

Promises vs. Realities of Women in Development (WID: Microcredit and Women's Enterprising Work in Rural Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article deals about the relationship between rural women's enterprising work and microcredit in two villages of south-western Bangladesh, named Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur. It tries to understand the local women's perception of entrepreneurial work and examine whether it fits the microcredit lenders' concept of entrepreneurship. Focusing on the case of Grameen bank, as one of the main microfinance institutions of the villages, I aim to see whether microcredit facilities universally promotes rural women's enterprising work or only certain group of women can develop their entrepreneurship capacity through microcredit's support. I also enquire whether the promise of Women in Development (WID) paradigm, which boldly claims that women's participation in paid work will empower them, is valid in my study villages. Drawing multiple cases of rural women's work (around 40 women were interviewed), this article attempts to reveal the politics of microcredit and development in rural Bangladesh. It finds that not all women in rural areas of Bangladesh possess entrepreneurship capacities, and microcredit has varied effect on women depending on their individual standpoints.

Keywords: Microcredit; Development; Rural women; Bangladesh, Grameen Bank.



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1. Introduction

In the context of the economic development of Bangladesh, entrepreneurship is considered as an important aspect of boosting 'economic growth, productivity, innovation and employment', (Sarker and Palit, 2014). Realizing it as a source of the empowerment for the poor women in rural areas, many government and nongovernmental development planners, see it as a 'necessary condition for sound long term economic development' (Kabir and Huo, 2011). They generalize that the poor women possess inherent potential of entrepreneurship and it is the lack of collateral, which hinders their access to credit facilities and thus limits their entrepreneurial capacities. To assist the potential of female entrepreneurs, various government organizations and NGOs such as the Grameen Bank (GB), BRAC (Building Resources Across Communities), ASA (Association of Social Advancement) and others, therefore, works towards providing the poor women with collateral free credit facilities.

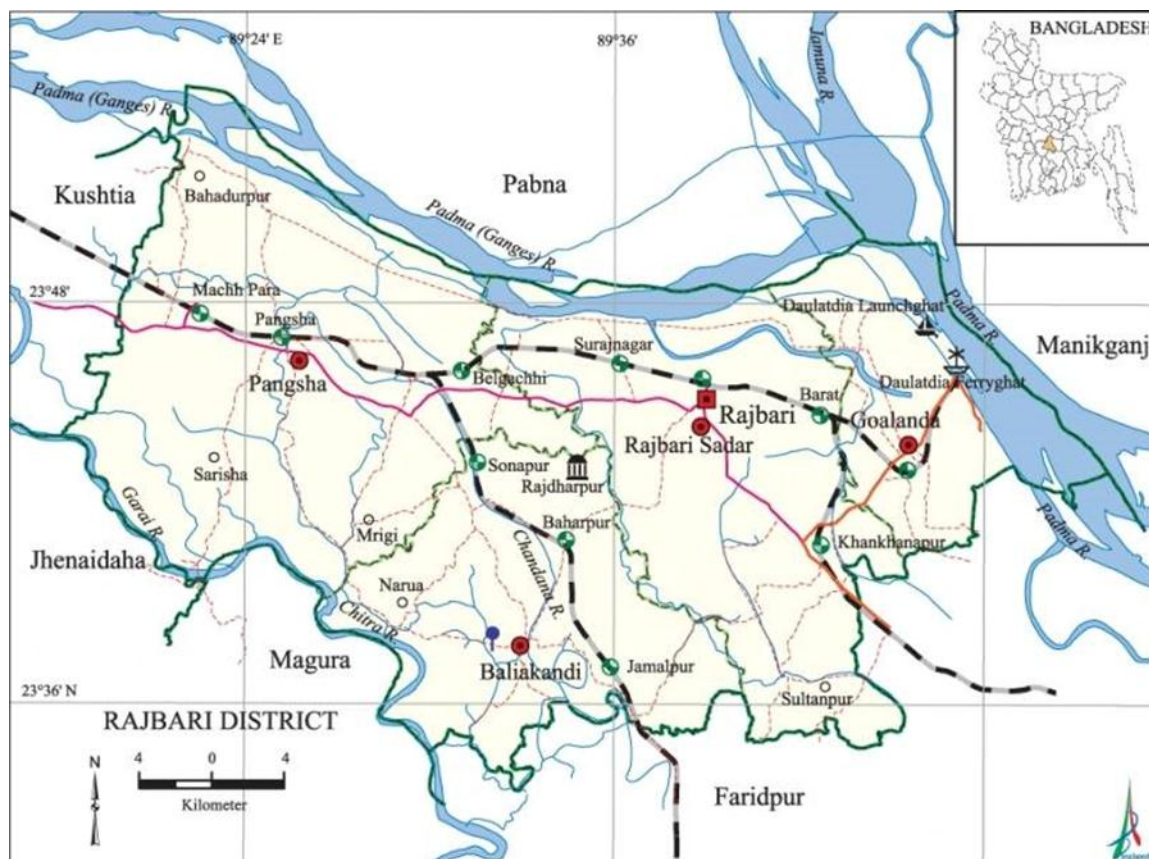
From the perspective of development and economic growth, credit is a source of finance, particularly under capitalism, which provides the poor with the opportunity for material advancement (Fernando, 2006). Since the late 1970s, microcredit has emerged as an important approach to development in Bangladesh in the post-independence era (Hashemi *et al.*, 1996; Kabeer, 2009; Pitt *et al.*, 2003; Yunus, 1998) and many regard it as a panacea for poverty reduction and economic development of the poor (Arun and Hulme, 2009). In 1976, Dr. Mohammad Yunus, a Bangladeshi economist, developed the Grameen Bank model, which was based on group lending. The purpose was to provide loans to poor women in order to increase their financial capital, so that they would be able to act as small entrepreneurs and so participate in the market economy. The way that it was intended to work was that a microcredit loan would be provided to a group of poor women, and one woman would be responsible for collecting the loan installments for the others. As Arun and Hulme (2009) put it, 'it was a bottom-up approach that made the social mobilization of marginalized communities, and particularly women, a main focus'. However, studies by Goetz and Gupta (1996), Rahman A. (1999), Rozario (2002), Karim (2008), Mannan (2010) and Faraizi *et al.* (2011) subsequently point out this scheme had some disappointing aspects, in terms of its understanding of the place of women in the local culture, and the real needs of poor women.

This article aims to understand the local women's perception of entrepreneurial work and examine whether it fits the microcredit lenders' concept of entrepreneurship. Taking the case of Grameen Bank, as one of the main microfinance institutions of Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur, I focus on the impact of the Bank's microcredit scheme on the poor as well as the better off women. I examine some basic problems, starting with: who controls and takes the responsibility for loan repayment, and who are the real beneficiaries of loans. My intention is to understand how women perceive microcredit as an aspect of enhancing their enterprising work, and to enquire into whether such perceptions vary according to social class.

2. Methodology

I conducted my field research at my own village and I had both advantages and disadvantages of my field. I am from a well-off family and my father is a well-known person within the village so I got easy access to well-off families and I also had the opportunity to talk to laborers who work at our agricultural farm. I also did not face accommodation problem. I got much information from the local Grameen bank office at Char Khankhanapur. My first visit to my field was on January 2013 when I was just building rapport with the villagers and was visiting local

branch of Grameen bank. Then I made subsequent visits to my study village on September 2014 and October 2015. It was quite difficult for me to select a key informant for my study. I was known to the villagers so I did not have the problem to enter in the society. But I only had my concern of getting informants from the lower-economic class.



Map: Rajbari district, Bangladesh

For my research I used purposive sampling. This sampling system allowed me to select informant as I needed for my research, which included my set of informants from different stages of society. I took informants from land owning class as well as from labor class. My informants also included people from policy level and from local people. I took total of 40 women regarding them in the center of the household. I tried to be a participant observer so that I could come closer to them and could be a part of their life. While I visited other people's houses, I tried to find out leisure periods of women like noon or afternoon while they were making their dinner. I sat beside them and observed their daily work and talked to them. I always used local terms while talking to my informant because if I talked in *suddo bangla* (appropriate Bangla) that will make a distance between me and my informant, local terms are familiar to them and they also feel comfortable answering in local language. I mainly followed semi-structure interview for collecting my information. I prepared some questions taking my objectives under consideration. Then I carried a small note book in my hand and talked to my informants. I didn't write anything in front of my informants. I came out from their houses and then wrote down some key words in my note books. After returning home, I rewrote every detail. I also used some specific questions for collecting basic information like name, age, education, family members, earning members etc. To collect more intensive and comparative data I use focus group discussions. It helped me getting interactive data and I could be able to get more data at a time. Women were also spontaneous while they were talking in a group. They discussed about their personal life as well as others who were not present there. I separated poor and rich women, older and younger women. I conducted focus group discussions in small groups consisting 3 or 4 women.

Though I was conducting field in my own native village, I experienced both pleasure and pain in my field. I had the opportunity to be close with my village people and invent new part of people's life. I could also know much about women's perception about society, their work and their problems which I never knew before. I had the chance to come closer and I found how they treated me and other women from my social background. Some of them considered me as NGO workers and some of them think I may be from census bureau. I needed time to make them understand. Some women who were from lower economic class felt shy talking to me. They felt I am educated; I may not like their answer. Some of them share their personal problems with me and try to find solution. They told many things which was not related to my study but I let them talk. I had to face some difficulties in availing working class women and men. I had to talk to those women who came from other village, when they took a break within their work hours like lunch time. Sometimes I waited while they processed foods for their family. I also talked to them when they were working in households.

Women from rich family talked about the necessity of purdah (seclusion) in their life and their social position. Younger women talked more spontaneously than older women. Older women talked about their lives and family

problems and also about the recent social changes in women's lives. I recorded the interviews who gave me permission to do so. During focused group discussion, I took permission to record. Above all, I tried to keep myself reflexive during my research.

In the village, women have little or no education. Most of my informants did not have education, some of them complete primary school and few of them complete or attended secondary school. Three of my informants completed their higher secondary and started working in government primary school. Though some of them started school, poverty or early marriage caused drop-outs. Most of my informants are in middle age and some of them are young and few of them are old age. As I was conducting this study to know the perception of enterprising work among women so I tried to include women from all social class. Most of my informants were married and few of them were widow or divorced. I included women from different social class so that I could make a comparative analysis.

3. Discussion and Results

Perception of enterprising work differs among the women of Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur based on their class and caste status. While better off women consider such work as *karbaar* (an enterprise), the poorer counterpart regard it as *chhoto khato babsha* (small business). Usually, the former requires bigger investment than the latter. *Chhoto khato babsha* includes raising livestock, rice husking, vegetable gardening and fisheries on a small scale. Though many poor women do many of these activities as part of their *ghorer kaaj* (household work, when these are done for the market, it turns into *babsha* (business). For some Ghosh (confectioners), Betei (weavers of bamboo mats) and Bagdi (small fishers) women, their work is to complement the *paribarik babsha* (family business). However, enterprises such as poultry raising, fisheries and clothing, if done on a large scale, may become a *karbaar*.

While an entrepreneur, is generally known as the person who 'initiates and establishes an economic activity or enterprise' (Sarker and Palit, 2014), a woman entrepreneur is recognized to be possessing certain characteristics, such as, ability to start a business alone or with one or more partners, eagerness to take financial, administrative and social risks and responsibilities and participate in daily management activities (UNDP, 2004). I argue that such official definition of entrepreneurship reflects the understanding of the microcredit lending organizations and some better off women, who can afford to establish a *karbaar*. Many poor women see their participation in enterprising work in a much simpler way than the above definition suggests. They may start an enterprise, as a form of self-employment, when other paid employment opportunities are not suitable. It can take place as a chance, as a force or as a consequence of an external intervention. This finding confirms that of Parvin *et al.* (2012) who also identify these three aspects among the micro-entrepreneurs of Dinajpur district of Bangladesh. By chance entrepreneurship, they mean starting a business 'without any clear goals or plans', force entrepreneur refers to one who take part in business activities because of the death of an earning person (spouse) or due to financial difficulties and created entrepreneurs correspond to entrepreneurs 'located, motivated and encouraged and developed through entrepreneurship development programmes' (ibid:255). However, there are no female community enterprises in Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur, like the *shangha* (active community based enterprises in the herbal sector, formed and managed by the *dalit* women) of Tamilnadu and Karnataka, India, which requires the women to work out of their house, under a common shed (Torri and Martinez, 2014). For most of the women, the reason for women's participation in home based enterprising work, is its compatibility with their household responsibilities (ibid:33).

Microcredit organizations intend to create women entrepreneurs and involve them in the market economy by providing them with loan facilities. However, many poor women participate in small business such as rearing cows, goats and chickens, making *muri* (puffed rice) and *cheera* (flattened rice), producing home grown vegetables and manage small scale fisheries in household ponds to supplement their family income even if microcredit support is not available. Such finding reflects that of Kabeer (1991) and White (1992). Kabeer (1991) shows that in rural Bangladesh, many poor women are engaged in livestock rearing as it allows to 'transforming their only source, labour power, into a productive asset' and enables them to earn a living. She shows that the practice of share-rearing is a viable form of enterprising work for the poor women where they rear livestock and poultry on behalf of the wealthier households. White (1992) also illustrates that animal sharing is a beneficial enterprising activity for some rich as well as poor women in the rural areas of Bangladesh. For the rich women it provides the scope of an added income without requiring their household labour and for the poor women it acts as a means to 'transform their labour into material assets' (ibid: 79). She suggests that animal share tending gives the women with greater autonomy than other forms of savings and keep livestock assets in female hands.

In Char Khankhanapur, 25 women out of 40 are involved in various types of enterprising works. 10 are from Hindu households and 15 belong to the Muslim households. Among them, 2 Hindu women and 3 Muslim women are better off and manage *karbaar* (poultry business, fisheries, timber plantation, money lending) and rest of them are engaged in *chhoto khato babsha*. 2 women work as *dai* (traditional birth attendants), but they do not see midwifery as an enterprising work as shown in White (1992) research in Tanore district, Rajshahi, Bangladesh. They consider it as *theka kaaj* (informal work) and a secondary activity, as it produces insufficient earning to maintain a living. In Decree Charchandpur, 8 out of 20 women are engaged in enterprising work. 3 women, who are returnee migrants from the Gulf, have set up their own *karbaar* (poultry business, clothing business and money lending), rest of them participate in home based enterprises such as livestock rearing, vegetable gardening and rice business. Money lending is a profitable business for the better off women in both the villages.

In a study of the women based micro-entrepreneurs in garment sector of Ahmedabad, India, Kantor (2005) distinguishes three types of women entrepreneurs, such as, entrepreneurs managing their own enterprises, dependent home based workers who rely on intermediaries to provide their inputs and see their outputs and a mixed group who rely on intermediaries for their inputs but sold their own outputs (Kabeer, 2012). In Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur, most of the women belong to the dependent home based worker category. Only some poor Betei women, who sell their manufactured products such as *kula* (winnowing fan) and *pati* (bamboo mats) in the local markets but depend on men to provide the necessary inputs i.e. bamboo sheets, exhibit the characteristics of the mixed group entrepreneurs. Money lending allows the better off women to become own account entrepreneurs. I noticed that it is often the Grameen Bank's microcredit facilities that enhance the better off women to start *karbaar* and motivate some poor women's *chchoto khato babsha*. Almost all of the enterprising women in Char Khankhanapur and 8 out of 10 women in Char Khankhanapur are members of the Grameen Bank *shomity* (organization) as microcredit borrowers. In the next section, I explain what microcredit is and how the Grameen Bank model of microcredit works to understand its role in the development of women entrepreneurship.

Microcredit and the Women Entrepreneurs

Microcredit is 'the extension of small loans to women for income-generating projects' (Karim, 2008). It offers scopes of self-employment opportunities for the poor women and aims to overturn the conventional banking practice by removing the requirement of collaterals to access credit facilities. Its main idea is to allow the poor women to access credit avoiding the money lenders, who charge high interest rates against the loan provided.

By the late 1970s, the Grameen Bank (GB) appropriated the Women in Development (WID) paradigm of the western development agencies and appeared as the bank 'for the poor women' (ibid:13). Since then, it has started to provide collateral free loans to the poor women and the underlying idea was to involve them in the market economy. The basic features of the GB model of microcredit are to prioritize poor women's access to credit through formation of small solidarity groups of 5 or 6 members, to go to the credit borrowers' doors instead of them coming to the Bank's office, to ensure that no collaterals are required to access loan facilities, to allow the borrowers to repay loans in weekly installments and to let the borrowers apply for bigger loan amounts for succeeding loans (Grameen Bank, 2010). According to this model, the poor women borrowers are taught the importance of managing money and keeping basic accounts of expenditures through microcredit. The weekly meetings also allow them to get 'new forms of identity' (Karim, 2008).

As the Grameen Bank (2011) suggests, once a borrower's group is formed, the bank officials discuss the rules and regulations of the Bank and its loan sanction procedures with the members of the group. They tell the members that at the initial stage, only two members will receive the loan and the group will be responsible not only to ensure that the loan is used for an entrepreneurial purpose, but also to confirm that installments are paid in due time. Thus a member of a group is accountable to one self as well as to the group.

GB Loan terms are fixed at the beginning of the contract, given 12 months of duration to pay the loan installments (Pramanik and Qian, 2012). Borrowers are supposed to pay the installments during the weekly meetings. Though the principal loan amount is divided in 46 equal payment amounts, the borrowers may make early payments of the amounts without penalty or changing the loan conditions. Weekly payment dates and meeting dates are adjusted according to the dates the borrowers decide to pay the installments. However, loan disbursements dates are flexible and can be fixed as any day of the week. Usually, the first payment for a loan is due at the second meeting date instead of the first, to allow the borrowers to manage the amount for the payment of installment (ibid:333). Often the Bank encourages the formation of a group fund, where all group members need to put their money, so that the whole of the borrowing group have the responsibility to repay the loan, if a member defaults (Hulme, 2009). The group members are forced by the Bank either to pay the money or lose access to future loans (Karim, 2008).

GB relies on 'obligatory savings, where a deposit is equal to 2.5% of the loan's value, and that is deducted from the loan, placed in a special savings account, and that cannot be withdrawn for three years' (Johnson and Rogaly, 1997). Another 2.5 percent of the loan value is placed in a personal savings account and in case the loans exceed 8000 taka, there is also a mandatory pension deposit. While the Grameen Bank continues to state that it does not, cannot, and will not accept physical collateral of any kind, the obligatory savings scheme, in effect, acts as a form of loan security.' (ibid: 110). This implies an underlying profit based model, puts the accumulation of capital in the form of savings, as a priority, which may not benefit the poor women. What is the difference between formal banking services and that of the Grameen Bank? State led insurance schemes and banking policies also focus on profit taking and capital formation, through credit services. Common claims of the formal banks and other financial institutions like leasing and insurance companies include promises that money is safe, prizes are offered in the form of bonuses for regular repayments of loan installments and good return on savings at maturity.

The basic idea of microcredit of creating individual entrepreneurs, who with the credit support will become self-employed, own assets and sell her labor on the market, indeed reiterates the neo-liberal ideology of the capital ownership (Karim, 2008). Such idea of entrepreneurship development considers individuals as responsible for the success and failure of an enterprise. In the rural areas of Bangladesh, it has also replaced the patron-client relationship between the rich and poor with the 'neo-liberal discourse of self-help and individual responsibility' (ibid: 14). Though the women borrow the microcredit from the Bank with an interest rate of 16 percent, in reality, they repay the loan with 50-60 percent interest because of the hidden costs associated with the loan such as entrance fees, cancellation fees, late fees and mandatory savings (ibid:17).

GB's practice of profit making through microcredit is evident in the case of 3 women borrowers out of 25 in Char Khankhanapur and 2 out of 8 women borrowers of Decree Charchandpur. I illustrate here the case of Aloka, a Hindu widow of Char Khankhanapur. Aloka had always maintained a good record of loan repayment with Grameen Bank having about 15,000 taka (1 taka= 0.0074 GBP) in her savings account. At her youngest daughter's marriage she tried to withdraw the money, but was refused by the bank officials, and was harshly treated when she asked for the return of her savings. She moaned that she started to save money in her saving account on the basis of the Bank's assurance that she could get the money during her crisis. But, her incapability to withdraw the savings made her believe that instead of benefitting the poor women like her, the Bank was trying to make its own business. She was feeling repentant for not making any traditional savings such as investments in livestock and assets such as land. She could not go to the court fearing that the Bank officials would harass her.

Aloka's case not only signals the abusive aspect of the GB microcredit, it also emphasises on the indigenous forms of savings with assets, such as domestic animals, jewelry and sometimes by cultivating fruit and wood trees. Mannan (2010) identifies this as a form of 'hidden cash-in kind' with a guaranteed market value. Aloka's statement about Grameen Bank's deposit policy highlights the fact that the concept of obligatory savings, which women refer to as *lal joma* (red savings account), is limiting access to their money, rather than providing them with a source of finance in difficult times. In such cases, the bank is exploiting them, instead of benefitting them, and so leaves them vulnerable, particularly in times of crisis.

Similarly, the story of Shaheda, exemplifies how some poor women are unable to claim the savings of the deceased borrowers. Shaheda is the eldest daughter of Rahima Bewa – a widow and a Grameen Bank microcredit borrower from Decree Charchandpur. After the sudden death of Rahima in a road accident on November, 2011, Shaheda went to the bank's office to claim the deposited sum of 12,000 taka, which her mother had in a personal savings account. She pleaded with the bank officials many times to let her have the money, but they refused her telling that she needed to show her birth certificate as a proof she was Rahima Bewa's daughter. Since Shaheda did not have the certificate, she could not claim her mother's money. Moreover, the bank officials were rude to her, and told her that when a member dies her account transactions are closed, and all the money goes to the Dhaka head office. For Shaheda, and women in similar circumstance, microcredit has, thus, been turned into 'micro theft', clearly indicating lack of flexibility of the loan system, and the Bank's latent interest in capital accumulation, by not returning the savings of the poor to the poor. These findings, also, refute the Grameen bank's basic claims that it benefits the poor, in terms of savings for the future, and transforming their savings into financial capital. When I followed up the cases, like that of Shaheda, with the GB officials, they mentioned that it was against the GB policy to release the deceased borrowers' savings to any of the claimants of their families without any valid evidence showing their relationship with the deceased member. I argue, that in rural areas, where having birth certificates is not a common practice among many poor women, such policy of GB is indeed devious and exploitative.

GB's non-flexibility of microcredit lending is evident by its rigid weekly repayment policy, as I observed at the local branch of the Bank at Char Khankhanapur. The borrowers need to repay the instalments in time, as the Bank officials do not allow them any slack. If one fails to repay within the set period, the loan collection officers seize all their belongings and assets without considering sudden changes in their economic circumstances such as crop failure, ill health or any other adversity. Therefore, many poor borrowers (15 out of 25 in Char Khankhanapur and 4 out of 8) compare these officers with *jamindari izaradar* (feudal tax collectors), who were merciless, when taxing poor peasants during the Feudal Period (known as *jamindari amol*). As the successful, better off borrowers (5 out of 25 in Char Khankhanapur and 3 out of 8 in Decree Charchandpur) could pay the instalments in due time, they did not experience the harshness of the GB loan collection officers. Yet, they were aware that being a defaulter could be disastrous.

Rozina, a poor woman, from Decree Charchandpur and a defaulter of a loan, provides a classic example of the non flexible and abusive loan collection practice of the GB loan officers. Last year she borrowed 5000 taka, with an interest rate of 16%, from the Grameen Bank, to buy a goat to raise some income from its breeding. As she had no literacy, she just put a thumb stamp on the loan paper when she received the money. The loan sanction officers told her that she would need to pay 5,750 taka with 6 monthly installments of 958 taka, divided into 24 weekly installments, of 240 taka. She agreed and took the loan with the hope of repaying it from the income she would get from the goat breeding and rearing. However, after she bought the goat it fell ill and died in a month. When she notified the loan sanction officer about it, he told her that it had nothing to do with the bank and she had to pay the installments any way. She took the loan to supplement her husband who was a poor share cropper. However, because of her failure to repay the second and subsequent two installments, the GB loan collection officer not only insulted her, as well as her husband, but they also took away the chickens as compensation. The chickens used to serve as a small income source for her family, and provided some nutrition for the children. She pleaded several times to the collection officers to consider her economic crisis, and allow some time to repay the loan later, but they did not listen to her. According to her, they behaved like the brutal '*jamindari ijaradar*' (feudal tax collector) and '*lathiyal*' (thugs) working for the '*new jamindar*' (the Bank) during loan collection. They did not show any *doya* (kindness) and were only concerned with the recovery of the loans.

Rozina's experience questions GB's updated repayment policy, which was implemented as a consequence of the 1998 monsoon flood in Bangladesh, to compromise the situation of the numbers of loan defaulters (Roy, 2010). It proposed to install 'considerable repayment flexibility, loan rescheduling and customized loans', where borrowers could return the loan amount many months later, when due to difficult economic situations they fail to repay loans (ibid: 110). However, as the above case indicates, such a flexible repayment system is not in practice at the Bank's local branch in Char Khankhanapur, which is causing poor women, like Rozina, considerable distress. The GB

officials claimed that the reason behind such gap between the policy and the practice was the pressure from their senior officials at the headquarter to recover loans from the defaulters. If they would fail to show the loan recovery, the defaulters' amount could be deducted from their salaries. Such scenario reiterates the findings of Karim (2008), who notices that ending up with too many defaulters in a branch, might lead to loss of jobs or glass ceiling its manager and other officials.

Most women regard microcredit as *reen* (a loan) and personal loans from relatives and neighbours as *dhaar* (borrowing). *Reen* needs to be repaid within fixed period but *dhaar* can be repaid in a convenient time of the borrower. Often people consider *dhaar* as informal loan with flexible repayment opportunity whereas *reen* is regarded as formal. They define buying on credit from local markets as *baki*, which according to Mannan (2010) is 'purchase of goods based on social knowledge and familiarity'. Savings or *joma* is a concept more common for the rich, than the poor who focus more on everyday living expenditures.

Fig.1. Loan installments being collected at the local Grameen bank's loan collection centre, Char Khankhanapur



Women borrowers categorize *reen* as *shohoj reen* or *babsha reen* (any purpose loan with set interest repayment rate of 16%) and *poshu reen* (loan for animal purchase with 16% interest and repayment period of 6 months). According to some poor women borrowers in Char Khankhanapur (10 out of 25), these *reen* arrangements enhance the status of the non-poor women. Romela, a poor woman borrower of *shohoj reen* at Char Khankhanapur explained the situation. According to her, in 2010 she borrowed 10,000 taka from GB as *shohoj reen* to start a small fishery in her homestead pond. At the same time Aklima, one of her richer neighbours also took similar loan for enterprising a clothing business. Though Romela was supposed to make a good profit, the fish died due to the contaminated water running to the pond from a neighbour's field. She faced great difficulty in repaying the *kisti* (installment and interest) on time. However, Aklima could repay all the *kisti* regularly, despite having poor annual sales from her shop that year. She had savings in the form of domestic animals, land, jewelry and cash. It was easy for her to repay the *kisti* from her personal and family savings. For Romela it was difficult to do so as she had only a few chickens and no entitlement to assets, such as land or, jewellery, or cash savings like Aklima. The only source of income of her family was from the small piece of agricultural land, which provides her family with a meagre living.

Romela's case exemplifies the fact that though Aklima and she had different economic circumstances, the GB officials treated them equally, during loan sanction and collection. They hardly take into consideration the multiple realities of the borrowers and their individual capacities as entrepreneurs. While a rich woman like Aklima can benefit from the GB microcredit by investing it in a new enterprise, without encountering economic difficulties for loan repayment, some poor women like Romela suffers financial hardship and fall below the poverty line, losing little they own, such as livestock and household resources during forced loan repayment. They, consequently, become indebted to *mohazaan* (money lenders), to manage their *kisti* (installments and interests) which increases their economic vulnerability, having to repay the debt at very high interest (as high as 120 percent). Among the 25 women borrowers of Char Khankhanapur, 7 women had to take the loan from the local money lender to repay the instalments. 3 out of 8 women borrowers in Decree Charchandpur also had similar experiences. Romela and Aklima's circumstances overturn the generalized assertion of the GB style microcredit, that all women possess entrepreneurial skill and it is always beneficial for them in terms of generating income. Their experiences also reflect the findings of Torri and Martinez (2014) among the female entrepreneurs of India which show that the ability of a woman to transform her life through access to financial services depends on different factors, such as her individual situation and abilities, her environment and her status of women as a group.

Though microcredit's main target is to develop the entrepreneurial capacity of the poor women in rural areas, microcredit lending institutions often prefer to provide loans to non-poor women because of the better chances of repayment, without unpleasant experiences during the collection of repayment loan installments, and this makes banking profitable (Rahman I. R., 1997; Wright and Dondo, 2003). For instance, Tandra Sarkar, one of the loan collection officers of Grameen Bank, asserted that the Bank preferred women borrowers from good earning families as they were regular in their installment payments. They were good borrowers and would not need to be reminded, or forced, to repay loan installments in time. For some poor borrowers she and other officers had to face difficulties,

and undesirable situations, during the collection of the installments. According to her and 3 other officers, some poor women may not use the loan for business activities; they would just spend it and end up to be defaulters. If they would be kind, they could never recover loans.

Tandra Sarkar's statement indicates the capitalist mentality of GB where the emphasis is laid on the recovery of loan and interest. The Bank's preference for the non-poor borrowers also overshadows the promise of microcredit to enable the poor women to access credit facilities. It suggests that there exists a gap between the official practice and actual practice of microcredit lending which is guided by the lack of understanding of the complex realities of the poor women's lives. For some non-poor and poor women, microcredit may be used to enhance an existing enterprise, but for the very poor women, who barely fulfill the necessity of their everyday living, how can microcredit be used in an enterprising work instead of meeting the urgent needs such as food, clothing, medicine and others? Even if a poor woman possesses entrepreneurial skill, without being fulfilled with the basic needs, it may not be possible for her to participate in any enterprising work. This supports the finding of Karim (2008) who shows that in rural Bangladesh, only certain categories of women are benefitted from microcredit, such as, rural middle class women, women with marketable skills, women whose husbands have marketable skills and women, whose husbands have a regular employment and pay the installments.

Control on Microcredit and Women's Enterprising Work

To understand whether microcredit enhances poor women's participation in enterprising work, it is important to examine whether they have control over their loan and can invest it in establishing an enterprise. While several studies (Goetz and Gupta, 1996; Karim, 2008; Rozario, 2001;2002) show that though women are the borrowers of microcredit, it is the men who use the credit, microcredit lending organizations such as the Grameen Bank, officially do not acknowledge this reality. Drawing on Karim (2008), I argue that the reason behind this is the 'western aid mandate' which supports the WID policy of involving women in the development process and the tendency of showing the statistical figures and images of women in the reports, to reflect their increasing participation in income generating, enterprising work.

One of the reasons of targeting the poor women as microcredit borrowers is the understanding that they are bankable. Other reasons include that they can be easily located for the loan recovery purpose (Goetz and Gupta, 1996) and are vulnerable to repayment pressure by the peer groups and loan collection officers (Karim, 2008; Rahman A., 1999). Some poor women are less mobile and hence considered submissive, because of their patriarchal social backdrop. Such criteria of the selection of microcredit borrowing confirms the finding of Karim (2011) that 'women are effectively subjected to two sources of authority in the microcredit relationships: the social authority of the borrower group and patriarchal authority of the household'. However, I noticed that many poor women (9 out of 25 in Char Khankhanapur and 3 out of 8 in Decree Charchandpur) are not as docile and vulnerable as the above studies show. They often argue with the loan collection officers and other women of the peer groups to negotiate the installment payment date. Sometimes, they willingly remain absent from home and make the officers wait to collect the installments.

In an attempt to investigate whether the women borrowers have always control over their loans, I follow Hashemi *et al.* (1996) idea of 'loan control' and Goetz and Gupta (1996) concept of 'managerial control'. Hashemi *et al.* (1996) define control over a loan, in terms of control over funds rather than control over productive activities involving the loaned money and Goetz and Gupta rank loans on a five point scale: full control, significant control, partial control, very limited control and no involvement. 'Full control' is where women, who are, directly, involved in market activities, take and use a loan. 'Significant control' is when women have a say on using a loan, but do not participate in the market. 'Partial control' refers to the loss of control over the loan use, except for labour input. 'Very limited control' means little labour input in the use of the loan. 'No involvement' means what it says, no involvement in the use of the loan.

I found that women's control over loan use depends on their social class and marital situation. Some rich women (5 out of 25 in Char Khankhanapur and 3 out of 8 in Decree Charchandpur) have 'significant level of control' over their loans when initiating small businesses, such as raising poultry, grocery stores at the local market, and buying domestic animals for share-rearing. There are, also, cases where women from affluent households (3 out of 25 in Char Khankhanapur and 2 out of 8 in Decree Charchandpur) take loans to finance their husbands' business expansion, and so have partial control over it. Among the well off, as well as the poor, those who are single, divorced or widowed, with no male partner or relative, have greater control over loan use. It is some poor women (4 out of 25 in Char Khankhanapur and 2 out of 8 in Decree Charchandpur) who, irrespective of their marital status, have minimal, or no control, over loans but are involved in small scale home based enterprising work, such as rice husking and livestock rearing. For instance, Rukiya, a poor woman of Char Khankhanapur borrowed 3000 taka to help her husband buy a rickshaw, to earn their livelihood. She admitted that she borrowed the loan, but knew that the money was not for her. She had neither any contribution of labour in the investment of her loan nor any control over the loan funds. But, she claimed that bringing the loan to her husband enhanced her position in the household.

Rukiya's case confirms the finding of Goetz and Gupta (1996) that transferring loans to husbands or other male relatives is a survival strategy for many poor women to secure their marriage and improves their status within the household. It also support the claim that Rozario (2001) makes about the centrality of marriage in women's lives in rural Bangladesh. Rukiya's loan transfer to her husband indicates the importance of marriage in her life rather than starting an enterprising work. This suggests that marriage remains the most acceptable form of social identity for the adult women in Bangladesh (ibid:xxii).

Whether or not poor women like Rukiya have control over their loans, they are often responsible for repaying the installments. If they transfer the loan to the men of their households and the men do not pay the installments, they face difficulties to repay the loan without any economic support. So it is important to understand their microcredit experiences in depth, to learn whether microcredit ensures poor women's participation in enterprising work and improves their lives. In the next section, I show the variety of women's experiences of microcredit and enterprising work to complete the picture.

Effects of Microcredit: Enterprising Work and Women's Experiences

While microcredit promises to enhance poor women's participation in enterprising work and empower them through self-employment opportunities, in reality, not all women's experiences reflect such claims. Mahmood *et al.* (2014) show that among the female entrepreneurs in Pakistan, microcredit facilities can have a positive effect on income generating activity only if their familial and social conditions do not suppress their independence and mobility and do not hinder their attempts to start the enterprising work. I noticed a similar situation in Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur, where, whether a woman can participate in an enterprising work and be benefitted from the microcredit, depends on her individual circumstances within the family and the society. Not all women can be successful in enterprising work (Kabeer, 2012). The reason behind this is not necessarily that they do not possess *babshayik buddhi* (business skill). There can be several other reasons such as family obligations and responsibilities, difficult economic circumstances, lack of family support and bargaining power within the family, that do not let some women to start an enterprising work with the support of microcredit.

As Faraizi *et al.* (2011) suggest, microcredit started to target poor women in rural Bangladesh, defining empowerment as 'an institutional environment that enables women to take control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology'. By material assets, they mean control over land, water, forests, labour and money. Intellectual resources mean knowledge, and information. Control over ideology, according to them signify 'the ability to generate, propagate, sustain and institutionalize specific sets of beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviour; virtually determining how people perceive and function, within a given socio-economic and political environment' (ibid: 17). They claim that microcredit only increases women's income and do not provide them with the control on their own resources in terms of changing their status and position within their communities (ibid 19-25, 115, 116). My findings oppose such claim. For instance, I noticed that among the successful women entrepreneurs (10 out of 25 in Char Khankhanapur and 5 out of 8) in Decree Charchandpur had greater control on their resources such as their business inputs and enjoyed improved social status within their families and the community. They were also consulted about family affairs and were evaluated as the key decision makers by their family members.

Some women (3 out of 25 in Char Khankhanapur and 2 out of 8 in Decree Charchandpur) understand 'control' on economic resources, such as credit, as a concept possessed by men, rather than women, as men are usually the heads of households. For example, Nargis, a poor woman from Decree Charchandpur, said that as long as she and her family members could stay healthy and eat properly, she would not need to participate in the market economy; neither would she like to control assets, such as land or money. If her husband could manage the family needs, then she would not need microcredit and participate in *babsha* (business) to earn money. Rahman A. (1999) also highlights that many rural women in Bangladesh see controlling money as a male matter, and though they can get credit, they pass the loans to men, and relinquish control, because they expect the men of their families to care, protect and maintain them. He reports that many poor women would not become microcredit borrowers, if their husbands were allowed to have direct access to such credit facilities. That microcredit is socially perceived as a male issue is also evident in Mannan (2010)'s findings. He reveals that women not giving the money received as microcredit, to male members of their families, shows *be-adabi* (bad etiquette). I noticed that some men and women see women's possession of assets such as land, shops or houses by themselves, as *chhalak mohila* (cunning women). They consider women, who have male relatives to help them negotiate any purchases of land and domestic animals, as *bhalo* (good).

The motivations that influence women into enterprising work vary significantly. While the more successful entrepreneurs prioritize their enterprising work for its 'earning potential', the less successful ones take such work as secondary activity as an attempt of livelihood diversification (Kabeer, 2012). Among the 25 women in Char Khankhanapur, 10 women who were successful considered their enterprising work as their main income generating work, 5 women were successful initially but could not retain the success for long, and the rest attempted to start enterprise but were unsuccessful. In Decree Charchandpur, 5 out of 8 women successfully maintained their enterprise work and generated good income, 2 women were moderately successful and 1 woman remained unsuccessful. I noticed that those who were successful had a positive attitude towards microcredit and its role in their enterprise development. However, those who were less successful or unsuccessful, made ambivalent interpretations of it. For instance, Rasheda from Char Khankhanapur and Laila from Decree Charchandpur had ambiguous idea about the effect of microcredit on their *babsha* (business). Rasheda took a loan of 7000 taka (GBP 70) from the Grameen Bank (GB) on December, 2013, to start a small scale poultry business. For the first three months, she made a good profit out of it, but after that, as her husband fell ill, she had to take the responsibility of the household expenditures. She could not manage to make a profit from the *babsha* after fulfilling her daily necessities and paying the loan instalments. She failed to pay two consecutive instalments on time and had to experience the harshness of the loan collection officers. For her, microcredit was helpful when it helped her to start the *babsha*, but turned into a trouble when she became incapable to repay the loan because of the sudden changes in her household situation.

Laila borrowed 5000 taka (GBP 50) from GB on January 2014, to start a *muri babsha* (puffed rice business). She thought that she would get a good income from the *babsha* and repay the loan with interest. However, her elder

son could not sell the *muri* at the local bazaar with a profit. According to her, as her son was not *chhalak* (clever) and had no *buddhi* (skill) to sell the *muri*, she could get only half of the production cost. It was very difficult for her to meet her household needs and pay the loan instalments with the money she got from the *muri* sale. She asked the Bank officers to allow her some time to repay the loan, but was refused. To pay the first few instalments of the loan, she therefore started selling *muri* at the *bazaar* (except the weekly markets) by her and managed to make some profit. However, she found that after the payment of the loan interest, she was facing money deficit and could not invest further in her running *babsha*. She claimed that though microcredit helped her to start the *muri babsha*, it was because of the high loan interest, that she could not make sufficient income from it. When she was asked if her *muri* selling would deplete her *izzat* (prestige), she mentioned that necessity was more important than *izzat*. According to her, if she could not repay the loan and lose the income from business, she would lose the *izzat* anyway.

Rasheda and Laila's case suggest that whether a woman can be benefitted from an enterprising work depends on their individual circumstances. Rasheda had positive experience of microcredit and her business when she was making a good income and had no difficulties with making regular payment of loan instalments. But, the same person experienced it negative, when her family responsibilities increased and payment of the instalments was becoming harder. Similarly, for Laila, though microcredit provided the positive experience of starting a small business, the money deficit, followed by the payment of its interests, led to a negative evaluation of microcredit's effect on her enterprise development. Both the cases indicate that women's circumstances are not static and change over time. Hence, women understand their world from multiple standpoints and the interpretation of their life experiences reveal multiple subjectivities. The cases also reflect the significance of men's support in women's lives in rural Bangladesh. In case Rasheda's husband did not become ill and could the income support for the household needs, she could repay the loan instalments on time and could continue the success of her poultry business. Laila's case also highlights that as the lack of her son's marketing skill put her *muri* business in distress, her involvement in the *muri* marketing was necessary to run the business. While Nawaz (2012) shows that in rural Bangladesh, women entrepreneurs are bound to follow the cultural code of *purdah* and are restricted to go outside their homes to get involved in entrepreneurial activities; Laila's participation in *muri* marketing in the local market opposes such finding. Though she is aware that *purdah* exhibits honour and prestige, for her livelihood necessity, she has to negotiate the *purdah*, which is seen as a 'direct manifestation of male control' (Kabeer, 2009).

To gauge the effect of enterprising work on women's overall status, I examine the relationship between microcredit and enterprise development and the impact of microcredit on their lives. I also follow the three point scale developed by Kabir and Huo (2011). Based on the indicator, such as the ability of expending on life sustaining articles, such as food, clothes, health care and children's education, Kabir and Huo determine the impact of the involvement with enterprise activities on the women of Mymensingh district of Bangladesh at three levels - high, medium and low. According to them, the high impact refers to the ability to spend generously on the daily necessities, future savings and leisure facilities, medium impact indicates the ability to make moderate investment on these and low impact means the ability of spending the minimum for the items required for the maintenance of their lives as well as those of their households. Though I found that it was not always easy to draw a clear line between the impact level of high and medium, it was convenient to understand the difference between the high and low impact. In some cases, for example, among the unsuccessful entrepreneurs, I noticed no impact of enterprising work on women's lives. Among the 10 successful women entrepreneurs in Char Khankhanapur, enterprising work had high impact on the lives of 6 women and medium impact on the remaining 4. 5 women entrepreneurs who were neither successful nor unsuccessful, experienced low impact of enterprising work on their lives. In Decree Charchandpur, out of 5 successful women 3 reported their ability to spend sufficiently on food, cloth, children's education, health care and recreational facilities; whereas 2 other said that their enterprising work had medium impact on their lives. 2 moderately successful women claimed that their enterprising work had low impact on their overall status.

One of the main reasons of experiencing medium or low impact for some women was the influence of the decision of their husbands and in-laws on their ability to expend. For instance, Mollika, from Decree Charchandpur was successful in her livestock rearing business. She started it with the GB loan of 6500 taka (GBP 65) and increased it to 11000 taka (GBP 110) using her *babshayik buddhi* (business skill) and hard work. Her husband possessed the knowledge of animal care and had good marketing skill. This was a great support, which helped her to succeed. She and her husband consulted with each other regarding the advancement of her business. However, the decision of how the income would be spent depended on her husband. Though she wanted to spend more on her children's education and make some future savings, her husband decided to put the money for his sister's wedding. At first, she did not want to accept the decision, but finally agreed for the sake of maintaining peace within the family.

Mollika's case illustrates the situation of many poor women in rural Bangladesh, for whom maintaining family peace is more significant than expressing independence and equality. This put a brake on the gender equality idea of the WID policies which suggest that women's equal participation in income generating opportunities increase their status. Mollika's preference for family peace substantiates the Black/Asian women's standpoint. For many Black and Asian women though family may reproduce inequality, it is also a means of support. As Humm (1992) puts it, for many black women, 'community is not a fragile concept but a source of care and emotional strength'. It is an 'engaged vision' of their world opposed to the 'dominant ways of thinking' (Ruddick, 1995). Mollika's case also confirm the finding of White (1992) in Tanore district, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, which show that women who successfully run businesses may gain recognition for their success within the family and the community, but it is 'tied to the household, rather than to their personal interest'.

I argue that the relationship among microcredit, participation in enterprising work and improvement of women's status is ambiguous. Though for some women, participation in home based, traditional business with the support of microcredit may build 'social capital, create awareness and enhance their capability to uplift their position within the family and society' (Sultana *et al.*, 2010), for others, it may deteriorate the existing social networks. This is reflected in the basic requirement of GB microcredit lending to poor women, to attend weekly meetings. The main reason for arranging such meetings is to collect the loan installments, but they also aim to promote women's participation in a group of borrowers, and increase their social networks. However, some women (10 out of 25 in Char Khankhanapur and 4 out of 8 in Decree Charchandpur) do not find them helpful, since they cost the time normally allocated to domestic tasks. Many of them do not want to attend long meetings. For instance, Amena, a Grameen bank microcredit borrower in Char Khankhanapur, said that attending weekly meetings made it difficult to manage her everyday household work. By attending meetings which are set at mid-noon, she could not cook the day's meal in time for which her husband and her mother-in-law complained. As she said, '*I feel uncomfortable when weekly meeting date approaches. I know I shall have to face hard time for this*'. Similarly, Asmani, from Decree Charchandpur, complained about being verbally abused for attending the weekly meeting. Her husband did not want her to attend the weekly meetings because he thought that she would go there to escape her household responsibilities and pass time in gossiping with other women. However, for other women like Jainab, Rani, Koli and others, the weekly meetings offered a chance to meet other women and share their ideas and experiences with each other. For them, the meetings allowed them to have the scope of having their own space where they could freely interact, avoiding the intervention of the men of their households. Moreover, going out to attend the meetings made them feel that they were 'working' and had their individual identities. But, they, too, reported that sometimes, because of attending the meetings, they could not manage the household chores properly, which caused conflict within the households.

Both Amena and Asmani's accounts highlight the negative effect of microcredit on their lives in terms of deteriorating social relations within their families. The accounts suggest that their husbands do not realise the importance of attending the meetings, though they may be interested in their wives' membership in GB. If a good life for them means receiving good social treatment from the family members, microcredit appears to be causing disruption in their lives, by increases chances of ill behaviour towards them. However, the statements of Jainab, Rani and Koli indicate that attendance in weekly meetings has mixed connotations on their lives. On the one hand, it increases their sense of self worth and creates a separate domain for them, which is friendly and cooperative, on the other, it affects their household responsibilities negatively. Such diversity of women's experiences reflect the claim of Rozario (2002) that though microcredit may 'individually empower' many women in rural Bangladesh in terms of increasing their self worth, it is 'limited' and may not necessarily be 'sustainable in the long run'.

8 women out of 25 women in Char Khankhanapur and 4 out of 8 women in Decree Charchandpur reported that their access to microcredit and the income from their enterprising work had decreased the chances of domestic violence. They claimed that their participation in *babshaik kaaj* (enterprise work) and the money produced from it, had improved the standard of living of their families. For instance, Rokhsana, a better off woman, from Char Khankhanapur said that before she was a microcredit borrower from the GB and had no visible income from her vegetable gardening business, she had to depend solely on her husband's income to spend on individual and household necessities, which sometimes led to household conflict. But, her new found identity as a business woman and the income from the business, improved the consumption pattern of her family members. Her two sons could attend the colleges in Rajbari town and on January 2015, the sale of her mahogany trees worth of 10,000 taka (100 GBP) allowed her to support the expansion of her husband's clothing business in the local bazaar. Her ability to make economic contribution in the family improved her relationship with her husband and reduced scopes of domestic violence. However, for some other women (5 out of 25 in Char Khankhanapur and 2 out of 8 in Decree Charchandpur), participation in microcredit based enterprise work had negative consequences. For example, Siddika, another better off woman from Char Khankhanapur, experienced family conflict because of her access to microcredit loan and participation in the fisheries business. Though she was a successful women entrepreneur and could manage to earn sufficient income from it, her husband and mother-in-law wanted to control the loan and the income. Moreover, her husband wanted her to transfer the ownership of the pond to his name which she bought from her neighbour for starting the fisheries business. She did not want to transfer the ownership to her husband because she knew that he would sell the pond and invest the money in his younger brother's business. Regarding the asset ownership, tensions were created between she and her husband and lead to family violence when her husband started abusing her verbally and physically.

Rokhsana and Siddika's case suggest the variation of women's experiences of microcredit and participation in enterprise work within a same class. Both belong to the affluent households but because of their individual positions in the families, they are subject to differential impact of enterprise work on their lives. For Rokhsana, participation in vegetable gardening business allows her to make economic contribution in family and get a new identity, which increases her self confidence. But, for Siddika, her access to microcredit and fisheries business does not indicate such positive connotation on her status. Her asset ownership threatens her husband's authority and fuels domestic violence. Rokhsana and Siddika's stories reflect the finding of Schuler *et al.* (1998) and Kabeer (2001). Schuler *et al* show the evidence that in rural Bangladesh, though credit programmes may reduce violence by directing resources to families through women, in some cases, by providing resources to women and encouraging maintaining control over the resources, they may lead to domestic violence. They identify that giving women the power to own and control resources may trigger men's violent behaviour towards women as women's control over resources can be interpreted by men as undermining their authority. Kabeer notes that among the women of Faridpur and Mymensingh district,

registration of male assets in women's name can have mixed impact on women, that is, for some women it increases their evaluation within families but for others it means source of conflict.

For the women entrepreneurs, engaged in *chchoto khato babsha* (small business), participation in income generating enterprising work increases their work load. To illustrate this, I draw on the case of Ful Begum from Decree Charchandpur and Minoti, a Betei woman from Char Khankhanapur. Ful Begum borrowed 4000 taka (40 GBP) from GB on February 2013 to start a small poultry farm. Initially, she had 20 chickens which gradually turned into 50. Her husband works as a clerk in Khankhanapur union council office and her two daughters are students of Decree Charchandpur primary school. Her day used to start early in the morning (around 6 a.m.) with domestic chores such as sweeping the *uthan* (household yard) and finish with cleaning the dishes after the dinner (around 7.30 p.m.). Before she started the poultry enterprise, she could relax in the afternoon for couple of hours (between 3.00 p.m. and 5 p.m.). But, now she has no leisure as during the afternoon she has to feed the chicken and clean the litters. Her role as a woman entrepreneur has imposed on her additional hours of work. When she was asked, if the increasing work load causes trouble in her life, she said, '*takar jonne kaaj, kaaj korlei to taka ashbe*' (work is meant for money. If I work, it will bring money). Similarly, Minoti borrowed 6000 taka (GBP 60) from GB on January 2014 to enhance her bamboo crafting business which included making of *pati* (bamboo mats), *kula* (winnowing fan) and *chalon* (sieve). She spends about 11 hours for doing the daily chores and an additional 4 hours in making the bamboo crafts. Sometimes, she works till midnight, particularly when the *haat* (weekly market) days approach nearer. She said, working till midnight often strained her eyesight because of the insufficient light. She also felt tired during the day for working late hours at night. When I asked that, why she overworked herself, she answered, '*kaaj na korle kistir taka dibo kibhabe?*' (If I do not work, how can I pay the loan installments?).

For Ful Begum and Minoti, access to microcredit loan and participation in enterprising work have increased their work load. Both of them spend considerable time in managing household chores and perform additional work to generate income. But, there is a difference in the evaluation of such work. While Ful Begum, accepts the extra effort, she employs in her enterprise, as positive, Minoti does not express similar attitude toward the enterprise work. For Minoti, the additional work load is obligatory, to make sufficient income, so that she can pay the microcredit instalments without experiencing any disgrace. Her experience does not support [Kabeer \(2001\)](#), who shows that in Mymensingh and Faridpur district, women engaged in small scale, labour intensive enterprises see their increased work load as positive. Such finding rather fits Ful Begum's situation. Ful Begum justifies her additional work in the poultry farm as positive because she does it for money. Her understanding of the changing pattern of the time use in her work, brought by the microcredit facilities, reflects that it has not only created an opportunity to earn money, but it has also given a new meaning to work. Minoti's situation can be, however, understood in the light of the findings of [Rozario \(2001\)](#). Rozario notices that among the female members of the Jute works cooperatives in a village near Dhaka, the increased work load of jute crafting deteriorates women's health as well as economic conditions. She shows that the reason behind the extra work for these women are to fulfil the quota of the manufacturing of jute products, which is required for maintaining their membership in the jute cooperatives. The cases of Ful Begum and Maloti highlight that the WID policy of the microcredit to involve women in income generating enterprising work does not take into consideration that even if women participate in income based work, they are not free from doing time and labour intensive household chores. Seen from the subsistence perspective ([Mies and Bennhodt-Thomsen, 1999](#)), microcredit, therefore, seems to be devaluing the unpaid domestic work of many women like Ful Begum and Maloti and appears as a 'catch-up development' handed to them by those on the 'top' (i.e. the development planners).

Although microcredit aims to provide loans to the poor women to create scopes of self employment, in some instances it is used to pay for dowry. Among the 25 women microcredit borrowers in Char Khankhanapur 3 women mentioned that they took the loan to use as a partial payment of dowry. 2 out of 8 women borrowers in Decree Charchandpur also used the loan for the same purpose. Dowry, which involves cash, jewellery or other types of assets, which are transferred from the bride's family to the groom's family, is a traditional Bangladeshi marriage practice. However, because of the effect of modernization and globalization on rural culture, now dowry also includes payment of grooms' migration costs ([Rozario, 2001](#)) and capital for their business and career advancement ([White, 2013](#)). Though the dowry is negotiated prior to the marriage as a one off payment in India ([Nithiya, 2013](#)), in Bangladesh, it is a continued process and grooms' families expect brides' families to keep giving gifts in forms of cash and goods even after marriage. [Rozario \(2007\)](#) highlights the fact that microcredit enhances such expectation. She reports that men push poor women to bring money from microcredit lending institutions, if their families are unable to pay the dowry. I found that 7 out of 25 women in Char Khankhanapur and 2 out of 8 women in Decree Charchandpur became the members of GB microcredit scheme and participated in small trading in order to earn money so that they could offset their parents' inability to pay dowry during their marriage. For example, Monowara, a poor woman of Char Khankhanapur, described that during her marriage, her parents promised to pay 10,000 taka (100 GBP) to her husband as the dowry. However, they could manage to pay only 6000 taka (60 GBP). Her rickshaw-puller husband used to force her to bring the remaining amount of the dowry from her poor parents. As soon as Grameen Bank (GB) introduced microcredit, giving poor women, like her, access to credit, her husband's demand for dowry intensified. She, therefore, took a loan of 3500 taka (GBP 35) from GB on November 2012 from which she paid 2000 taka (GBP 20) to her husband instantly and invested the rest in buying some chickens to get some additional income. She said, '*koyta taka aay korle tar haate kisu dite pari*' (if I can earn some money, I can give some money in his hands).

Monowara's case signals an ambiguous effect of microcredit on some women. For women like Monowara, while it is used to pay for dowry, it also provides the opportunity to earn money, though the income may be used for dowry payment. In such case, the income generating work itself acts as a dowry, from the ground that, it is

performed to meet the demand of the dowry. If understood from the WID perspective, Monowara's involvement in small scale livestock rearing, appears as a source of self employment, which improves her situation by enabling her to make an economic contribution. However, it does not reflect any change in her status in terms of increasing her bargaining power within the household. Money being scarce (Schuler *et al.*, 1998), her access to microcredit and participation in income generating, enterprise work rather acts as a channel thorough which her husband gets benefitted. Such finding echoes that of Rozario (2001), which shows that women's credit facilities are exploited by men for their own benefit as 'additional sources of income'.

That microcredit repayment failure may lead to work as a migrant labourer, is evident in the cases of the some less successful and the unsuccessful women entrepreneurs, who likened microcredit to *jel khata* (being in jail) and being *srinkhol* (chained up). According to them, microcredit imprisons them by imposing high interest rates, and rigid time frames for repayment. Many of them complained that when installment repayment time comes, they do not eat or buy essentials to save the money. Sometimes, they join other microfinance institutions and borrow from them to repay installments, or go to money lenders who charge high interest rates. Rankin (2008) shows that such a process of loan swapping also takes place in South Asian countries like Nepal, where women take loans from several sources, so as to avoid becoming microcredit loan defaulters. As a result, they become even more heavily indebted, caught in the dreadful trap of loan repayments to multiple sources.

I found that loan repayment difficulties forced 2 out of 25 women in Char Khankhanapur and 1 out of 8 women in Decree Charchandpur to decide to sell all their belongings, including land, house and animals and migrate to cities or small towns. For example, Shabana, a poor woman from Char Khankhanapur took 5000 taka (50 GBP) from Grameen Bank (GB) on November, 2014 to start vegetable gardening in her homestead. She invested the money in producing tomatoes for market, but she could not make a profit out of it to repay the loan and its interest to the Bank. She turned to BRAC, another micro credit lending organization for loans to repay that of Grameen Bank. She thought that she would be able to manage the weekly installments and interests of BRAC from her small savings of family expenditures, but it did not work for her. To repay BRAC installments, she decided to sell her homestead land and her chickens and take the employment as a domestic worker in Dhaka, leaving her family behind. She said that it was shame for her and her family to undergo the humiliation of the inability to repay the loan. Once she could pay the installments, she was free from the *srinkhol* (chain).

Shabana's story reveals a negative connotation of microcredit lending on some poor women in rural Bangladesh. It shows that the pressure of loan repayment forces her to get entangled in a web of loans from various microfinance institutions. Because of the lack of any productive support, she fails to repay the chains of loan installments and decides to sell her assets and migrate in search of paid work. She considers her inability of loan repayment and the harassment related to this, as a matter of shame for herself as well as her family. Such finding confirms the claim made by Rozario (2002) that not all recipients of GB style microcredit may become entrepreneurs in their own right and there are possibilities that many women are likely to become 'semi-permanent clients' of one or other microcredit organizations to fulfill the need to make loan repayments. Shahana's concern of shame, attached to her inability to repay the loan installments, can be understood from point of the 'economy of shame' as outlined by Karim (2008). Karim shows that in rural Bangladesh, microcredit is used by its lending organizations as a tool to manipulate women's existing notions of shame and honour for the advancement of their goal of capital accumulation.

While for many poor women like Shabana, participation in paid work as migrant labourers is an outcome of the pressure to repay loans, for some other women microcredit is a source of paying the migration costs when they decide to migrate to the Gulf to take contractual paid employment opportunities. In Char Khankhanapur, 5 out of 12 and in Decree Charchandpur, 4 out of 11 migrant women borrowed microcredit to meet their migration costs. Whether working as migrant labourers improves their lives is a matter of further investigation.

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