	Cox's Bazar	SHABGE	Not stated
Lower middle class Muslim women	19	7	NW	Dinajpur	Control	Non-remote
Lower middle class Muslim women	20	10	NW	Joypurhat	Control	Remote
Men	13	11	NW	Joypurhat	GO-Interfish	Non-remote
Men	14	9	NW	Rangpur	GO-Interfish	Non-remote
Men	22	10	NW	Rangpur	Control	
Men	42	7	SE	Cox's Bazar	Control	Non-remote
Hindu women	1	10	NW	Kurigram	GO-Interfish	Remote

Hindu women	2	10	NW	Thakurgaon	GO-Interfish	Remote
Hindu women	39	8	SE	Cox's Bazar	SHABGE	Non-remote
Hindu women	43	10	SE	Cox's Bazar	Control	Non-remote
Adolescent girls (Muslim)	17	10	NW	Rangpur	SHABGE	Non-remote
Adolescent girls (Hindu)	18	7	NW	Dinajpur	GO-Interfish	Non-remote
Adolescent Girls (Muslim)	24	10	NW	Rangpur	Control	Remote
Adivasi women (Santal)	15	12	NW	Panchagarh	SHABGE	Remote
Adivasi women (Santal)	16	7	NW	Dinajpur	GO-Interfish	Remote
Adivasi women (Rakhain)	47	7	SE	Cox's Bazar	SHABGE	Remote
Adivasi women (Santal)	23	11	NW	Dinajpur	Control	Non-remote
Adivasi women (Mru)	40	7	SE	Bandarban	Control	Remote
Adivasi women (Marma)	41	5	SE	Bandarban	Control	Remote

**Table 1.2: Focus Groups**

Table 1.3 lists the FGD forms which were filled in on the basis of individual interviews. As will be seen, most of these individual interviews were with women from communities where focus-group discussions were also held. In most cases, it is not clear whether these women also took part in the focus-group discussion in their community. In any case, most of these interviews provided little additional information to the focus group responses.<sup>3</sup>

Type	Record No	Region	District	Project	Remote or Non-Remote	Comments
Poorer Muslim women	30	NW	Nilphamari	GO-Interfish	Remote	same community as Focus Gp 11
Poorer Muslim women	31	NW	Joypurhat	GO-Interfish	Remote	same community as Focus Gp 12
Poorer Muslim women	32	NW	Rangpur	GO-Interfish	Non-remote	
Poorer Muslim women	44	SE	Cox's Bazar	SHABGE	Non-remote	
Lower middle class Muslim women	27	NW	Joypurhat	GO-Interfish	Non-remote	same community as Focus Gp 12, subject not included in FGD
Lower middle class Muslim women	28	NW	Rangpur	SHABGE	Non-remote	
Lower middle class Muslim women	29	NW	Kurigram	GO-Interfish	Non-remote	same community as Focus Gp 7
Lower middle class Muslim women	45	SE	Cox's Bazar	SHABGE	Non-remote	
Hindu women	25	NW	Kurigram	GO-Interfish	Remote	same community as Focus Gp 1
Hindu women	26	NW	Thakurgaon	GO-Interfish	Remote	same community as Focus Gp 2
Adolescent girls (Muslim)	35	NW	Rangpur	SHABGE	Non-remote	same community as Focus Gp 17
Adolescent girls (Hindu)	36	NW	Dinajpur	GO-Interfish		same community as Focus Gp 18
Adivasi women (Santal)	33	NW	Panchagarh	SHABGE	Remote	same community as Focus Gp 15
Adivasi women (Santal)	34	NW	Dinajpur	GO-Interfish	Remote	same community as Focus Gp 16

**Table 1.3: Individual Interviews**

<sup>3</sup> I had encouraged CFs responsible for the focus-group discussions to follow up individual cases of interest through conducting interviews in which they gathered detailed life-histories. I am not clear why most of them instead carried out individual interviews using the focus group guidelines.

The FGDs were supplemented as noted above by a series of case studies obtained from open-ended interviews and workshops. A list of these case studies follows with an indication of themes covered in the individual case studies:

**Name Themes**

**Individual case studies from Cox's Bazar**

1	Fereza	Extreme poverty, dowry and mobility
2	Shahida	Poverty, black (dark) complexion, dowry, violence, extra-marital affairs of husband
3	Rizia	Child marriage, dowry and polygamy

**Individual case studies from Nilphamary, Pirganj, Kurigram, Thakurgaon, Rangpur, Joypurhat, Dinajpur Field Offices**

4	Muslema	Child marriage; physical violence on a child bride
5	Lipi	Being returned to parents for dowry; use of dowry for capital, competition for dowry, maintenance of status etc
6	Joynov	Gambling husband, and consequent poverty, violence, and husband's attempt to re-marry for lack of sons
7	Rabeya	Violence and polygamy, <i>shalish</i> by Chairman in favour of husband after being bribed by husband
8	Ruksana	Love marriage to cousin, dowry, husband's polygamy, divorce
9	---	Dowry payments making already poor into a beggar and dowry maintained by Chairman and other local prominent men in a <i>shalish</i> session
10	---	Poverty, violence, extra marital affairs, <i>ghor jamai</i> , second marriage, desertion
11	---	Possible infanticide for fear of having to pay dowry for fourth daughter
12	Nazma	Child marriage, her four marriages, sexual abuse and <i>fouzdari mamla</i> (criminal case)
13	Parul	Unfulfilled desire for education
14	---	Adolescent girls intervening successfully to stop dowry at their friend's marriage
15	---	Women's solidarity successfully preventing child marriage
16	---	Wife blamed for giving birth to a second daughter and thrown out of the house, but later husband was counselled by neighbours, now a happy family

**Dinajpur Workshop**

17	Khadija	Outcome of love-marriage, dowry, violence, husband's extra-marital affairs, threatened court case, negotiation ( <i>aposh</i> ), no change
18	Mehennegar	Child marriage, pressure for money from parents-in-law, divorce, becoming a co-wife second time, now back at home maintaining herself and her daughter from sewing
19	Saleha	Dowry-violence, polygamy (four wives) of husband who mistreats her, lack of maintenance from husband who works away from home several months of the year, and now barely comes to Saleha who he tried to drive away from home with four children
20	Halima	Black complexion, dowry, violence and divorce, deprived of children

**Chokoria workshop**

21	Rizia	Orphan girl married by paternal uncle to his son for her property, divorced, next uncle tried to do the same for his son, she escaped, married someone else, only to find he already has a wife, now mother of four daughters while co-wife has two sons, now pregnant and prays she has a son
----	-------	--

**Rangpur workshop**

22	Shabana	Failed love marriage to her cousin, husband's extra-marital affairs, lack of maintenance, violence and coping strategies
23	Jahera	Poor, dark complexioned woman, married to an epileptic, disabled man, who had vasectomy before marrying her, she is now subject to violence from her in-laws, torture from her husband
24	Josna	Forced to become a co-wife for lack of dowry and because of dark complexion

25	Parul	Love marriage 15 years ago, no children but husband does not blame her, and both been to doctors. Husband married her because of her beauty (fair complexion mainly) and did not ask for dowry. There is some violence from husband, lack of respect from in-laws because she comes from lower socioeconomic background, and did not bring in any dowry.
26	Shafia Begum	Married 14-year old daughter to her sister's son at her sister's insistence, so that the girl could look after the mother-in-law.

**Table 1.4: Case Studies**

### 1.3 Contrasts within the FGDs

As noted above, the FGDs were chosen to reveal possible contrasts on a range of dimensions:

- Adivasi women versus non-Adivasis
- Hindu women versus Muslims
- Adolescent girls versus adult women
- Villages in the Northwest versus villages in the Southeast
- Villages where RLP has been operating versus 'control' group villages where RLP has not been operating
- Women's groups versus men's groups
- Poorer women versus lower middle class women
- Remote versus non-remote groups
- GO-Interfish versus SHABGE villages

In addition, the FGD response form recorded the number of women in the group who were married, unmarried, widows, female heads of households, and abandoned.

In practice, many of these dimensions seemed to make relatively little difference to the responses. Given the number of different variables involved, and the additional variation introduced by the different approaches of various CFs, this is perhaps not surprising, though I expected to find more contrast than appeared in relation to gender and in relation to class (see 1.4.2, below).

The dimensions where there was most visible difference were the first five in the list above (Adivasis versus non-Adivasis; Hindu versus Muslim; Adolescent girls versus adult women; Northwest versus Southeast; RLP versus 'controls'). In the remainder of this section, I discuss these contrasts. I will also talk a little about the men's responses.

#### 1.3.1 Adivasis versus Non-Adivasis

The "Adivasi" groups covered by the FGDs included several quite different populations with different political and socio-economic situations and different social and cultural practices. FGDs 15, 16 and 23, along with individual responses

33 and 34, refer to Santals in the far Northwest of Bangladesh (Dinajpur and Panchagarh districts). With the exception of group 23 (a 'control' group), all of these refer to communities where RLP has projects in operation.

Judging from the FGD responses, the issues for the Santal women in the Northwest are similar in many respects to those for Bengali Muslim women, but there are some issues where their responses are different and characteristic. Some of these came up in Question 5. Among the Santals it is the women who work in the fields, although apparently these days 50% of the men are also working in the fields. Thus among the main problems they identified were the lower wages for women compared to men, the lack of security for women, family planning, that women have to work in the fields (both when in the father's house and the husband's house) as well as doing housework, violence, lack of health care etc. They did not mention child marriage as a problem, and in fact are concerned about the difficulty of getting married at all, even when of marriageable age.

Groups 40, 41 and 47, from the South-east, are quite different. These refer to three different communities (Marma, Mru and Rakhain). The Marma and Mru communities are remote groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts area and without active RLP projects. The Rakhain people live today as a small minority population in the coastal region of Cox's Bazar, although they have close historical and cultural links with the Marma, and like them speak the Arakanese language. All of these three South-eastern groups are traditionally relatively gender-equal, like many other populations in mainland Southeast Asia, and women have had considerable authority and say in household matters. This is reflected in various degrees in their responses. Thus in questions 11 and 14, on whether women's opinion is sought or valued within the family (11) or the community (14), the Marma group answered with a clear "No". The Mru group said on question 11 that women's opinion was valued in specific areas (cultivation and agricultural work, children's education, children's marriage and on question 14 that women's opinion was not valued in the community but that women can take part side by side with men in various community work, depending on their abilities. The Rakhain group however said on Question 11 that "Among the Rakhain for all matters it is women who take decisions" (!) and on Question 14 specified that women's opinion was valued in relation to religious functions, social functions (weddings, when someone dies), and about *bichar* and *shalish*.

These three groups gave quite different responses to all the other focus groups on many other questions as well. Thus on Question 5, the Marma and Mru groups were very concerned about having to work in the fields during pregnancy, immediately after delivery, or while carrying their baby on their back. The Rakhain group had a series of specific problems regarding lack of space, health, sanitation and water drainage problems and malnutrition, as well as lack of work in the rainy season. Security problems were also high on the agenda for the Rakhain, in relation to the surrounding Muslim population.

Dowry, however, was not an issue for any of these populations (and was mentioned in Question 5 only once, in an individual interview, among the Santals). These communities did not pay dowry traditionally and do not appear to have adopted the custom as yet. The Rakhain group noted that in their community the man goes to live with his wife's family, and that it is the man's family who pays the wife's family at marriage, an amount seen as equivalent to the amount spent in the upbringing of the girl to the point of marriage.

### **1.3.2 Hindu versus Muslim**

The Hindu women also named one or two issues that differentiated them from the Muslim majority, although in most respects their responses were quite close to that of Muslim women. Specific issues included women being kept separate at menstruation and after delivery. Some other issues come up in later pages of this report.

### **1.3.3 Adolescent Girls versus Adult Women**

There was little significant difference between the adolescent girls and the groups of adult women on the FGD responses. I found this surprising, since the four trial groups in June 2005 had included one group of unmarried girls, and they had quite specific issues that they discussed at length. These included restrictions on being able to go out as they liked, being labelled as 'bad' if they talked to boys or otherwise misbehaved while boys were not subject to similar labelling, boys having better opportunities for education, not having their opinion taken seriously, and so on. While some of these issues came up occasionally (for example the lack of freedom), the responses for adolescent girls on the whole were close to those for adult women.

Some adolescent girls (in two groups), however, mentioned problems with some "special illness" that they cannot talk about. They also commented about men's general lack of concern with their health. I took this "special illness" to be some reproductive health issue: I am aware that in Bangladeshi villages young women suffer from a number of reproductive health problems and that families are very secretive about these, because of their concern that this will cause problems with their marriage.

### **1.3.4 Northwest versus Southeast**

The main area in which Northwest and Southeast groups contrasted was the area of health. Women in the southeast commented much more frequently about reproductive health problems (prolapsed uterus etc).

A possible reason for this might be that they tend to have higher numbers of children. One FGD response (group 46) commented on the pressure from men to have more than two children because they are concerned after the 1991 cyclone about the possibility of losing children in natural disasters. It may also be, however, that the women in the Southeast were more willing for some reason to discuss reproductive health issues, since these problems are certainly present in the Northwest as well. For example, the CFs in the Southeast may have had a higher level of awareness of such problems, and may have raised them more often during the discussion.

In most other respects, the responses from the Southeast did not seem to differ systematically from those from the Northwest, particularly if the Adivasis were excluded.<sup>4</sup>

### **1.3.5 Groups from RLP Villages versus Control Groups**

On the whole, there was not a great deal of obvious difference between responses of groups from villages where RLP projects had been operating and the 'control' groups from villages without RLP projects. Groups from RLP villages tended however to have a higher awareness of economic opportunities and legal protection available to women, and I have made some comments about this where relevant in later sections.

### **1.3.6 The Men's Responses**

The FGD guidelines were really designed with women in mind, for obvious reasons, but they were also tried out with four groups of men. In two cases, the FGD responses indicated that the group consisted of a mixture of married and unmarried men. In the other two cases, this was not stated. Three of the groups were from the Northwest (two GO-Interfish villages and a 'control' group) and the fourth was another 'control' group from the Southeast.

My impression is that men mostly answered the questions from the perspective of their wives (or perhaps mothers and sisters) as they saw them. Their responses tended closely to follow those of the women, suggesting the existence of a common understanding of women's situation. However, it may well be that any group of men available to participate in an CARE focus group on women's empowerment is likely to consist of men with relatively 'enlightened' gender attitudes, or at least men who know what kinds of responses are acceptable.

---

<sup>4</sup> 27% of the SW responses were from Adivasis (3 out of 11), but only 14% of the NW responses (5 out of 36). In addition, the Adivasi population in the NW (Santals) appeared more assimilated to Bengali cultural norms than the Adivasi groups in the SE (Marma, Mru and Rakhain).

## 1.4 Methodological Issues Regarding the FGDs

I provide further analysis of the FGD responses in the succeeding sections of the report. Here I shall discuss some methodological issues regarding the FGDs.

### 1.4.1 The FGD as a Research Instrument

In the first place, it is important to note that while focus group discussions are ideally semi-structured, with an informal checklist of topics, and allowing for extensive interaction between participants (see e.g. Sherraden et al. 1995: 62-67; Bloor et al. 2002; Bryman 2001; 335-351), it was felt by RLP staff that this was not practicable or appropriate when working with village women in Bangladesh. Instead, the FGD guidelines take the form of a detailed and fairly lengthy set of questions and, in practice, when they were used, discussion tended to follow the questions very closely. As a result, the FGDs were not so much occasions for free or informally guided discussion but rather events at which the participants worked together through a series of written questions. While not ideal, this approach at least provided detailed guidance for the community facilitators (CFs) who were to carry out the FGDs and ensured a large degree of consistency between the way in which the FGDs were conducted. However, it meant that responses were often brief and stereotyped, with the same responses occurring again and again.

In fact, I was struck by the great similarity of the responses across the different groups. While many problems (dowry, child marriage, etc) are genuinely common to almost all communities, the responses on the forms suggest that the groups and individuals found it difficult to get into extended discussion of many of the issues, and that CFs may have needed to prompt the women with possible answers in many cases to get any response. My impression when using the guidelines for FGDs myself is that FGDs were often hard to run strictly in accordance with the guidelines, as women took a long time to respond to each question, and often needed a lot of prompting and probing from the CFs before they would say anything much.

This no doubt reflects the unfamiliarity of village women and men with the focus group context, as well as the need to get through a large number of questions in a finite period of time. It may also reflect the participants' unwillingness to discuss personal issues in front of fellow villagers. Here it should be noted that while care was taken to recruit groups who were relatively uniform in class terms, even women of the same class may have competing interests. Communities may exhibit conflicts between kinship groups (*gushti*) and women's abilities to discuss very personal issues in front of women from a 'rival' *gushti* may be very limited, particularly around issues such as decision-making, control over income, marriage arrangements etc. Without detailed information about village micro-politics in each

case, it is hard to know how far factors of this kind may have inhibited the responses of the participants.

Of course, even though responses may at times have been limited, we can assume that the participants would not generally have agreed to statements that they did not feel were true. In addition, the FGDs were carried out by skilled facilitators who were very familiar with the field situation and well used to working with Bangladeshi rural women. They usually knew the people in the FGDs, who felt comfortable with them and able to speak relatively openly. The CFs used their common sense to rephrase questions and to probe further when necessary, and the detailed and informative material included in many of the responses testifies to the effectiveness with which they facilitated the discussions.

### 1.4.2 The Question of Class

As noted above, some of the questions refer to class issues. In particular, Muslim women's groups were identified on the FGD report forms as consisting of either "lower middle-class" (*nimno modhyabitto*) or "poorer" (*daridrotoro*) women. As far as I know, these distinctions were made by local CFs who recruited the groups on the basis of their existing knowledge of different families' socio-economic status in their own areas, and also ran the FGDs. While the CFs no doubt did their best to apply these distinctions consistently, the number of CFs involved and the differences between the areas means that it is difficult to apply a precise meaning to the distinction. In practice, there appeared to be relatively little difference between the responses of groups labelled as "lower middle-class" and those labelled as "poorer".

In addition, RLP staff noted that participants in SHABGE projects are on the whole poorer than participants in GO-Interfish projects, though the FGDs include both "lower middle-class" and "poorer" groups for both SHABGE and GO-Interfish projects. In general, I did not find systematic differences between responses for SHABGE and GO-Interfish projects.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> It was also noted on the FGD forms whether the elite group of the village (*para*) could be classified as "primary elite," "secondary elite" or "tertiary elite". These terms referred to the wealth and political influence of the village elite, tertiary elite being the wealthiest and most powerful. I did not attempt to correlate these distinctions with the FGD results.

### **1.4.3 Dealing with Difficult Problems**

Another limitation of the FGDs arose from the actual format of the questions in the guidelines (see Appendix Two). These focussed from Question 6 onwards on the easiest major problem to tackle. This meant that problems seen as more difficult (particularly, perhaps, dowry and male domestic violence) were not discussed very much in the later sections of the FGD. Fortunately, the workshops and individual case studies helped to fill in the picture in this regard.

Given the relatively small number of groups, the large number of variables, and the presence of other variable factors (such as the different styles and approaches of the various facilitators and writers), there is not much point in looking for statistically significant results in the focus group responses. My analysis is therefore qualitative for the most part, though I have occasionally given figures where useful quantitative information can be derived from the responses.

### **1.4.4 Women and Men**

A final methodological issue that I discuss here is the extent to which the structure of the FGD and the specific questions asked may have created an excessively polarised picture of gender relations in Bangladeshi villages. Several comments on the draft version of the report commented on the extent to which the material in the report portrayed male-female relations almost entirely in negative and oppressive terms. As one comment rightly noted: "Women are also mothers, daughters, (and as such have loving relations with their sons and brothers), despite the type of marriages they may have."

There is considerable truth in these comments, and it has to be remembered that a study such as this, where the vast majority of the material is derived from answers to a fixed set of questions, is bound to present a limited and partial view. The whole format of the FGD is based around encouraging a group of women to reflect, through the questions, on the ways in which they are limited in their lives through being women, and the ways in which they might counter these limitations, particularly through common action with other women. It is hardly surprising that the responses tend to polarise men and women, and to see men primarily in negative terms. A different set of questions here, focussing for example on co-operative relations between men and women to improve village society, might have given a significantly different picture. In fact, the one question (no.6) which asked specifically whether men were also concerned about women's problems produced quite a few positive comments about men, notably in regard to fathers' concern for their daughters' welfare.

It is important perhaps to read the negative comments about men that often emerge in the material in this light. In addition, men are also limited by the social and economic structure and cultural practices of village Bangladesh. Individual

men are not necessarily in a position to contest norms of honour, shame, and proper female behaviour, to reject demands for dowry for their daughters, to refuse to accept dowry when their sons are married, and so on. This is particularly true for men at the lower levels of village society, such as the fathers, husbands and brothers of the poorer women in the FGDs. My earlier report explored many of these structural issues that underlie the often oppressive nature of gender relations in Bangladeshi villages in considerable detail (Rozario 2004a).

Nevertheless, the overall picture revealed by the FGD responses and case studies, of a society dominated by men in many ways, and in which women's situation is subordinate and vulnerable and their options in life often limited in comparison to those of men, is undoubtedly true. Numerous village studies from many parts of Bangladesh, including my own field research, have revealed essentially the same picture.

## 2 Women's Awareness of Their Situation (Qus. 1-4)

### 2.1 Questions 1a and 1b: How and Why are Men and Women Treated Differently?

This section is based primarily on Questions 1 to 4 of the focus group guidelines.

These initial questions were mainly aimed at getting women to think about their situation as women, before moving on to the questions about specific problems and approaches. As a result, the answers tend to state what is well known to anyone familiar with Bangladeshi rural society. Thus in the responses to Question 1a (How are girls and women treated differently from boys and men?) we hear over and over again that women have to follow parda, wear different clothes from men, that women are physically different from men, that their mobility is restricted, they can't work outside, have to worry about honour and shame (*izzat*), that they cannot buy what they like, that dowry has to be paid for women when they marry, that people think that women are less intelligent, etc. We also hear that women get less food to eat and that they are not treated as quickly if they are ill. There is not much difference between the answers to the two questions.

There are perhaps useful indications in some of the responses to Question 1b (Why do you think that they are treated differently?) about what Bangladeshi village society sees as central to why men and women are treated differently, though even here there is nothing particularly new or surprising.<sup>6</sup> A high proportion of answers mention that girls will go away to another's house when they marry, while boys will continue the lineage. Another very frequent response is that boys will feed (look after) and bury their parents, women cannot look after their parents even if they want to. In later questions, some women indicated that their inability to look after their parents is a big issue for them.

### 2.2 Question 2: Advantages, Benefits and Qualities of Being a Woman

Question 2 asks whether being a woman has particular advantages, benefits or qualities, and if so what these are. The responses here fall into several categories. Some of them refer to women's biological abilities (they can have babies and breastfeed), others to their social role (they cook, look after children and after the sick and elderly) or their personal qualities (they are more patient than men, can put up with their husband's violence and bad behaviour and their in-laws' criticisms, are able to treat their in-laws as if they were their own family). Other responses consider as advantages that women do not have to earn money, that

---

<sup>6</sup> As one of the comments on the draft report pointed out, similar attitudes are prevalent through many of the rural areas of South Asia.

they are supported by their husbands, do not have responsibility for running the household, and receive *mohr* (*mohorana*, customary payment) at marriage.

Many women though answered in terms of special opportunities available to women (it is easier for women to become NGO members and to get loans, women can get scholarships for their education, women can get jobs with NGOs even though their education is limited, they can get opportunities to work in handicrafts through NGOs, they can get the widow's pension) or to their protection by the law (women can get legal help in relation to dowry or domestic violence, they get three months' support after divorce). These answers are found both in RLP and in control groups, although the RLP groups tend to give more detail in this area, suggesting a higher level of awareness of economic opportunities and legal protection. I was impressed however that all these women, in RLP and control groups, seemed quite well informed about preferential employment opportunities and legal protection for women.

### 2.3 Question 3: Women's Personal Ambitions and Regrets

Question 3 asked about what things the women would like to do or had wanted to do, but could not do because they were women. The FGD response form listed how many women had chosen each of these ambitions or regrets. There was no particular limit on the number of ambitions or regrets stated, but in most cases it seems as if each woman selected two to four. A small number of items occurred very frequently, and it is worth listing the number of responses numerically, starting with the most popular. I have grouped together a number of similar responses in most cases, and I have omitted the men's responses because they probably say more about what men think women want than what the women themselves want.<sup>7</sup>

<i>Ambition or regret</i>	<i>Number of persons selecting</i>
Would like to study (or to have studied); to study and get a job	165
Would like to get (or to have got) husband of own liking, get good-looking husband, husband of good character, educated, compatible, etc.	109
Would like to work (or to have worked) outside, to be able to engage in income-generating work and become independent, be independent, improve family's income	78
Would like to marry or to have married in a well-off household	77
Would like to go out as much as I like, move around freely and with security, travel around Bangladesh, to Dhaka	72

<sup>7</sup> The main responses listed by men were study, get educated and work, go out as much as I like, spend own income, work outside, buy clothes according to own choice, have children, join NGOs.

Would like to build or to have built a nice home	53
Would like to buy or wear gold jewellery	37
Would like to wear good clothes, dress up, buy good sari	36
Would like my children to have education or higher education	32
Would like to look after and feed parents well, to help parents by earning, to be able to go on helping parents after marriage	30
Would like to buy things as I like, buy clothes and other things myself	23
Would like not to marry young, or not to have married young	17
Would like to visit relatives with husband; would like husband to respect wife's family	17
Would like to spend own income, buy land in own name, be independent	17
Would like to be rich; to have enough money within family	13
Would like to go to bazaar with husband	10

**Table 2.1 Women's Ambitions and Regrets**

The numbers should not be taken too literally. In some groups women named several ambitions or regrets, in others only one. Some of the figures may include the same person voting twice or three times (e.g. for a good-looking husband and for an honest husband, or voting as part of a group and again as an individual). There may also have been varying degrees of prompting by CFs, as noted earlier. However, the figures probably do give a fair indication of the priorities women expressed. There were a total of 272 women in the 29 women's groups and the 14 individual women's interviews.

The high rating for "study" is noteworthy. In a large number of cases, study was explicitly linked to getting a job, and it looks as if the idea of education leading to employment has been taken up very widely. A substantial number (32) also listed education for their children as a priority.

Having a good marriage is also clearly still a very high priority for Bangladeshi women, with 109 choices for some variant of having or getting a good (good-looking, honest, intelligent, etc.) husband, and 77 wanting to marry or to have married in a well-off family. Since a high proportion of the women are already married, these responses also suggest a substantial degree of dissatisfaction with the husbands and marriages they actually have.

In fact, the women's responses to Question 3 in general suggest that many of these women are dissatisfied with their relationships with their husbands. Their concerns are not just about men being violent and harsh to their wives, and at their wasting money through gambling. They are also frequently worried about men having extra-marital affairs, both for the loss of affection and also because the men

will fail to support them because they are giving their resources to other women. These are themes that also come up often in the case-studies and anecdotes.

Working outside the home, having an independent income, etc, is also a highly-rated ambition (78), with smaller numbers expressing the desire to buy things as they like (23) and to spend their own income, buy land in own name, or be independent (17), and another ten wanting to go to the bazaar with their husband. Having a nice home (53) also rates highly. The desire for gold jewellery (37) may reflect the financial security that it traditionally provides for Bangladeshi women more than its ornamental value, though 36 say they would like to wear good clothes and dress up.

Two groups of responses refer to relations with the wife's own family, and point to what appears to be a significant source of stress and concern for women: "Would like to look after and feed parents well, to help parents by earning, to be able to go on helping parents after marriage" was given as an ambition by 30 women, and "would like to visit relatives with husband" or "would like husband to respect wife's family" by 17. Another 17 expressed the desire not to marry or to have married so young (they consisted of 15 Muslim women and 2 Hindu women; it is interesting that none of the adolescent girls selected this ambition).

A number of other responses are maybe interesting more for their low frequency. "Would like to have only two children" was chosen by eight, all from one group, while "would like to marry without dowry" was selected by only three, all from one group. As was suggested in feedback from CARE staff on a draft version of the report, this probably reflects the unreality of this scenario. For these women, to marry without dowry is something that happens only in fairy-tales.

Nine people from four different groups gave "would like to marry far away" or "would like not to marry a relative" as their ambition, suggesting that it is a problem for a limited number of people, but in a number of areas.

A small number (three) of the Hindu women listed "would like to go abroad" and one listed "would like to marry in India" as their ambition. Two of the Adivasi women also expressed an ambition to go to India. None of these responses was given by any of the Muslims, and they would seem to reflect the minority status of the Hindu and Adivasi communities in Bangladesh. At the same time, it is not clear from the responses whether they were thinking of going to India permanently, or for example visiting family there.

One of the Adivasi women said that she wanted to become a nun, while one of the Hindu women said that she wanted to go into religious work. Again, none of the Muslim women expressed ambitions of this kind, although one wanted a *maulana* for a husband, and four wanted their child to become a *hafez*. A number of other ambitions were also specific to the Mru Adivasi group (no.40): they wanted to

divide up the housework, to make decisions, and to do various other things that are done by men within Mru culture, such as carrying and making bamboo objects.

## 2.4 Question 3a: Why Women Can't Realise Their Ambitions

This question asks, "Why couldn't you realise these ambitions?". Many of the answers here are predictable: poverty and scarcity in the family, being married off early so no opportunities for study, being unable to earn money of one's own because one is female, social obstacles. "Fathers do not want to spend money in educating girls, saying that they will go away to *shashur bari* (their in-law's house)". Here, the adolescent girls are particularly aware of the social obstacles: "To study in a good school one has to go far away from home and when you do that, people say bad things about you." "If you go to the bazaar, the people think you are involved in some love affair." Only the Mru women say that there are no social restrictions, but parents do not encourage them or give them opportunity to do men's work.

This question also led to quite a few anecdotes and stories. There are several accounts of how poverty and other family pressures led to girls having to abandon their schoolwork. We also learn, for example, why the Hindu woman in FGD No.43 could not go into religious work (she has an aged husband), and why one of the women in FGD No.12 said that she wanted an expensive sari. She had been married three years earlier into a very poor family, and wanted a good sari, so, following the example of one of her neighbours, she made and sold a fishing net. However, her husband demanded the money and when she refused, took it and beat her up, so she never got the sari. Another woman in the same group has also been trying to earn extra income through working in the field, raising poultry and cattle, and making fishing nets. They are living in a very small room and she hopes to be able to afford to move into a bigger one, but her husband again forcibly takes away her earnings and wastes them in playing cards and gambling.

## 2.5 Question 4: Ambitions for Daughters

Question 4 asked, "Do you want your daughters' lives to be different from your own?" and then specified, "How do you want to see your daughters' lives?" and "What could be done to enable them to have a better life?". Women's ambitions for their daughters are not very different from those they named in Question 3 for themselves. They want them to be educated, to have a good husband, to be valued and cared for by their husband and in-laws, not to have to face scarcity, and so on. Many groups, but by no means all, said that they wanted their daughters to work and earn money. A few groups mention that they would like their daughter to marry without dowry.

When asked what could be done to enable their daughters to have a better life, the women mention education, arranging private tuition if necessary, training in income-generating activities, arranging a good marriage for them with a sensible and honest man, not marrying them too early, and taking their likes and dislikes seriously. The men's groups say similar things, and one (Group 13) says that they should educate the daughters keeping them in a hostel. The CF comments at this point, "There is lack of security - and the girls suffer from fear of violence as they travel to and from school/colleges. Some bad young men make different bad remarks: referring to a girl passing by, they say '*ekta mal mal jacchey*' (*mal* means goods or merchandise, and here the girl is being compared to some merchandise, so 'one piece of merchandise is going'). Beside, some conservative people say '*meyera shikkhito hoyei deshta gelo*' (the country is being destroyed by girls being educated). So in order to educate daughters and not be subject to such remarks, hostel is seen as the best option."

People are aware of the need for education for girls, and as we found out in Question 2, they are also aware of the scholarships that make this financially more possible, but it is not clear whether in practice they are able to follow up on the suggestions they make here. Much the same is true of marriage: both women and men want in principle to avoid early marriage and to marry their daughters to a good and honest man from a family which will take care of them, but in practice their options may be limited.

### 3 Major Problems as Seen By Village Women (Qu. 5-10)

In this section of the report, I discuss the major problems in their lives as seen by village women. My discussion is based in part on Questions 5 to 10 of the focus group discussions and individual structured interviews, in part on the workshop and case-study interviews. As will be seen, these produced rather different kinds of material and responses.

#### 3.1 Question 5: The Biggest Problems for Women Today

This question asked "What are the biggest problems for women today?". The women were asked to name the issues, then to discuss the ranking for the issues as a group and to come to an agreement about the three biggest problems, the easiest to change of these three and the most difficult to change of these.

Dowry was very generally seen as the biggest problem. 33 of the 47 FGD responses rated it as first, and a further 5 as second, with only two of the non-Adivasi groups failing to give it as either first or second. (Among the Adivasis, by contrast, only one of the eight FGDs mentioned it at all.) It was also almost universally regarded as the most difficult problem to deal with, with 35 of the 38 FGD responses that mentioned it rating it in this way.

The following table gives all those problems mentioned by more than one FGD response, with the numbers of responses rating them in various positions, and rating them as easiest or hardest to deal with. They are arranged according to the frequency with which they are mentioned. Again, I have grouped together similar problems.

<i>Problem</i>	<i>No. of groups rating it as 1st</i>	<i>No. of groups rating it as 2nd</i>	<i>No. of groups rating it as 3rd</i>	<i>No. of groups mentioning it as "other"</i>	<i>No. of groups rating it as easiest to deal with</i>	<i>No. of groups rating it as hardest to deal with</i>
Dowry	33	5	-	-	-	35
Lack of health care, health-related problems, lack of care when sick	2	4	4	16	5	1
Violence or bad treatment by husband (including violence when pregnant)	1	8	9	9	4	4
Child marriage	1	7	8	9	14	1
Lack of security	1	2	3	10	1	1
Women have responsibility for family planning	1	1	4	10	3	1
Physical mobility	-	2	1	12	2	-
Polygamy	-	1	-	10	1	-
Problems with delivery	-	1	-	10	-	-
Divorce	1	1	-	7	-	-
Too many children	-	1	2	5	-	-

Malnutrition, women do not get enough food	1	-	3	4	2	-
Married men have affairs with other women, have perverted tastes	1	1	-	4	-	-
Women's opinion given no value	-	-	-	4	-	-
Problems with in-laws (various)	-	1	-	2	-	-
Problems with women's illnesses (cannot discuss, cannot get treatment)	-	-	2	1	2	-
Prolapsed uterus	-	2	-	-	-	-
Women's wages are low	1	-	-	1	-	1
Lack of education	-	1	-	1	1	-
No right to land or property, no property of their own	-	1	-	1	1	-
Have to work soon after birth (Adivasis only)	-	2	-	-	1	-
Have to work both inside and outside (Adivasis only)	-	1	-	1	-	-
Being deprived of rights	-	-	1	1	-	-
Violent sex from husband	-	-	-	2	-	-
Too many children, having children against one's will				2		
Kept separate during menstruation (Hindu women only)	-	-	-	2	-	-

**Table 3.1 Women's Biggest Problems**

Some of these problems are specific to particular groups (Adivasi or Hindu) and this is indicated above. Others are mentioned more often or rated more highly by particular groups, for example security problems were evidently a big issue for Adivasi populations in the Southeast, with one of the three Southeastern Adivasi groups giving them as the biggest problem and another as the second biggest. This last group (the Rakhain) gave "lack of living space, crowded situation, sanitation problems, lack of privacy from neighbouring Muslims" as their biggest problem and as the most difficult to tackle. However, the above table gives a clear picture of what the majority of groups see as the biggest problems facing rural women: dowry, health care (including delivery problems), violence and mistreatment by husbands, child marriage, lack of security, women's responsibility for family planning (and having too many children), and physical mobility. Other problems that score highly include polygamy, divorce, malnutrition, and unfaithful husbands.

Question 5a asked "What are your reasons for selecting the problem you list as most difficult to change? Have there been any changes over the last five years to this problem?" Since 35 FGDs chose dowry as the most difficult problem to change, answers to this question generally refer to dowry, though a few groups

chose other topics, particularly violence or mistreatment by husbands. Question 5b asked the same question in relation to the problem listed as easiest to change. The topic most often selected here was child marriage, with health care, violence or mistreatment by husbands, and women's responsibility for family planning all also being chosen in three or more FGD responses. Since questions 6 to 10, are about strategies to address the easiest problem to change, these responses again focus on the same issues.

Topics not selected as easiest or most difficult to change receive little discussion in the FGDs, so I have amplified the discussion below with material from the case-studies.

### 3.1.1 Dowry: The Most Intractable Problem

It was perhaps not a surprise that dowry is named in almost all the FGD responses both as one of the biggest problems (in most cases, the biggest problem) and also as the big problem that was most difficult to deal with.<sup>8</sup> Dowry is a relatively recent phenomenon among Muslim populations in rural Bangladesh, but there has been rapid inflation of dowry payments over the last twenty or so years, and they are now very large indeed in comparison with the income of poorer and even lower middle-class rural families. Hindu families, who traditionally paid dowry, have experienced similar inflation, so that what was a relatively nominal payment has now become extremely onerous for them as well.

Although dowry is officially illegal, and there have been numerous campaigns and official announcements attacking it, very few marriages take place without it, and the availability of relatively easy credit through rural micro-credit schemes has further fuelled inflation of dowry, leading to very high levels of rural debt in many cases. In other cases, families are pressured to promise payments which they are then unable to fulfil, causing misery and suffering to large numbers of women, who may be subject to dowry-related violence or forced to return to their parents' home.

Here are a couple of case-studies that illustrate aspects of dowry issues:

Ruksana comes from a poor family. She is the second of four sisters; there is also one brother. Her elder sister was married ten years ago. The third sister worked in someone's house for eight years, after which they paid for her marriage. Ruksana, who is good-looking but not fair in complexion, began a romantic liaison with her cousin Ataul (mother's brother's son). Her mother let them mix freely as she thought it might lead to marriage, but people started to talk and said he might not marry her later, and they should arrange the marriage. However, Ataul's parents disapproved of the marriage (apparently mainly on the grounds of the family's poverty), began to look for another wife for Ataul, and stopped him going to Ruksana's house.

Ruksana managed to speak to Ataul by phone and told him that her mother

---

<sup>8</sup> Dowry problems are discussed in detail in my previous report, Rozario 2004a: 44-9.

was very ill. Ataul came to her house, and village leaders then negotiated a marriage between them with a *mohr* (payment from Ataul's family to Ruksana's) of Tk. 80,000. However, when Ruksana went to Ataul's house after marriage, her mother-in-law mistreated her and demanded a cycle, some jewellery and Tk. 30,000 from her. Ruksana's mother took a Tk. 7000 loan from Grameen Bank, bought a cycle and made some ear-rings in the hope that the mother-in-law (her own brother's wife) would treat Ruksana better but the mother-in-law pressured her for more money. Ruksana did not want to tell her parents since they were already struggling to keep up payments on the first loan and could not afford enough food. Her mother-in-law tricked her into signing divorce papers (she told her that the papers were to obtain another loan, from BRAC), forced her to return to her parents' house, and arranged a new marriage for Ataul. Ruksana has sold the earrings so she has the money to try to bring a legal case against Ataul's family for violence and dowry offences.

In Ruksana's case, the village leaders recognised her father's inability to pay and attempted to negotiate a practicable settlement. However, her in-laws refused to recognise the settlement, although they were close relatives of Ruksana's own mother, and the village leaders did nothing to intervene. Meanwhile, her parents were forced to take out a loan they could not afford, making their already very bad economic situation even worse.

More typically, as in Kalu Ahmed's case, village leaders insist on dowry being paid, even though they are fully aware that the family does not have the resources:

Kalu Ahmed is a poor labourer without any land, and can only get work for part of the year. He has three daughters and married the first two with great difficulty. He married the third at age 15 with the promise of Tk. 30,000 dowry but has been unable to pay it. The girl was abused mentally and physically by her husband and mother-in-law, and they repeatedly sent her back to her father's house for dowry. Eventually she became pregnant, but they treated her with more violence and forced her to have an abortion. Her parents fought with the husband's parents and a village *shalish* was arranged with the Union Chairman and many prominent village men. They told Kalu Ahmed to pay some of the dowry as a condition for the girl to go back to her husband, although they know well that he will be unable to do so and she will be forced to remain with her parents.

Many more examples of dowry problems could be cited, and dowry has become perhaps the biggest single cause of rural impoverishment and indebtedness, aided by the ready availability of loans through Grameen Bank and other sources of micro-credit. It is also the single biggest factor behind such other major problems as polygamy, divorce and domestic violence towards women.

Poor families with several daughters are the most vulnerable, but dowry issues pervade the whole of rural society. Poor families with marriageable sons may benefit economically, but the resulting marriages are not necessarily happy ones. Women commonly "marry down" in class and status terms for lack of desirable

grooms within their own groups, and are married to men who are not only from poorer families but frequently also less educated than themselves.<sup>9</sup>

As we saw in Ruksana's story, many parents struggle hard to save or borrow to be able to give what will seem like a good dowry to the groom's family to ensure their daughters' happiness. In many cases, such strategies fail to work.

Since almost all of the FGD responses to Question 5a dealt with dowry, we have many comments about why dowry is seen as the biggest problem and what changes there have been over the last five years. All the responses on dowry are quite clear that there is no marriage without dowry, that dowry is a major cause of rural poverty, that the Government does not enforce the laws against dowry. "Because a daughter cannot be married without dowry, parents do not admit to paying dowry." They say over and over again that dowry payments are increasing as the competition for good husbands becomes more and more acute. There is also widespread concern that girls are not getting married because of their parents' inability to pay the dowry payments that are demanded. "Dowry has become like a competition. If one family wants to give less dowry, another will offer more dowry to marry their daughter." "Fathers of daughters have to sell the land and the bull they plough with to pay dowry." They are also very aware of the links between dowry and violence.

Many of the responses refer to competition, and one of the CFs notes in a response for a lower-middle-class Muslim woman (No.27): "Competition about dowry: When a groom's family see a girl and like her, they start negotiating about dowry. Often poor families cannot meet the demand for a high dowry and they offer a somewhat lower amount. So the groom's family does not budge. At this time, some neighbouring family, who might be somewhat better off and have a marriageable daughter, offer a few thousand takas (5-10,000) extra to the groom's party and 'buy the groom' for their daughter."

Several of the FGD responses suggested that the problem of unemployment of men was also a factor behind dowry problem. Because of unemployment problems, men who would be looking for salaried jobs do not marry until they have a good job, so reducing the supply of marriageable men and forcing up dowry payments. Some men also look to dowry to be used directly as a bribe to get a job, or to start a business.

Later in this section, I give some discussion of legal action in relation to dowry issues as revealed in the FGD responses and case-studies.

---

<sup>9</sup> "These days," said one young man, "if you marry a rich girl, you are not given respect". Another told how a girl might say, *amar bab dui lakh taka dieyechhey, ami kuno kaz korbo na* (my father has given two lakh takas, so I will not do any work).

### 3.1.2 Health Care (Including Delivery Problems) and Malnutrition

Health care problems also rated highly as a major issue for many rural families. Five groups gave some further discussion, since they selected it as the “easiest” problem to tackle. The comments mostly refer to how this problem can be tackled by counselling husbands so that they will spend their money responsibly and make sure that the health of all family members is looked after. Reproductive health problems can be approached by discussions among women and with female health workers. One group felt that men were becoming more aware of the need for health care for women, and are allowing women to go to clinics for treatment.

I have carried out research myself on the rural health system, in relation to childbirth (Rozario 1995, 1998) and also in relation to recent changes in government policy and the introduction of community clinics (Rozario 2003). Consequently, I am well aware of the serious problems in this area: the poor provision of health care, the disproportionate emphasis on family planning at the expense of mother and child health, the frequent lack of attendance by staff at rural health centres, and the negative, unhelpful and dismissive attitudes of hospital doctors and nurses to rural patients. Government hospitals and other facilities are poorly resourced and offer sub-standard services.

There is little about all this in the responses. This perhaps reflects that rural women have low expectations about health care and little experience of effective health provision. In addition, as one of the comments on the draft report noted, it would seem that women saw the immediate problem as one of gaining access to health care at all, and the poor quality of such health care as was available locally as a secondary issue. Thus they saw the real obstacles to their receiving health care as being discrimination within the family, lack of decision-making power and lack of control over income.

Only one response explicitly mentioned the poor quality of health care, and this was from a Santal group from the Northwest who listed health care as the most difficult problem to tackle: “the hospital is a long way from the village, the health worker rarely comes to the *para*, we cannot always go to the doctor due to scarcity, the doctors in the hospital neglect us because we are Adivasi”.

At the same time, remarks from CFs in the FGD responses for the Muslim communities suggested that there are serious problems in the actual delivery of health care for them as well. Thus one CF comments as follows in relation to a poorer Muslim community who had said that the problem could be solved by counselling husbands, etc.: “This is a very poor area. The only government service they have access to is through the family planning worker. There are no health workers who visit the area. They are still very superstitious, and resort to *tabiz* [amulets], *pani pora* [empowered water] etc from *kabiraj* [folk healers]. Due to lack of money they cannot go to doctors. Although government hospitals are free, they cannot access this service for lack of money for travel expenses. Also they cannot

travel alone, have to take someone else with them and pay for their travel expenses.”

### 3.1.3 Violence and Mistreatment by Husbands

Violence by husbands (or more generally in the *shashur bari* or in-laws' house) was also very frequently mentioned as one of the biggest issues. Four FGD responses gave it as the hardest to deal with (the highest score here after dowry), four as the easiest. However, only one of the group that named it as hardest gave any discussion in Question 5a.<sup>10</sup>

Positive responses here were “Prominent people in the area have become aware of this problem and are advising people. Education has increased. In some areas, the law is being implemented. Over the last five years, this problem has decreased because women have become much more aware, and they are aware of the law against violence against women.” (Poorer Muslim women, Group 9; Group 21, a “control” group of poorer Muslim women, gave an almost identical response)

One of the men's groups (14) made similar points and also stressed the role of NGOs such as BRAC and Proshika and of the union Parishad in raising awareness about the problem. The CF commented “In this *para*, violence against women is much less than before. However, even now in about seven or eight families there are frequent fights and conflicts between husband and wife, and the husbands are beating up their wives with little or no reason. The reasons include the wife not having good health and feeling unwell, not performing housework properly, and inability to bring money from father's house. Mothers-in-law also incite their sons, e.g. “what have you [the son's wife] brought from your father's house that you say so much?”. As these comments suggest, violence against women is often linked to dowry issues.

While the Muslim women reported that violence against women was decreasing, a group of Adivasi women (Santals, no.34) noted that that there had not been violence in the past in their community, but that it was happening now, and was linked in some places to the recent adoption of dowry.

The case studies gave further information and plenty of examples of violence against women. It seemed from some of the comments I heard that a certain level of violence from husbands is seen by women as acceptable, if the marriage is satisfactory in other respects. See for example Josna's story, which she told at the workshop in Rangpur, which also illustrates some of the problems of polygamy:

Josna's parents were poor and unable to pay dowry, so she “had to become a *shatin* [co-wife]”. But her co-wife herself came for her, because she did not have

<sup>10</sup> Some FGD responses named more than one “hardest problem”, or chose a different one in Question 5a from the one they had named in Question 5.

any children. The husband used to live in his first wife's house, and after his second marriage, all three stayed at the first wife's house. For a while, it worked OK. The husband took turns with both wives (fifteen days each). Initially they all slept in one bed, but then it became complicated, so they bought a second bed.

Josna became pregnant, and conflict started with her co-wife when she was in her seventh month of pregnancy. The co-wife's relatives apparently incited her, saying that Josna's child would get her property (three *bighas* of land). So she told Josna to go away with her husband. When Josna objected, saying it was the co-wife who had brought her there, the co-wife took a burning log from the stove and burnt one side of Josna's face.

Josna was forced to leave, along with her husband, and they took shelter with Josna's parents. But they were also very poor. Gradually Josna bought a little land and built a single-room house for her and her husband.

Meanwhile, the co-wife was defrauded of her property by her relatives who had incited her against Josna and her husband. Now this co-wife is like a beggar, and sometimes visit Josna and her husband. She now wants to return to them, but the husband say they can't afford to have her.

Josna is doing better now. She has some poultry, her husband works for others and she does what she can.

When asked about *mardhor* (violence), she said *mardhor to acheyi*, "Violence is there" – the implication being that it is natural or normal. Apparently there is conflict with her husband about Josna helping her parents, who are extremely poor and sometimes have to go without food. It seems Josna sometimes earns more than her husband, but he still complains if she helps her parents. Her brother helps a little, but not much.

During my meeting with a mixed group of young adolescent men and girls, when I started discussing the problems of violence against women with the young men, the girls got restless, as they wanted me to discuss the issue of dowry with the boys.<sup>11</sup>

I said to the girls, "Isn't violence also a big problem for women?" One of the college girls (HSC student) said, "If my husband is bad, I will fix him up, I will talk to him and make him understand." She went on to say "It's women's fault as well. The husband comes home after his day's work, he is tired, then the wife starts talking about things that angers him. There is no need to discuss husbands' and wives' problems now. These will have to be fixed up amongst the couple. If I do something wrong, it is only right that my husband will beat me."

Later she added, "If my husband does not love me, I will run away. He will beat me, then he will love me, then we will be together." I was a little surprised that this young woman who was so enthusiastic about taking up a fight against dowry, was so casual about husband's violence against wives.

<sup>11</sup> I had met the girls previously in 2004, when I mentioned the possibility of boys and girls discussing gender issues together. They were very interested in this, so when we met as a mixed group on this occasion they kept prompting me, "Ask them about dowry".

Again, during our discussion about the problems of violence against women, one of the young men said, "Does the same woman get beaten every day?" This was his way of saying, it's only a problem if a wife is beaten up every day, it is to be expected that a woman will be beaten up every now and then.

Mother-in-laws and other relatives also often seem to be involved in domestic violence, as in some of the stories above. Another example is an anecdote from one of the FGD responses, which describes the successful intervention of the village women's group:

Kulshuma is a member of the village Women's Group. She dreamed of marrying and of living in peace and happiness. However, when she went to her husband's house, she found that he spends his days playing cards and gambling, and does not earn an income.

Kulshuma's mother-in-law pressures her to get her son to earn a living. But whenever K tries to say something about this to her husband, he beats her up. Often she goes away to her father's house after she is beaten up. Once, her sister-in-law (*nonod*) and mother-in-law beat her up very badly, blaming her for her husband's not working or earning any income, and threw her out of the house.

Then she resorted to the assistance of this Women's Group. The women in the group thought hard what can be done, then they went and talked with the mother-in-law and husband, and threatened them with legal action. After this, her husband took her back. Thus Kulshuma believes that to stop violence or oppression against women, women have to form into solidary groups and protest.

It would be interesting to have more detail about cases such as Kushulma's, where there appears to have been active and successful intervention by women as a group. Examples such as this are few and far between, however, especially when it is considered that the whole structure of the FGD was directed towards uncovering such attitudes and behaviours.

### 3.1.4 Child Marriage

Child marriage was frequently cited as a problem, but it was also the commonest problem to be described as "easiest to deal with". The general opinion was that it had decreased in the last five years. Typical comments in FGD responses are that village leaders, imams and teachers are now aware and are counselling about it, and parents are consequently more aware. Parents are aware that girls' health will suffer if they marry young.

FGD responses also noted that government laws against child marriage are widely known and are being implemented, so that the *kazi* will not marry girls under the age of 18. Also, as the opportunities for girls' education increase and they stay longer at school, this reduces child marriage. Opportunities for girls to get jobs with NGOs, even with limited education, again reduce the pressure for early marriage.

One group of lower middle class Muslim women noted that the lack of money for dowry payments is also reducing the incidence of child marriage.

### 3.1.4 Lack of Security; Restrictions on Physical Mobility

Lack of security and physical mobility were both high-rating problems and probably belong together in many cases, since women's lack of mobility results in part from lack of security when alone outside the village.<sup>12</sup> Few of the FGD responses however chose either lack of security or physical mobility as the easiest or most difficult problems, so there is not much further information about these issues.

One of the lower middle class Muslim women's groups chose lack of security as the "easiest" major problem to deal with, and commented on the need to implement laws, to involve the *samaj* (community) and raise awareness, and to ensure that just *shalish* is done (Group 3).<sup>13</sup> The comment on *shalish* is perhaps clarified by the comment of a young man to me that girls cannot go out at night because when rich boys hassle them and abuse them, they are not brought to justice, because there is bias in the *shalish* sessions.

One of the Adivasi (Santal) groups in the NW (no.16) gave lack of security as the "most difficult" problem. Their comments were: "Women cannot move about freely. Society and the administration do not play any part (in addressing this problem?). There has been an increase in uncontrolled behaviour. Kidnapping has increased; rape, acid throwing have increased." This may reflect the fact that for this community women traditionally were not subject to the same kinds of restrictions as for Muslim women, whereas they are now in a particularly vulnerable situation as an Adivasi minority. Communal security issues were also very critical for the Rakhain (Adivasi) community in Cox's Bazar District.

### 3.1.5 Too Many Children; Women's Responsibility for Family Planning

These two major issues also seem to belong together. One of the groups cites "too many children" as the easiest problem, saying that family planning is readily available and that family planning fieldworkers come to their houses. Three of the responses cite family planning as an "easiest" problem to deal with. Beside those FGDs which identified family planning as among their three main problems, many other responses also identified family planning or women's responsibility for family

<sup>12</sup> For the two Adivasi communities (one in the NW, one in the SW) which placed lack of security as 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup>, the situation was obviously different, and the problem was a general lack of security in relation to the surrounding non-Adivasi communities.

<sup>13</sup> The group apparently felt that there had been some improvement in security over the last few years. I found this surprising given that the general picture in Bangladesh seems to be that there has been considerable deterioration in the security of women in public spaces. Here, as in some other places, it might have been useful to cross-check the data further with the community.

planning as one of their main problems, bringing the total number of FGD responses concerned about having too many children or family planning to 19 (Table 3.1)

I was a little surprised at women identifying the issue of family planning being the exclusive responsibility of women as a problem, since it seems at first sight to be very much a western feminist issue. A comment on the draft report suggests that the issue of women's responsibility here is less a moral one (as it might be in the Western context) than a practical one. Women not only have to use the contraceptives, they also have to collect them, pay for them, communicate with service providers regarding health problems, and manage their husbands when they are not using any method.<sup>14</sup>

Although there was not much concern expressed about the side effects of family planning methods in the FGD responses,<sup>15</sup> women's identification of family planning being a burden for them may also reflect their on-going suffering from the side-effects of different contraceptive methods. It is evident from a number of studies that side effects of contraceptive methods are common, and that women rarely get much if any treatment for them, for the main emphasis of the Family Planning Department is on controlling the number of babies being born, rather than on the health of women (Rozario 1999).<sup>16</sup>

### 3.1.6 Unfaithful Husbands, Polygamy and Divorce

Again, many case studies involve unfaithful husbands, polygamy and divorce, some with examples of having resorted to legal action where husband married again without first wife's knowledge. There are also examples of women resorting to village or UP *shalish* sessions in an effort to get some maintenance from their husbands who might be too preoccupied with their extra-marital affairs and spending their money on these relationships and failing to support their wives and children.

In the FGD responses divorce and polygamy rated quite highly as major problems. While unfaithful husbands did not get mentioned directly among the main problems, it was clear from the response of many women to Question 3 (about their ambitions) that they would like an honest (*shaf*) husband, meaning a husband who would possess good character and would not go after other women. In the anecdotes accompanying the responses to question 3, some CFs mentioned that in some areas there was no work for labouring men from five to six months of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Sterilisation (vasectomy) is also available to men, but most men would not accept it for fear of becoming impotent or unmanly.

<sup>15</sup> Side-effects are mentioned in one of the Adivasi responses (16).

<sup>16</sup> It may also be that women's identification of family planning as a problem may reflect men's lack of cooperation for women's use of contraception. It is not uncommon in my experience for women to seek contraception without the knowledge of their husbands or mothers-in-law because they know that they would not approve.

year and so they have to go away to other districts, often as far as Dhaka, to sell labour, or ride rickshaws during this period. It is often during this period that men start extra-marital affairs, and there is always the risk of this leading to a second marriage. There was at least one case study where the husband had four wives, and he was trying to throw out the first wife and the children from his home.

Polygamy is quite common in some of the communities. In one of the lower middle class Muslim communities (28), the CF notes on the response form that eleven families are polygamous.

Mollika, a woman from this community, married some fifteen years ago and she was happy at the beginning. Her father-in-law was polygamous and encouraged his son to take a second wife. Because Mollika is 'dark' (*kalo*, black) her father in law kept telling his son to marry a *farsa* (fair) complexioned girl. Eventually her husband married again, but the marriage did not last and the couple were separated or divorced. Then he married again.

At present Mollika lives at her parents' house. She has three daughters and the younger wife has a son. Her husband spends more time with the younger wife and does not maintain Mollika's family. She manages by raising poultry and cattle and is subject to constant scarcity. Her husband beats her up often and is always in a bad mood. There is no peace or happiness in her family. At present, the husband is not well, adding further to her problems.<sup>17</sup>

After this survey of some of the major problems, we move on to the main focus of Questions 6 to 10; taking action.

### 3.2 Taking Action: Questions 6 to 10

This section deals with the problems each group identified as the easiest to address. The problems most frequently taken up are child marriage (the most frequent) and violence against women, though a number of other topics occur less often (women's health problems, lack of security, polygamy, lack of nutritious food for pregnant women). As we have seen, child marriage is already on the decrease, for a variety of reasons, but it clearly remains a serious issue within some of the communities.

While many of the FGD responses here feel routine and do not give much sense that there is any effective action, or much likelihood of the women being able to organise any, there are a number of cases where there seems to be some real activity. These refer particularly to child marriage and violence against women.

<sup>17</sup> Dark skin colour is always an aggravating factor in relation to dowry, marriage and violence (Rozario 2002). The same CF mentioned a *slok* referring to this: *kalo dhan ar kotoi dekhey bahey, atash chandina* ("How much can one look at the black paddy, no. 28 rice is really nice, white and it glitters.") here, the dark girl is compared to some other inferior rice, and the fair girl to no 28 rice (a type of new IRRI variety of paddy) which is clean, white and glittering.

Mostly these are villages where there is an active RLP group, either of women alone, or of men and women together, and in several cases CFs report that the groups regularly discuss the issues of child marriage and violence against women.

### 3.2.1 Question 6. Are men concerned about this problem too?

Generally the answer here was "yes". Looking more closely, the extent to which men were concerned doubtless varies (and so do the specific men who are concerned).

In relation to child marriage, fathers are directly involved. The possible health implications of an early marriage seem to be well known. A typical response (from a poorer Muslim women's group, no.11) is this: "When married young, a girl's health is gets damaged (*nosto*). They become pregnant at an early age, so they suffer various health problems. Pregnant women suffer from malnutrition, and often get beaten up. They become mothers at an early age, so their bodies become weak, they cannot do housework, they cannot look after their husbands. Then the relationship between husband and wife deteriorates and husband wants to marry again."

Apart from the health issues, men are likely to be worried about the possibility of the girl being sent back to them and becoming a burden on them if the marriage does not work out. As we have seen from several case studies, such worried are quite realistic.

In relation to violence against women, men's concerns are rather different: they are scared of the law. Men who commit violence against women may end up in gaol, and other men too may be concerned because the village's reputation is affected. This is another group of poorer Muslim women, no.9: "They [men] are scared of law and take some neighbour with them and the reputation of the village suffers. Then no one wants to marry their daughters with men in that village. When a man beats up his wife, he does not think, he beats in anger. But later reputation suffers and he is scared of the gaol [the prospect of being imprisoned]." However, as we have noticed above, a limited amount of violence from the husband is regarded as quite normal and acceptable. It is only if violence is excessive that the man may be at risk of legal action, and even then the chances of a successful prosecution are not necessarily high. As noted above, village mediation (*aposh*, *mimangsha*) often leads to the problem being "settled" within the community in ways that maintain the status quo of gender and class relations.

In relation to security, men may also be concerned because of the risk to their female family members, particularly daughters. Their family's reputation may be at risk if a female family member is harassed in the streets. If their daughter's reputation is damaged, they may not be able to arrange a marriage for her.

### 3.2.2 Question 7. How are you dealing with this issue?

A lower middle class Muslim women's FGD (No.6) gave the following response in relation to child marriage: "Making parents of girls understand, sometimes individually and other times going to the parents as a group, we are explaining the drawbacks of child marriage. We are telling them about the importance of continuing the education of girls. Guardians are sometimes brought to the group meetings and these things are explained to them, including giving them information about laws against child marriage and advising them about girls' health issues." According to the CF, this village has an active CARE RLP women's group with 22 members, which discusses the issue of child marriage at their meetings. Recently they managed to prevent the child marriage of one family. Other FGD responses speak in similar terms, and several of them have also formed groups that discuss child marriage.

The following response from a Hindu women's group response (No.1) is also mainly about child marriage, but also addresses the question of action of violence against women at the end: "Girls are being encouraged to study. When someone wants to marry their daughter young, they are being advised and made to understand the problems of child marriage. In our group we discuss the problems and adverse effects of child marriage. People are now saving to educate their girls." The CF added, "In this community the men and women meet jointly and they discuss child marriage problems, and that's why they are aware about child marriage problems. Presently, there are 45 members in this group and they have connections with various government and NGO organisations. They also have good connections with the Union Parishad. When women are subjected to violence by their husbands, they seek help from the Union Parishad. In addition, they get other advantages, e.g. as a group they took initiative to repair their roads."

Lack of security: Here there seemed less in the way of effective action. This is from a 'control' group of lower middle class Muslim women: "To discuss at meetings. To discuss as a group with the prominent people. To discuss this with village young men and ask for their support."

### 3.2.3 Question 8. How can this issue be most effectively addressed within and beyond the community?

The responses here are more standard. For child marriage, for example, the imam can discuss child marriage on Fridays after the *namaz*, UP members can discuss child marriage issues and make sure people are aware of the laws, the UP chairman can enforce a penalty fee and punishment for parents who marry their daughters young. There are very similar responses for violence against women and other problems.

It is certainly true that if there were regular fines and punishments for offenders, it would have an impact on the community. Regular sermons from imams have also played a significant role in raising awareness of issues of this kind and in making people aware of their legal and moral obligations.<sup>18</sup>

What is rather noticeable here though is that the responsibility is being shifted to other people. Few if any women answered this question, or even Question 9, in terms of putting pressure on the UP members and chairman to take action. This may reflect a realistic assessment of the difficulty of taking such action.

### 3.2.4 Question 9. What role can you play to tackle this issue?

The emphasis here is mostly on talking to people. For child marriage, for example, we find "Make everyone understand by holding meetings. Will have to prevent as a group. To make parents understand by going from house to house. To make people understand about laws against child marriage and threaten to take legal action. To encourage all to place emphasis on girls' education." This is from the same lower-middle class Muslim women's group (no.6) mentioned above, with an active RLP women's group.

A poorer Muslim women's FGD response in relation to violence against women states: "Have to counsel both parties. Have to raise awareness of law against violence against women. Women have to engage in income-generating work." (The reference to income-generating work is probably on the grounds that poverty is a major cause of violence.)

An interesting comment on lack of security came from a lower middle class Muslim women's group: "When someone is subjected to violence, all should cooperate and bring in a just verdict". Here there is an awareness that the problem is not so much that there are no procedures and laws, but that they are not applied fairly in a way that could protect women's interests. In Question 15, where women are asked what difference it would make if they were involved in decision making in the *para*, many groups say, there will be just verdicts and just resolution of conflicts.

---

<sup>18</sup> The one imam I interviewed during the present study (in another area of Rangpur District) had relatively strict views of gender relations. He believed in strict veiling of women and does not allow his wife show her face in front of other men, even in his own house. Thus while I was sitting on their verandah with three men, she was kept inside the room and could not come out to feed their six cows because the cow-shed was visible from the verandah. His views on domestic violence were also conditional on the principle that "women have to listen to their husbands." When I mentioned that many village women say "women's heaven is under her husband's feet", and asked if this is Islamic, he confirmed that it was! I was able to interview his wife briefly after he left to go to the bazaar and found out how scared she was of her husband. She said, "He will roar like a tiger as he comes home. From half a mile away he will look around to see if his wife or his teenage daughter can be seen to be somewhere else within the *para*. When this happens he gets very angry." However, she did not admit to him inflicting violence on her.

### 3.2.5 Question 10 Can the government, NGOs or other organizations help?

Here again answers were fairly standard, and suggest that women are well aware of the services available from locally-active NGOs and government agencies. BRAC and RDRS are regularly identified as the NGOs which can help them with extending legal help and holding meetings with women and men in the village about laws against violence against women, child marriage, problems of polygamy, health issues, malnutrition, education, security and other problems. All NGOs operating in the locality were identified as those who can provide counselling and advice with different problems they face. The NGOs they mentioned include BRAC, RDRS, HEED, Pollisree, BASTOV, BELA, and PLAN. They also mentioned Grameen Bank and ASA, although these are not strictly speaking NGOs.

Union Parishad Chairman, Members, particularly female Members, were identified as people who could help in various ways: with advice, punishing those responsible for going against the law, e.g. the match-makers and kazi in relation to child marriage and also the parents of the child bride.

Women's Ministry, Family Planning Department, and Health Department, Family Court were also identified as bodies which can extend help in dealing with different problems. However, groups did not have much idea on how these bodies could be helpful. So they mentioned some general points in relation to the way organizations might be helpful: for example, provide legal help and advice, raise awareness, and provide training to women in income-generating work

### 3.3. Legal Action for Dowry Problems and Similar Issues

While the format of the FGDs meant that they do not discuss the actions women and their men-folk take in relation to dowry issues (since the FGDs only discuss what is being done about the issue chosen as easiest, and this was never dowry), several of the case studies illustrate women and their families taking legal action against the husband and their families for violence related to dowry, and for throwing their wives out of their homes because of dowry issues.

However, it is also common for the husband and his family to intervene by suggesting negotiation (*aposh*, *mimangsha*), and so getting themselves off the hook. *Aposh* and *mimangsha*, in other words, are strategies used by the culprits (with the help of the local leaders and UP chairman) to prevent the victims taking them to the court.

In some cases local prominent men do step in to help the victims, but more often it is the pattern for them to negotiate things in such a way that the victims do not fare much better than before. We have already seen this in Kalu Ahmed's case (section 3.1.1). Again, the case of Lipi (Case Study 5), when her father was telling the

groom's family that he was unable to pay any dowry, the *para* people incited him, "are you a beggar that you cannot pay anything". Thus these leaders, who are aware of the law against dowry, are justifying dowry for the culprits.

On the whole, there is greater awareness about the various laws to protect women, against dowry, against violence, child marriage, payment of *mohr* etc. But implementation of these laws is rare, and women often resort to legal action only when they have lost everything (e.g. after they have paid dowry, been subjected to all sorts of violence and been thrown out by their husbands). In such cases, they might try to get the dowry back, though it may be difficult to prove that they paid dowry, as there is no written evidence), they might also try for maintenance for themselves or their small children or for *mohr*.<sup>19</sup>

However, the greater awareness about the laws is apparently beginning to instill a fear in village men. Everyone is scared of the idea of facing the court and of the possibility of imprisonment. So when a woman makes a move in that regard, the man finds out, he starts action, gathering the village's prominent people on his side, including the UP Chairman and Members, giving bribes when necessary, often by selling land, making the family further impoverished. Unfortunately, the end result is still usually not that good for women, even if the husband is pressured into taking her back and told to behave better. After a few months of improved behaviour, the man gets back to his usual nature.

One adolescent man commented that "men have power only in speech, but women's power is written" (*cheleder mukhey khomota, meyeder likhito*). However, the responses as a whole suggest that the widespread awareness of laws about women's rights is not necessarily transferred into action. In practice men's power prevails in most spheres.

A good number of women mentioned that one of the ways that people from outside the *para* can help is the Chairman and Members to issue fines and exemplary punishment to men (for violence, for CM, for polygamy, dowry-related violence and so forth). Although there are many examples of the UP officials passing verdicts in favour of the oppressors after taking bribes from them or simply because they do not acknowledge these as any real problems, there are also one or two rare cases where these *shalish* sessions have gone in favour of women. The women's responses suggest that it might do some good to introduce punishment in cases where it can be proved that UP Chairmen and members have taken bribes.

---

<sup>19</sup> It was interesting women mentioned *mohr* (*mohorana*) as one of the few advantages women have. However, it is not clear how many women really receive this from their husbands, either at marriage or after divorce. Only in one case (Taraganj case where no dowry was charged) it was mentioned that the girl was paid Tk18,000 as part of her *mohr* and remainder was being paid on a monthly basis into her bank account.

## 4 Women's Influence in Decision Making (Qu. 11-15)

This section is based primarily on Questions 11 to 15 of the focus group guidelines. These questions are essentially aimed at finding out if and when women's decisions are sought by men within the family and within the *para* or community, which decisions women would to be involved with, and what difference they believe that this would make. The answers are again quite similar for different groups, regardless of their socioeconomic, married or unmarried, religious or regional variations.

### 4.1 Question 11: Is Women's Opinion Sought or Valued in the Household?

Thus for question 11 which asked women if their opinion was sought or valued in important household decisions, the only major exception came with the Rakhain group from the Southeast, who stated that among them women make all the decisions. Other groups mentioned that women's opinions were usually not sought, except sometimes for relatively minor family decisions.

In a number of groups, however, women mentioned that they are consulted and/or their decision is sought for certain things, e.g. selling poultry and cattle. Perhaps this is because these are the things women bought with their *samity* savings in the first place, and this is one of the income generating activities these women are engaged in. If so, it would seem that their financial contribution is beginning to have some impact on their decision-making because in some groups they did not have any control or say even over the money they earned themselves or borrowed from a *samity*.<sup>20</sup>

One community facilitator gives the example of the community organiser of a village GO-Interfish group. She has been able to contribute financially to her family and her opinion is being sought in family matters and is making decisions side by side with her husband and her mother-in-law.

While some groups said that their opinion is sought for more significant decisions, e.g. buying and selling of land, mortgaging land and marriage of their children, most groups said they were not consulted about these big decisions. Indeed one of the community facilitators conducting a RLP men's FGD added that while the men said that they seek women's opinion, in reality what they do is merely inform their wives that they are buying some land. This is because they claim that women do not understand anything about the productivity of any particular land, they only

---

<sup>20</sup> One woman, Maleka, spoke of a loan she had from BRAC. After she completed her repayments, she had Tk1000 left over and wanted to mortgage a piece of land with that. She discussed this with her husband, but her husband did not give her opinion any significance, saying that "women are less intelligent, there is no need to listen to them". Instead he bought a bicycle, and started some business, which eventually made a loss.

understand that their property will increase, so their opinion is not worth much. Indeed one or two groups mentioned that men seek opinion but they do what they like anyway. The main reason for informing or pretending to seek a wife's opinion when buying land is that a husband may not have the full amount he needs to buy the land and so he might ask his wife to get money from her parents, or ask her if she has any secret savings. I also wonder if a husband might also have a plan to ask his wife to borrow money from some NGO she is a member of.<sup>21</sup>

These motives on the men's part might explain the slight variation between the answers given by the lower middle class Muslim women and the poorer Muslim women. The responses of the former group tended to be more positive on this question, one or two responses saying that their opinion was sought in buying and selling of land, children's marriage, borrowing from others etc. One of the most common reasons given by women for not seeking their opinion was that women do not earn. But if the lower middle class women can earn a small income from different projects or get money from parents in need, then their husbands might be inclined to ask for their opinion for decisions which involve asking their wives for money.

On the whole though, while men might seek women's opinion in relatively minor decisions, they are still unwilling to consult women for more significant decisions like buying or selling of land.

I list here some typical reasons mentioned by women in the FGDs as to why men not seeking their opinion:

- Men claim that women are less intelligent (their brain size is a half or quarter that of men's);
- Men say that women do not go out and therefore do not understand anything;
- Women do not earn or have any money;
- Men are the heads of the household and maintain all expenses for family members;
- Men are concerned women will become too free and will become *dewani* (become *matbar*, i.e. bossy, or get out of control) and become too clever if their opinion is sought;
- Men think that girls will become daring (*shahosh berey jabey*, will become courageous, self-confident) if their opinion is sought;
- men are concerned about losing their honour (or 'losing face') if they seek women's opinion.

There is also a notion that it is dangerous to seek women's opinion, (*meyeder buddhi niley porey bipodey portey hobey* - one will get into trouble for taking girls'

---

<sup>21</sup> Apparently two men said they use the strategy of taking their wives to see the land they are buying, to encourage their wives to get money from parents or whatever.

advice).<sup>22</sup> The adolescent girls who reported this seemed resentful that often their younger brothers' opinion would be sought but not theirs. A father's saying in relation to the suggestion of seeking the opinion of his daughter about her marriage also says a lot about how men view girls and women: *Garur goluy darak ditey/ Gorur nitey hobey ousmoti?* ("Do I have to take the cow's permission to tie a rope around it?") This came up during a FGD with adolescent girls, who said that they were compared to cows in the *hat* bazaar – there is no question of their likes and dislikes being considered!

A common saying reported in different forms in a couple of the responses perhaps says it all: *Narir buddhi nebey jey bhatey morbey shey* (He who takes a woman's advice will die for lack of rice). Women are taken to have no intelligence or understanding of anything.

As we see later (Section 4.3), women do not necessarily accept these proverbs and cultural attitudes. Their responses on Question 13 suggest considerable self-confidence, and a feeling that they are as or more capable of making effective decisions than their menfolk.

#### **4.2 Question 12: What kind of decisions would you like to be more involved in?**

It is not surprising that the decisions most women wanted to be more involved in related to their children's marriage, buying and selling of land, buying and selling of cattle, business matters, and children's education. Most of these are decisions related to control over finance and therefore about control over their lives (economic empowerment), although children's education and marriage might involve non-financial decisions. One or two responses also said that they would like to be involved about husband's second marriage. One poorer Muslim women's group felt they would like to be involved in decisions about husband's movements, where he goes and so on. According to the CF conducting the FGD, this related to women's concern about their husbands' extra-marital affairs and about their wasting their money on other women. One of Santal woman commented that she would like to be informed when her husband went away from home, but her reason was different from the Muslim women's group.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> This was a comment from an adolescent girls' FGD.

<sup>23</sup> This woman (FGD 33) commented that sometimes husbands will go away and stay 3-4 days with relatives, but they do not say anything to anyone in the family before going. Also they do not mention anything when they go out on a daily basis. Wives get worried and sometimes face problems. This seems to be an important concern for the Santal women.

### 4.3 Question 13: What difference would it make in your family?

Women responded to this question again pretty much in one voice: everything related to the family life will be a lot better, in every possible way. Financially, the family's income would increase and expenses decrease, there would be no scarcity and less debt, children would be educated, the family would have adequate food, and enjoy better health, would get medical treatment when needed, would wear good clothes, house would have more furniture. In other words, the family would be materially comfortable if husbands listened to them and did not waste money in gambling, on other women, on polygamy, on businesses that did not make sense and so on. Women also felt that there would be no fights and conflicts, no violence against women, less divorce, there would be peace and happiness in the family. Most of all there would be compatibility and good relationship between husbands and wives.

Perhaps, in this response what we find is not so much that women necessarily believed that they would achieve all the things they listed only if their husbands consulted their opinion for all their decisions, but rather what they would like to achieve for their families and for themselves. After all, a lot of the problems are related to household poverty, often aggravated by matters like dowry, sudden serious illness or death of the husband. Of course it is still true that much could be achieved and the poverty situation could be improved significantly if men did not waste money the way women said they were wasting, eg. on gambling, on extra-marital affairs, playing cards etc.

### 4.4 Question 14: Is Women's Opinion Sought or Valued in the Community (*Samaj*)?

With the exception of the Rakhain group, every response for this question was a categorical NO. This is perhaps not surprising, considering men's opinion of women, as expressed in the responses to question 11. At the same time, this question refers very much to formal and official contexts, where women generally have least opportunity to express their opinion. We know that women do influence men in informal ways.

Thus, as the responses to this question make it clear, community decisions are part of the public world, which belongs to men. Women should not be seen to interfere in this world. Typical comments from the women about why their opinion is not sought or valued in the *samaj* are as follows:

- Men think women are *ghorer jinish* (things to be kept inside), they should not go out;
- Men do not want women to come out of the house;

- Men say women should not go out in the public *samaj*;<sup>24</sup>
- If women go to meetings, people in the *samaj*/society do not like it (and the women get a bad reputation);
- There is less opportunity for women to express their opinion because of fear of criticism.

Other reasons for men not seeking women's opinion repeat those we have already heard in question 11. So we hear again that men think that women have 1/16th of a kilo, e.g. about 58 grams, of intelligence (*buddhi*), while men have a quarter of a kilo, in other words, men have four times the intelligence of women.<sup>25</sup>

Another group, of lower middle class Muslim women, said that "Women cannot make judgement. Their mind is soft (*tader mon norom*), they will not be able to beat up any one." The CF commented in relation to this response, "In this para there have been numerous *shalish* sessions regarding gambling, harassing of girls, minor theft, extra-marital relations etc. At *shalish*, usually young bamboo sticks are used to beat up the culprit, and garlands of shoes are also used to insult them. Men think women are 'soft' both physically and mentally, and they will not be able to beat up the culprits."

Men's fear of loss of status, and that women will get out of control, also came through strongly: "Men think that if women are called or consulted in work relating to the community, then men's status will go down (*purusher dam komey jabey*)." "Men think that if women get the opportunity to express their opinion, they will not listen to men (*manbey na*)."

Some of the responses of adolescent girls are of interest, in that they reflect society's greater control over them and the fear of them getting out of control (again *dewana*), meaning get involved with men and cause trouble:

- Unmarried girls will not get married if they become *dewana*
- Boys think if they listen to girls, their honour will be at stake (*man smamman thakbey na*)
- It is believed that if a girl expresses an opinion, it will be inauspicious, something might go wrong

Women also responded to this question in relation to being excluded from taking part in *shalish* sessions. Thus quite a few responses started off by saying, "we are not allowed to go to *bichar*, *shalish* sessions". It is not surprising that women identified the village *shalish* sessions as the main context in which they felt that their opinion was not sought and should be sought. *Shalish* sessions are about real

<sup>24</sup>The interviewee refers to this as religious conservatism (*dharmiyo gurami*)

<sup>25</sup>*Narider chatak buddhi or purushder pua buddhi*. The comment was from a poorer married Muslim woman in the NW. Similar comments at Qu.11 came from groups of both lower middle class and poorer Muslim women in the NW. She was referring to comments made by men about women in the village.

power. While the village communities are now becoming more accustomed to poor women going out of the households to take part in paid employment, e.g. in earth-cutting, road construction, in the field and so on, they are a long way from accepting women taking part in what is clearly identified and protected as men's world and men's responsibility. The *shalish* sessions also protect men's and often the rich men's interest at the expense of women, and also poor men.<sup>26</sup>

#### **4.5 Question 15 If women were involved in community decision making, how would things be different?**

This question did not yield anything very significant except that again women thought things would be a lot better all round if women were involved. In particular, women would get just verdicts at *shalish* sessions, and they would also have power, more confidence, honour and status, and more skills. Many of women's problems would also be decreased, including violence, divorce, and women and men would live their lives together in peace. There would be fewer cases of *talaq* or divorce because women would be more aware and will be able to assert themselves for their rights.

As with the responses to question 13, women's responses to Question 15 seem to reflect more what the women would like to see happen than a realistic view of what the consequences might be if their opinions were taken into account

#### **4.6 Summary and Conclusion**

As I noted in the Introduction, the structure of the FGD guidelines tends to polarise men and women, and that is particularly true in these questions, in which women (and men) are being asked why women are not being consulted in decision making, and what difference it might make if they were. It is perhaps understandable that women and men both resort to proverbial sayings about why women are not taken seriously. Such sayings are very common in village Bangladesh, and the examples given above could be multiplied from my own field experience.

The apparent confidence of many of these women that things would be much better if they were listened to suggests, as noted above, that women do not simply accept these stereotypes. In fact, the women have their own proverbial sayings and traditional verses (*shlok*) which reject the idea of men as superior. Women quoted many of these *shlok* in the workshops and case-study interviews. Here is one example:

---

<sup>26</sup> I am not sure how the CARE (PHL) initiative of VAW Forum is working out, but clearly none of the women's groups felt that women had any influence on the *shalish* sessions, let alone taking part in these.

*hal dey dhorī dhorī*  
*Moi dey chori chori*  
*Oa lagano toola ar fela*  
*Kai kori dekhao toe shona*  
*Koto thela*

(“The man ploughs, he has to hold the plough, ride on the *moi* to flatten the lumps, to sow seeds and so on. But let him make bread (*ruti*) from scratch, making the *kai* and making the little balls and then rolling them, he would find it extremely difficult!”)

At the same time, there is doubtless some truth in the men's comments that women understand less about certain things because they do not go out, are not educated and do not get exposed to the outside world. It would also seem that the inability of women to earn an income plays a big part in men's assessment of women's value. Yet these disadvantages of women are themselves created by society's restrictions on what women are allowed to do and not allowed to do in the first place. The honour of individual men and of their families still largely depends on their women being kept under strict control.

In fact, men's comments about women becoming *dewana* if they were allowed freedom of mobility, allowed to participate in the men's world or if their opinion was sought in important decisions in the family or in the community, suggest that they are not necessarily as convinced of women having less intelligence as the proverbial sayings might suggest. Both men and women are increasingly aware that there are plenty of women, even in Bangladesh, who are taking on jobs outside the home and performing them as competently as any men. Girls are receiving higher levels of education, and female Union Parishad members are a reality throughout Bangladesh.

The women's responses to the two “How would it be different?” questions (Questions 13 and 15) may be unrealistic about what women's participation in decision-making might achieve for the average Bangladeshi family or community. However, they make it clear that women think of themselves as fully able to contribute to formal decision-making within the family and the community if they are allowed to. This doubtless reflects that many women are well aware of their ability to influence men and their decisions informally. Despite the rather negative views that come through in the responses to Questions 11 and 14, women have undoubtedly always exercised agency within family and society, if often in informal, covert and subtle ways.

## 5 Women's Solidarity, Agency and Strategies (Qu. 16)

In this fifth section, I look at the question of women's solidarity at the village level as it appears in the light of this study. This topic was addressed explicitly in the last of the focus group questions (no.16: "Do women within your family and community support one another to make things better? If so how, and If not, why not? How could women support one another better?"), and I will start with the answers they gave.

### 5.1 Question 16: How Do Women Support Each Other?

The women's answers to this question were very similar to each other. Almost every group said that they cooperate and help each other in times of need and crises. Some of the standard ways in which women said that they help each other are as follows:

- By lending money and rice in times of crisis (*bipoder shomoy*);
- When unexpectedly guests come, helping with cooked rice and curry;
- During delivery, calling the *dhatri* (midwife or *dai*), doing their cooking and other household work;
- At weddings, helping with advice, lending money and doing some work
- When there is a fight, talking to the husband and trying to counsel him;
- Advising each other how to earn some more money from poultry raising, or growing different vegetable and spinach crops around the house, etc.

Quite a few groups also mentioned that they collected money to contribute to a poor girl's wedding, or to take a woman to the hospital during delivery.

Even the control groups' responses were very similar. Thus one Muslim lower middle class control group (no. 19) in a non-remote area in Dinajpur district said that they take sick women to hospital and arrange medical treatment, help in solving conflicts within the *para*, and help each other in times of crisis. Another control group in a remote area (no. 20) spoke of giving advice for treatment, taking children to school, giving advice about loans and about income-generating activities, and counselling husbands when they beat up their wives. Another group was more specific about the last situation: "When a husband beats up his wife, we try to calm him down and bring some sense to him" (lower middle class Muslim women, no. 3).

These responses seem very positive in the light of my own knowledge of Bangladeshi villages, and I wonder whether the nature of the question being asked meant that women tended to exaggerate the extent of mutual aid, or at least to quote any examples they could think of even though in reality such occurrences might be uncommon. It is certainly true that women have always helped each other in small ways when they could, e.g. lending small amounts of money, rice, being

there during delivery, and helping with cooking and so on, and that these small actions may make a considerable difference in practice to women's lives. Some of the other examples given (taking sick women to hospital, arranging medical treatment, counselling husbands when they beat up wives) seem less likely to happen on a regular basis, if only because few poorer village women have the means to assist in arranging medical treatment, and violent husbands are not necessarily willing to be counselled by neighbouring women.

In fact, when it comes to intervening in cases of domestic violence, women may be quite limited in how much support they can or will give. As we saw in Section 3.1.3, a certain amount of violence by husbands to wives may be regarded as reasonable. I have heard on several occasions of violent husbands arguing along the lines of, "I feed her, clothe her, I will do whatever I like to her. Do you feed her? If not, why are you interfering?"

Neighbouring women cannot also always be relied on to support the wife in cases of domestic violence.<sup>27</sup> They may even take the husband's side and encourage him. Here we should recall that, as we learned from the responses to question 5(a), there is stiff competition among families for suitable grooms for their daughters, and often women are at the centre of this competition.<sup>28</sup> Also studies elsewhere have shown that competition and conflict between women is rife in relation to taking loans and repayments through various NGOs (Rozario 2004b). Such competition, to my mind, is bound to create a major obstacle when it comes to creating any sustainable solidarity among women.

The question of conflict and cooperation within families also barely appears in the FGD responses. There is no reference, for example, to conflict between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, doubtless in large part because of the nature of the focus groups along with the highly structured nature of the guidelines. However, almost all the individual case studies, including those that derived from the workshops, reveal the seriousness of such conflicts between women within the same families, in particular between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law (who are also, in several of these cases, related in other ways, since girls have married their mother's sister's or father's sister's son). Some of the worst forms of violence and oppression exist within these families, creating more problems for solidarity among women. Ruksana's story (see section 3.1.1, above) is a typical example.<sup>29</sup> It is also important to note that most of these cases of violence relate to dowry. Thus one could argue that dowry is not only causing families to become poorer, but also creating serious rift and divisions among women, among relatives.

---

<sup>27</sup> My own interview with a well-off woman in a 'tertiary elite' village in Rangpur revealed that her husband and teenage son prevented her from intervening in cases of domestic violence in the household next door to them.

<sup>28</sup> Thus when a suitable groom and his family come to a village to 'view' a girl and start negotiating for the dowry amount, the parents of other marriageable daughters will often offer a larger dowry than demanded, and/or might start spreading rumours about the character of the girl who is being considered for the marriage, with the aim of getting the man to marry their own daughter instead.

<sup>29</sup> Others include the case studies of Lipi (5) and Shafia (26)

Only one of the FGD responses referred at all to issues of this kind, and this was one of the men's groups, which said that women could not provide support to each other because they were "scared of husbands, or mothers-in-law; they do not have money in their hands; they do not have any power in their hands; they are helpless; and they are motivated by the desire for revenge".<sup>30</sup> I feel that the problems mentioned by this group are more prevalent than was reflected in the other FGD responses and often stand in the way of women cooperating with each other.

In any case, these new problems which have developed in the last few years, like competition for large dowry, for the scarce suitable grooms, fights and conflicts regarding taking loans and repayments are formidable barriers and challenges for women to overcome as they work towards greater solidarity. Dowry also aggravates the existing tension between a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. For example, almost all the case studies reflected on the constant conflicts between the young daughters-in-law with mothers-in-law, and almost all of them related to the demand for dowry or supplementing dowry by bringing more money from the young women's father's homes.

Despite all this, we should not be too negative. For one thing, despite the new competitive situation among village women, what they have is very precious - the ability to cooperate with each other in times of need. We need to find out how to facilitate these cooperative ventures and to multiply and develop them into effective solidarity among women to work towards positive changes in their situation.

Here, RLP's efforts do appear to have had some positive impact. It was noticeable in the responses that, in the areas where RLP has been operating and the women and men have formed into group Rice and Fish FFS group or Homestead groups, through their joint savings ventures and meetings they have been able to cooperate with each other somewhat more than they might have otherwise. They are also more aware of external facilities and have some contacts, which women not served by CARE RLP or other NGOs do not have.

It is clear that to change women's situation, we are up against a very stiff uphill battle, and so we need to find small steps along the way before getting to the top of this hill. There are many big constraints and big problems, most of which are interrelated. The small steps can be development of and facilitation of some of the informal strategies women are already using and to find more informal ways of addressing the problems, which might gradually have an impact on the more bigger and tougher problems like dowry and violence.

Here it would have been useful to have more data and concrete examples of some of women's cooperative behaviour towards each other, especially when it involved

---

<sup>30</sup> I thought they might just mean "jealous," though the term used was *protihingsha*, meaning revenge. This might relate to competition for grooms, spreading of rumours about another's daughters, etc.

women's greater mobility outside the village, e.g. taking a woman to a hospital or doctor. For example, women's mobility outside the village is still a problem, as is access to health care, but many groups gave the example of taking a sick woman to a doctor.<sup>31</sup>

It is largely through some of the case study material, through extra information added by CFs on the FGD responses and some informal interviews I held with different groups that I got a sense of the kind of strategies women were adopting to avoid some immediate or long term problems. A number of these case studies involved collective strategy: the case of Kulshuma who was beaten up and thrown out by her in-laws (see section 3.1.3 above). Other success stories of action due to women's solidarity include a case of wife having been blamed for giving birth to a second daughter, in which the couple were reconciled and now live happily with two daughters; a story from Nilphamary of a marriage without dowry; and a story of prevention of child marriage in 2001 in Pirganj.<sup>32</sup> I also have two case studies of individual women adopting different strategies to avoid aggravating the on-going problems in their marital relationships

The issue of agency of women have to be understood within the constraints women live their lives. Shabana's story illustrates the kind of agency women often exercise on an individual basis to cope with their dire situations:

**Shabana's Story (*Bhalobashia gelam fashia* – "I got trapped by loving")**

Shabana had a love-marriage with her cousin. Her mother-in-law is her *khala* (mother's sister). However, this factor does not protect her. Her *khala* is totally oblivious to Shabana's situation. Shabana said "*biyer par khala shashuri hoye juy*" (after marriage *khala* becomes the mother-in-law).

Shabana has a young son but she is now leading a very unhappy life. Her husband merely uses her as a source of capital, but sleeps with other women. He often beats her up for little or no reason. Once he beat her so badly that she had to be taken to the hospital. Her uncle helped her try to get a divorce. But her husband did not give her the divorce and so they are still married. Shabana said "*bhalobasha koirao medical kortey holo*" (although I had a love-marriage, I had to go to the hospital).

<sup>31</sup> I recall a story from my discussion with some village women in Rangpur in 2004 about how they often uses the tactic of going to the *thana* level hospitals with groups of two to four women and raise voice if they are not given the drugs the sick woman needs. This strategy usually works because the middle-class man serving would be very concerned about the voices of the women being heard by others and attention being drawn to him as the person they are shouting at. This could hamper his status and honour in the eyes of the others, and also there may be a potential risk with his manager or boss. Thus he would promptly serve the women to quieten them down. Note that this kind of strategy would not normally be adopted by the relatively well off (middle class) women, because to do this would to lose their own shame and honour and the honour of their male relatives. So this strategy is only available to poor women who are not shown any respect or honour that they can lose.

<sup>32</sup> This success story of stopping the marriage of a nine-year-old child refers (I think) to the same incident which I referred to in my previous report, and which Andrew Bartlett also refers to (Rozario 2004a: 26 and fn.18).

Shabana's husband has a shop and he often sleeps there with other women. Shabana says that whatever little bit of money he gets he wastes on other women, or whatever - she does not know. She runs her family, by working in other people's households, sewing *kathas* (quilts), working in the field, taking micro-credit and so on. Whenever she has some money in her hand and her husband knows, he will try to take it from her and spend it.

So Shabana has been adopting various strategies to cope with her husband's violence:

(1) Once she hid Tk5000.00 that she had borrowed from BRAC, under the bed. However, her husband found it and took Tk.2000 which he spent on his shop or something. Then Shabana was stuck, since she knows he will not repay the money to her or to BRAC.

(2) Another time her husband asked her to borrow some money from BRAC for him. She knew that he would never pay her back. So she said BRAC would not pay her the money. She actually went to see the BRAC person and told him not to lend the money to her when she comes back with her husband because he would take it and waste it and she would be trapped. She then went to BRAC with her husband and was denied this loan. This way at least she was able to avoid having to get into more debt through her husband.

(3) Since Shabana has realised that her husband is not committed to their marriage, she stopped having any more children after her one son.<sup>33</sup>

(4) Shabana's strategies to deal with her husband's violence: The day we have a fight I take my son with me to the room in the evening – the son (9 or 10 years old) is her only possible protection. At other times, she will wake up her young son from his sleep and make him stand with her. This apparently sometimes works.

From these examples, we can see that Shabana made some significant strategic moves without the knowledge of her husband to cope with her situation of poverty, unhappy and violent marriage: her decision not to have any more children clearly made a difference, for she has to maintain herself and her son; as has her strategy of avoiding getting into more debt through her husband compelling her to take out more loan from BRAC for his enjoyment.

When asked Shabana if the women from the *para* don't come to her assistance when her husband beats her up, she said "The people from the *para*, some come to incite the oppressor, the others may come to help".

Shabana is still a very good-looking woman although she is deprived of basic necessities such as adequate food and nutrition. Her natal family is also very poor. Her sister married a man who already had a wife, and Shabana burst into tears as she said "my sister is also very unhappy, she is a *satin* (co-wife)."

During our open-ended day-long interview with a small group of women in Rangpur, Shabana kept singing about failed love, desire for love - some of her songs go like this:

*Bhalobashia gelam fashia*  
*Sonari chan, pitola ghughu*  
*Jabi kothay palala*  
 (I got trapped by loving  
 golden moon, brass dove  
 where will you escape to?)

*Bhalobasha paoar ashay ashay din gelo*

<sup>33</sup> I assume that she was using contraceptives for this purpose.

*Asha puron holo na*  
 (My days are gone in the hope of getting love  
 but my hope [desire] is not met.)

*Premer jala boro jala goe*  
*oh shokhi shukher dekha pai na*  
 (The pain of love is really painful  
 oh friend, I do not find any happiness.)

Another story of a woman who has managed to extricate herself from a difficult situation is that of Mehennagar. In some ways, Mehennagar's story is perhaps more about economic empowerment than strategy. However, it is really both, in that she used sewing as a strategy of survival and of avoiding getting into any other marital relationship with men.

**Mehennagar's Story: Of Child Marriage, Pressure for Money from Parents, Divorce, Extra-Marital Affairs of Second Husband**

According to the information provided with this little case study, Mehennagar would be 49 or 50 years old now. Her parents were not that well off, and she first married at age 12, about 37 years ago. They had two children (son and daughter) and the family life was running OK. After this her parents in law started to attack and criticise her on every possible occasion and to pressure her for money. Mehennagar says her husband was simple-minded and did whatever his parents or other people told him to. Before Mehennagar could understand what was going on, apparently her parents took a divorce for Mehennagar

She had been living in her parents' house for six years after this. Then her father was involved in some dispute/case related to land. To solve this dispute he resorted to the help of a village leader. During this time the village leader, Suleiman, took advantage of the situation and asked to marry Mehennagar. Despite the fact that Suleiman had a wife, six daughters and two sons, Mehennagar accepted the marriage. She was subjected to violence from her co-wife and other problems in the family, but still she was hoping to live a family life. Her husband apparently slept with her, but forced Mehennagar to have an abortion the five times she became pregnant. But the sixth time, the abortion technique did not work - then she was admitted to a clinic in Dinajpur town hospital. The fear was that this child would also have a right to the father's property. However, Mehennagar decided to keep the baby and went away to her father's house. She had a daughter from this husband, but she did not return to him. She is maintaining her daughter in her father's house.

Apparently Mehennagar said "*Pa jhakalei amar poisha*" (There is money as soon as I shake my feet). This relates to her foot-pedalled sewing machine, which she has been using skilfully to earn an income for herself. She now says, no more husbands' *shangshar* (family); "Rather than being maintained by such husbands, it's much better to be independent and look after oneself". She is not educating her daughter at the school.

From this case, one could see how a skill like sewing, along with backing from her parents who sheltered her in their home can help a woman get by and avoid further violence and problems from a husband and his parents. While I would say that Mehennagar's sewing skill has become a clear source of economic empowerment, it is also true that it is her parents' protection which allowed her to achieve her present sense of empowerment.

It is not clear what happened to her children from the first marriage.

Although the FGD responses did not produce any real stories of the various strategies used by individual women to cope with their situation, I know Shabana's and Mehennagar's stories are not unique. Women all around Bangladesh are adopting or exercising agency to deal with their difficult situations (see Kanji, Bode and Haq 2005).

The question is, can these individual strategies, or the limited signs of collective action described in the FGD responses, lead to some form of genuine empowerment?

## 6 Conclusions and Recommendations: Possibilities for Women's Empowerment

This section begins with a discussion of some of the recommendations from my previous report in the light of the present study. I then look at whether there are any specific avenues that seem particularly worth following given the information from the grassroots level found in the FGDs, workshops and interviews.

### 6.1 *Building Solidarity Against Patriarchy Revisited*

My 2004 report, *Building Solidarity Against Patriarchy* (Rozario 2004a), gave a series of nineteen recommendations, largely on the basis of my discussions with women's organisations in Dhaka and a short field trip to CARE projects in the Northwest, as well as on my own previous research on Bangladeshi rural society.

I was aware at that time that I had had little opportunity to explore the issues surrounding women's empowerment in detail with poor rural women, and the present project was designed in part to fill this gap. As noted in the introduction, the specific methodology which we used had limitations, but the FGD responses, workshops and case-study interviews have nevertheless yielded a substantial body of further information regarding how rural women from the poorer and lower-middle classes see their lives, the problems they are facing and how they might address them.

In this section, I ask whether the discussion and particularly the recommendations of the earlier report still seem appropriate in the light of the present study. Should any of the recommendations receive additional emphasis? Do any of them need revision?

Here I shall mainly discuss those recommendations that are specifically directed towards activities in the rural context. I have omitted several recommendations that are not particularly relevant here,

*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.*

The information from this study has certainly reinforced my sense that dowry is at the centre of very many of the problems experienced by poorer rural women in contemporary Bangladeshi society. At the same time, we should take on board the consistent message from almost all the groups that dowry is a particularly difficult issue to tackle. How can the problem of dowry best be approached?

We should perhaps consider whether a more indirect approach may be more effective at this stage than a full frontal attack. Perhaps we are better off to support and reinforce those areas where women feel that they are able to take effective action, in the hope that once effective women's groups are established, the bigger and more fundamental problems, like dowry, may be easier to tackle.

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

There is clearly wide concern amongst rural women about violence against women, including dowry-related violence, and there seems every reason for CARE to emphasise this theme. At the same time, it is clear that rural society tolerates low-level violence against women and sees it as acceptable, and that men can often get away with considerably more than that. We need to work to raise people's awareness so that *all* violence against women is seen as unacceptable. I provide some more discussion on this in the concluding section.

*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.*

This recommendation still seems to make a lot of sense. Grameen Bank-style microcredit has become a major factor underlying the growth of dowry payments, with all its attendant problems, and runs the risk of pushing rural women and their families into higher and higher levels of debt. Local credit-sharing groups are a much safer way to provide credit, and also help to build up practices of mutual responsibility much more effectively than the Grameen Bank-style model. CARE already has some experience with these groups and I would encourage it to continue to promote them.

*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.*

I still find this an attractive idea, and it has a bearing on several of the problems discussed here, for example the acceptability of low-level domestic violence to women in rural society. The point of the Freirean approach is to sensitise the group to the interests and problems that they have in common, and which are generated by the structure of village society. If women can understand that they have a common interest in dealing with issues such as violence against women, and that

this goes beyond the interests they have as members of their individual families or class, then real collective mobilisation of women would become much more possible. Education which is based on the idea of encouraging women's individual success (e.g. as entrepreneurs), though it may of course strengthen individual women's position in relation to their own family, is unlikely to help much in this direction.

*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.*

There are many indications in the present study that rural women look to UP members, particularly female UP members, for support and leadership. This recommendation seems very relevant.

*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.*

FGD responses often mention the role of imams as people who can provide moral direction and information through their sermons. This recommendation still seems to make good sense.

*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.*

The role of drama, *jatra* and folk song did not come up much in the present study, but I still believe it has considerable potential for presenting new and more appropriate images of women, men and gender relations and getting these through effectively to rural people.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Perhaps some emphasis could be placed here on simple stories where men and women are seen to be cooperating with each other, men asking or consulting their wives on particular issues with successful outcomes, and so on. Stories of successful village women (in their roles as UP member, NGO worker, etc), and the difference these women make to their own families and

*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.*

There was no direct material bearing on this issue, but my feeling is that these problems are very much part of the rural situation, and that anything that leads to greater cooperation and less competition between NGOs is likely to be of benefit.

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

Again, there is little direct material bearing on this issue, but the many very positive responses to the final, unnumbered question on the guidelines ("How did you find this discussion?") suggest something of the positive relationships CARE CFs have established with their local communities with whom they are working. I am sure that this has had an impact in areas such as the high level of interest in education and study which women express both for themselves and their daughters on Question 3.

*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.*

In the light of the considerable awareness of and interest in legal matters expressed throughout the FGD responses, these both seem important recommendations.

*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.*

---

communities both with money and their advice, could also help in raising the value and status of women in the eye of the village *samaj*, including men.

Again, this remains an important recommendation, especially with the growth of education for girls.

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

This is also an important recommendation, particularly perhaps in relation to radio, since television still has limited availability to poorer village populations in many of these rural areas.

*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 GoB and other NGOs.*

This is obviously a very important issue for many rural women. It is closely connected with issues of personal mobility and so also with women's ability to acquire an education (past primary level) and to earn an income. Both of these have been greatly restricted in the past by lack of mobility and are increasingly threatened by increasingly high levels of personal insecurity and "masthanism". I would see this as a major area where women and men in village communities might be involved in campaigns in the near future.

*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.*

Despite its limitations, the present project has I think again demonstrated the value of academic research in accessing important areas of women's experience and understandings. It has also pointed in the direction of further, more in depth village-based studies to explore specific issues (such as security issues, issues specific to Hindu or Adivasi groups, men's unemployment issues, and so on).

## 6.2 Future Directions

In providing some concluding comments on this report, I should point out that when the report was commissioned, I was not asked to provide recommendations as such, but to "capture what rural poor women think are the key issues that put them in vulnerable positions [and] what they would propose could be done to address these issues". I have felt it useful to comment above on the relevance of my

previous recommendations, since these formed the background for the commissioning of the report.

The research for the present report does not provide sufficient basis for further detailed recommendations. It is evident from the FGDs that rural women have some general ideas about possible actions, but that they mostly have little detailed sense of what could be done for these to be implemented. To come up with more concrete and specific suggestions, one would need to work closely over a longer period with the local staff and with specific communities. I will nevertheless end with a few comments on what the material in the report suggests about possible future directions.

1. Village *shalish*, along with legal provision in general, is clearly an important area. If *shalish* procedures were better informed, more sensitive and more appropriate, they could do a lot to relieve the most acute problems women face in rural Bangladesh. Encouraging legal aid groups to work directly with *shalish* might be one useful approach. Encouraging women's participation would also be very desirable, and women clearly see it as essential if they are to get justice from *shalish* courts. The role of UP chairman and members, particularly in relation to *shalish* issues, also needs more research, given the frequency with which women in the FGD responses seem to look to them for intervention. It is difficult to make specific recommendations here at the present state of our knowledge, but this seems to be an important area about which we need to know more and where it may make sense to look for appropriate interventions.

Both women and men are very aware of the existence of legal provisions protecting women against violence, prohibiting dowry, preventing child marriage and so on. There have been many references in the report to women threatening legal action, both individually and in groups, in relation to issues such as child marriage, violence against women, harassment in public spaces, or polygamy. There are also one or two examples of this strategy being effective. It is clear, however, that there are many obstacles in the way of successful legal action by village women, and that threats of this kind run the risk of not being taken seriously. If we want to encourage women to act to enforce the legal protection provided to them, we have to back them up with legal aid and support. A number of effective, well-publicised prosecutions could make a considerable difference, since such cases do not only punish the individual concerned, they also affect the reputation of the family and village.

2. It is clear from responses in the FGDs that women's inability to earn an income and contribute to the family's finances is central to the lack of importance given to their opinions and their welfare within village society. To change this, there is a need to make more concerted effort in creating IGA (income generating activities). As more and more women come to earn a real income in rural areas, parents and husbands' families will gradually begin to see them as assets, rather than burdens,

with implications for their status in their families, and hopefully also an impact on violence against women and on dowry.

3. There are suggestions in the FGD responses that male unemployment is a major issue in fuelling dowry and marriage problems in rural Bangladesh. It would be worth finding out more about this and seeing whether any effective strategies can be developed in this area.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> One option here might be to introduce more support for rural boys who want to stay on at school. Scholarships for girls have evidently made a major impact on female education levels and so on female employment in rural Bangladesh. Similar action for boys might assist men in gaining productive employment, while higher levels of male education might also have a positive effect in other areas such as violence against women. While CARE does not have the resources to undertake anything on this scale itself, it could promote research on and discussion of these issues.

## References

- Banu, Laila Jasmin and Brigitta Bode (2002) "CARE Bangladesh's FFS Approach: New Frontiers in Farmer Empowerment." Paper for *International Learning Workshop On Farmer Field Schools (FFS): Emerging Issues And Challenges*, 21-25 October 2002, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- Bartlett, Andrew (2004) *Entry Points for Empowerment*. CARE, June 2004.
- Bloor, Michael, Jane Frankland, Michelle Thomas and Kate Robson (2002) *Focus Groups in Social Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Bryman, Alan (2001) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kanji, Nazneen with Brigitta Bode and Anowarul Haq (2005) "Women's Empowerment: Perceptions, Boundaries and Strategies in Jalagari village, N.W. Bangladesh." A study for CARE Bangladesh to inform the Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII) on Women's Empowerment. September 2005.
- Nazneen, Sohela (2004) Gender Relations in Bangladesh: The Household and Beyond. Dowry, Women's Property Rights and *Salish*. A Literature Review. CARE Bangladesh, Dec. 2004. (CARE SDU Reports and Studies)
- Rozario, Santi (1995) "Dai and Midwives: The Renegotiation of the Status of Birth Attendants in Contemporary Bangladesh." In Janet Hatcher and Carol Vlassoff (eds) *The Female Client and the Health-Care Provider*, Ottawa: International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Books, pp. 91-112.
- Rozario, Santi (1998) "The Dai and the Doctor: Discourses on Women's Reproductive Health in Rural Bangladesh." In Kalpana Ram and Margaret Jolly (eds) *Modernities and Maternities: Colonial and Postcolonial Experiences in Asia and the Pacific*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp.144-176.
- Rozario, Santi (1999) "Western Feminists, Reproductive Rights and Contraception in Bangladesh." *J. Interdisciplinary Gender Studies*, vol.4, no.1, pp.83-97.
- Rozario, Santi (2002) "Poor and 'Dark', What is My Future?: Identity Construction and Adolescent Women in Bangladesh." In Lenore Manderson and Pranee Liamputtong Rice (eds) *Coming of Age in South and Southeast Asia: Youth, Courtship and Sexuality*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, pp.42-57.
- Rozario, Santi (2003) "Recent Health Reforms in Bangladesh: Will the Community Clinics Work?" In *Women, Health and Poverty in Bangladesh*, ed. by Kazi Hossain and Ehsan Habib. DFID and British Council, Dhaka, Bangladesh, pp.31-56.
- Rozario, Santi Theresa (2004a) *Building Solidarity Against Patriarchy*. CARE, November 2004.
- Rozario, Santi (2004b) "Microcredit, Dowry and Early Marriage: Towards a Research Programme", presented at a workshop organised by the Population Council, New York, held in Dhaka on January 2-4 2004.
- Sherraden, Michael, Deborah Page-Adams, Shirley Emerson, Sondra Beverly, Edward Scanlon, Li-Chen Cheng, Margaret S. Sherraden, Karen Edwards and Lissa Johnson (1995) *IDA Evaluation Handbook: A Practical Guide and Tools for Evaluation of Pioneering IDA Projects*. St. Louis, MI: Center for Social Development, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis.

## Appendix One: From the Terms of Reference

### 1. Background:

RLP has been working with male and female Farmer Field School groups since 1999. In most cases, RLP worked with individual groups for 18 to 36 months. As the program has evolved to address broader livelihood and rights issues, staff has also begun to facilitate awareness raising on gender issues and family law. At the same time female participants have become increasingly empowered through the opportunity for space and interaction with one another and due to their increasing involvement in contributing to household income.

In this way it has led CARE Bangladesh to believe that in order to have significant impact on the lives of women and children, there is a growing need to acquire greater understanding on how to address the issues of vulnerability particularly related to gender. These issues would include domestic and public violence, early marriage, dowry, maternal mortality, malnutrition, divorce and abandonment, low wages etc.

In order to understand more about these issues RLP commissioned a study on *Women's Solidarity and Patriarchy* in late 2004. The primary purpose of the study was to learn how CARE was addressing gender issues within its various programs and what the leading women's organization perceived to be the most critical issues within the country. At the same time, the consultant was to learn about the existence and nature of women's solidarity within Bangladesh. During the study the primary women's organizations within the country were contacted and interviewed. Although the report provides impressions on the level of solidarity (or lack there of) among these organizations there was not sufficient time to learn more about the existing concept of solidarity among rural women.

Similarly the study reviewed what these organizations felt were most important gender issues, but not from the perspective of poor rural women. Although VAW was identified as an important issue and rallying point for these organizations, this did not specifically include domestic violence. And despite the fact that VAW is strongly correlated with dowry and early marriage, dowry was not identified as a critical issue. And yet, rural poor women have identified dowry as a major issue that negatively affects their lives.

This study proposes to learn not only what rural poor women think are the key issues that put them in vulnerable positions but what they would propose could be done to address these.

## **2. Objectives of the Study:**

To identify, analyze and document and learn more about how social and other issues (like domestic and public violence, early marriage, dowry, maternal mortality, malnutrition, divorce and abandonment, low wages etc.) affecting the women and children in their individual and family life and to what extent these contribute to vulnerability particularly related to gender. In addition, the study will also present options on how these issues could be addressed, in the context of the key beliefs within the Bengali culture, and subcultures, which comprise the local patriarchal system.

## **3. Methodology and Implementation Process:**

Within the RLP 6 month extension phase there are 18 paired Community Facilitators in each of 7 districts. One pair of male and female CFs will be chosen from each district and trained to facilitate the Focus Group discussion. All of the district staff will be involved in proposing which of the more “progressive/communicative” groups can be interviewed for this study. FGD guidelines will be developed for both male and female groups. The male group should consist of the male family members of the female group. Staff should ensure that groups consist of and are lead by non-elites; they should be the poorer members of the community. It may be necessary to do a follow up discussion with elites and the extreme poor separately, based on the preliminary results.

The FGDs will be facilitated in 2-3 communities in each district. The group size should be probably be limited to 5-7 persons. One could divide up group members by age and/or socioeconomic status.

## **5. Outputs and Deliverables:**

A 20 to 30-page document synthesizing information what are the issues that have significant impact on the lives of women and children we need to learn more about how to address the issues of vulnerability that are particularly related to gender. These issues would include domestic and public violence, early marriage, dowry, maternal mortality, malnutrition, divorce and abandonment, low wages etc. The report capture what rural poor women think are the key issues that put them in vulnerable positions but what they would propose could be done to address these issues.

## Appendix Two: Focus Group Discussion Guidelines

Community facilitator:	Scribe:	Date:	
District:	Upazila:	Union:	
Village:	Para:		
Control group: Y/N	RLP group: Y/N		
Remote: Y/N	Non-remote: Y/N	Distance from district HQ:	
Primary elite: Y/N	Secondary elite: Y/N	Tertiary elite: Y/N	
Hindu women: Y/N	Lower-middle-class Muslim women: Y/N	Poorer Muslim women: Y/N	
Men: Y/N	Adivasi women: Y/N	Adolescent girls: Y/N	
Number of participants:			
Out of these, how many are	Married women:	Female heads of household:	Unmarried women: Widows: Deserted or abandoned women:

### **A. How Aware Are Women of Their Situation in Society?**

1. Do you think that girls and women are treated differently from boys and men?
  - 1a. How are they treated/viewed differently?
  - 1b. Why do you think women are viewed/treated differently?
2. Do you feel that being a woman has particular advantages, benefits or qualities? What are these?
3. What kind of things would you like to do or have you wanted to do but were unable to do because of the fact that you are a woman? (List these, with the number of women who select each.)
  - 3a. Why couldn't you do or can't you do these things?
4. Do you want your daughters' lives to be different from your own?
  - 4a. How do you want to see your daughters' lives?
  - 4b. What could be done to enable them to have a better life?
5. What are the biggest problems for women today? The women will name the issues in a plenary process but trying to get everyone's input. Then the group will discuss the ranking for the issues and come to an agreement about the three biggest problems, the easiest to change of these and the most difficult to change of these.

Problem	Biggest problem	2 <sup>nd</sup> biggest problem	3 <sup>rd</sup> biggest problem	Which of these would be easiest to change?	Which would be most difficult to change?

5a. What are your reasons for selecting the problem you list as most difficult to change? Have there been any changes over the last five years to this problem?

5b. What are your reasons for selecting the problem you list as easiest to change? Have there been any changes over the last five years to this problem?

**Women's Strategies for Addressing Their Problems:** Based on the responses to the above questions, the following questions are about how they could start addressing the problem identified above as easiest to change.

6. Do you feel men are also concerned about this problem? Why are they concerned?

7. How do you as women, deal with this issue now? Are you doing anything to try and change the situation?

8. How can this issue be most effectively addressed within the community/para? Who can help and how? Within the para and beyond the para?

9. What role can you play to tackle this issue?

10 To address this issue, would it be helpful to have support from the government, NGOs or other organizations? If yes, which organisations and how can they help?

**B. Women's Influence In Decision Making**

11. Do you think that women's opinion is sought or valued in important household decisions? If yes, explain for which decisions, and if not, then what has been the reason?

12. What kind of decisions would you like to be more involved in?

13. If you are more involved in family decision-making, then what will be the difference in your family?

14. Do you think women's opinion is sought or valued in important decisions within the community/samaj?

15. If women were more involved in community decision-making, how would things be different?

### ***C. Women's Solidarity***

16. Do women within your family and community support one another to make things better? If so how, and If not, why not? How could women support one another better?

### ***Conclusion***

How did you find this discussion? What have we learned together?

### Appendix Three: List of Staff Involved in FGDs and Workshops

SL #	Name	Designation	Field / District Office Name
1.	Shahanaj Rozi	Community Facilitator	Thakurgaon District Office
2.	Roksana Parvin	Community Facilitator	Thakurgaon District Office
3.	Farzana Yesmin	Community Facilitator	Joypurhat District Office
4.	Chhanda Rani Sikder	Community Facilitator	Joypurhat District Office
5.	Ferdoushi Zannat	Community Facilitator	Cox's Bazar Field Office
6.	Laxmi Rani Das	Community Facilitator	Cox's Bazar Field Office
7.	Arjuman Ara	Community Facilitator	Dinajpur Field Office
8.	Salma Khanum	Community Facilitator	Dinajpur Field Office
9.	Sabina Yasmin	Community Facilitator	Kurigram Field Office
10.	Bina Saha	Community Facilitator	Kurigram Field Office
11.	Rahima Khatun	Community Facilitator	Nilphamari Field Office
12.	Shaheba Khatun	Community Facilitator	Nilphamari Field Office
13.	Begum Mahmuda Khatun	Community Facilitator	Rangpur Field Office
14.	Shahana Yesmin	Community Facilitator	Rangpur Field Office
15.	M. A. Akandh	Community Facilitator	Rangpur Field Office
16.	Nasima Khan	Program Officer	Rangpur Field Office
17.	Anjuman Ara Begum	Program Officer	Rangpur Field Office
18.	Hera Lal Nath	Program Development Officer	Cox's Bazar Field Office
19.	Md. Abdul Jalil	Program Development Officer	Dinajpur Field Office
20.	Bilash Mitra	Acting Program Manager (M&E)	Dinajpur Field Office
21.	M. A. Malek Khan	Assistant Regional Coordinator	Rangpur Field Office
22.	Golam Sarowar Talukder	Assistant Regional Coordinator	Dinajpur Field Office
23.	Mustafizur Rahman	Assistant Regional Coordinator	Cox's Bazar Field Office
24.	Khaleda Afroz	Program Manager	Rangpur Field Office
25.	A. Mannan Molla	Program Manager	Joypurhat Field Office
26.	Kuntal Barman Mondol	Program Manager	Thakurgaon Field Office
27.	Nurul Amin	Program Manager	Nilphamari Field Office
28.	Arun Kumar Ganguly	Program Manager	Dinajpur Field Office
29.	Swapan Kumar Bairage	Program Manager	Kurigram Field Office
30.	M. A. Halim	Administrative Assistant	Rangpur Field Office