

Plenary Session 1

Women Empowerment

The seminar began with a plenary session titled 'Women Empowerment' with Institute of Microfinance (InM) Chairman Professor Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad in the chair and Professor Naila Kabeer delivering the keynote speech.

Naila Kabeer, Professor of Gender and Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science, UK, touched on various social aspects to give an overview of women empowerment and its status in Bangladesh.

Empowerment is about expanding the choices available to both men and women, equalizing the choices particularly those that relate to oneself but also expanding their ability to influence the shape of change in the society in which we live, she noted.

Professor Kabeer, throughout her speech, referred to and discussed key findings of relevant studies that shed lights on women empowerment in Bangladesh. The role that microfinance played in empowering women was comprehensively discussed in her presentation.

She opened her speech with highlighting a finding from a study by Hashemi and others (1996) saying, "We found some variations in organizational practice that made a difference to the impacts achieved. For instance, only Grameen Bank membership had an impact on involvement in major decisions while only BRAC membership had an impact on female mobility in the public domain."

Stepping back from these findings, what they add up to is that while credit can lead to change in certain aspects of women's lives that touch on power relations, the positive impacts of credit are likely to be magnified and expanded when financial services are combined with other tangible and intangible resources. "The lesson I take away from this is the need to avoid talking about the microfinance sector in general and to focus on variations in organizational practice," she said.

She later brought in studies that had something about the impacts associated with different kinds of paid works.

Anderson and Eswaran (2009) in their study used rural household data to compare women who earned of their own, primarily through home-based poultry rearing, with those who worked as unpaid family labour on their husband's farm. The measures of empowerment used in the study related to whether or not women had a say in decisions to purchase cooking oil, coconut oil, ice cream, betel leaf, children's clothes and own clothes. The study found that women in own-account enterprises were more likely to have some say in all the decisions studied than those who worked as unpaid labour on the family farm.

"But now because their household is buying ice cream, they have some say in it, I'm not sure that we should be talking about empowerment," she said indicating that we might want to know about the impact of women's own account earnings on more strategic categories of decision-making.

Heath (2014) also examined the impact of women's paid work on domestic violence in an urban context and found education as an important form of access for women's empowerment and one that might mediate the impact of paid work on women's lives.

She later focused on the forms of employments that were generated by anti-poverty development programmes targeted to women in extreme poverty. What Professor Kabeer noted here was, the programmes institutionally encouraged women to be mobile within their union and having to go and work in villages besides their own. They

attended meetings, workshops and trainings (CARE International 2005). The review also noted a number of knock-on effects on women's lives in terms of enabling their participation in Shalish, invitation to social functions such as marriages and so on. The author however had some distracting findings in other studies as well.

Professor Kabeer touched on a study that her team was carried out at the Centre for Gender and Social Transformation at the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development that involved a survey of 5000 women from 8 districts of Bangladesh and covered women in many different kinds of economic activities as well as economically inactive women.

In that study, education found to be more consistent among the other resources which appeared to be promoting positive change in women's lives. Also positive but less consistently was women's ownership of land/housing and membership of NGOs (which were overwhelmingly microfinance organizations). There was much greater suggestion of positive change at the level of individuals and family relationships and weaker evidence of change at the level of the community. The study also presented a less bright picture of women empowerment in Comilla.

Professor Kabeer put forth the potentials and positive developments that took place in women empowerment in the past few years and at the same time she underlined potential challenges. She believed change in men's mindset is fairly important to move forward what Bangladesh achieved in this front.

The speech was followed by a question and answer session where Professor Naila Kabeer replied to a few questions that came from the audience.

InM Chairman Professor Qazi Kholiqzaman made a few remarks after the keynote speech. He observed that the importance of groups that had been discussed in the keynote speech had lost its weight. "Group has been an important element of this whole process but original group concept had broken down. Now group meetings are essentially to give money out and take money back. So there're no discussions about the issues which were the purpose in most of the cases," he noted.

He emphasised on changing the core focus from microcredit to multidimensional support for sustainable empowerment. "We have many different studies carried out in the past and I hope we would have some more studies in this conference which would give us a whole new scenario of women empowerment in Bangladesh," he concluded.

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