

Exploring changes in the lives of BRAC women: A gender perspective

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FOREWORD

Empirical evidence points to a causal relationship between the socioeconomic status of individuals and communities and their health. Indeed improvement in health is expected to follow socioeconomic development. Yet this hypothesis has rarely been tested; at least it has not undergone the scrutiny of scientific inquiry. Even less understood are the processes and mechanisms by which the changes are brought about.

The Rural Development Programme (RDP) of BRAC is a multisectoral integrated programme for poverty alleviation directed at women and the landless poor. It consists of mobilization of the poor, provision of non-formal education, skill training and income generation opportunities and credit facilities. The programme is the result of 20 years of experience through trial and error. However evaluation of its impact on human well-being including health has not been convincingly undertaken.

The Matlab field station of ICDDR, B is an area with a population of 200,000, half of whom are recipients of an intensive maternal and child health and family planning services. The entire population is part of the Center's demographic surveillance system where health and occasionally socioeconomic indicators have been collected prospectively since 1966.

A unique opportunity arose when BRAC decided to extent its field operations (RDP) to Matlab. ICDDR, B and BRAC joined hands to seize this golden occasion. A joint research project was designed to study the impact of BRAC's socioeconomic interventions on the well-being of the rural poor, especially of women and children, and to study the mechanism through which this impact is mediated.

In order to share the progress of the project and its early results, a working paper series has been initiated. This paper is an important addition in this endeavour. The project staff will appreciate critical comments from the readers.

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Executive Summary

Background and the problem

In Bangladesh, patriarchal norms, ideology and social institutions shape women's role and status in the society. Within this patriarchal system, some forces like NGOs may affect the relationship between men and women with respect to prestige, power and control, by enhancing or lowering the status of women in different spheres and locations. Existing studies indicate that BRAC's interventions have rendered substantial changes in women's lives in terms of facilitating their material, perceptual and relational pathways to empowerment, both at the individual and at the family level. These studies however, did not indicate any perceptible change in women's cognitive domain about gender issues, which remain largely dominated by patriarchal norms and ideology. With this context in mind, the study explored in-depth the ideology, attitudes and aspirations of the rural women involved with BRAC VOs regarding gender equity within households.

Methodology

This descriptive qualitative study was conducted over a three months period as a part of BRAC-ICDDR,B Joint Research Project in Matlab. Of the three villages studied, two were located in areas where BRAC/RDP activities were being undertaken, while the remaining village had no BRAC intervention. The study population consisted of eighteen cases of BRAC and non-BRAC women of equivalent socioeconomic status selected by means of a quota sampling technique. Different data collection techniques were used including life histories for case studies, key informant interview and group discussion.

Findings

Study findings revealed that in certain areas the thoughts and ideology of BRAC women appeared quite distinct from non-BRAC women. Many of these differences were apparent in their attitudes and some through their actual practices and behavior. Confusion and contradiction between attitudes and practices however, suggested that BRAC women were in a period of transition. Although they were becoming more aware of the importance of gender equity, the dilemmas they experienced regarding marriage, dowry and divorce indicated their ongoing uncertainty about applying their acquired social and legal knowledge.

Compared to non-BRAC women, notable differences regarding notion of purdah and male power in the household were apparent among BRAC women. For them, the concept of purdah have been transformed to an abstract level and to some extent, transcended gender. Giving greater emphasis to an individual's intention and *iman* (faith in Allah), some BRAC women suggested that purdah was equally applicable for men and women. With regard to power relations within the household, many BRAC women indicated that control over household resources and decision makings were no longer an area of male monopoly. Aware of their increasing knowledge and capacity resulting from their involvement in BRAC programs, many women underscored its implications for the

existing power relations in the largely patriarchal society. Consequently, BRAC women encountered severe criticisms from various sections of the society who were in fear of losing their age-old exclusive power.

As a consequence of dual workload of BRAC related activities and household chores, BRAC women's notion about equity in division of labor within household was changing. Besides, a remarkable shift with regard to aspirations concerning boy and girl children was also apparent among BRAC women. Presently, they appeared to be more interested in daughters' education than their sons education. Two factors were responsible for this spectacular change: one was government's scholarship for female education and another was job availability in the garment industries in the city. These macro level forces that were encouraging female education did not affect non-BRAC women.

Indeed, the study indicated that involvement in BRAC's programme interventions have influenced women's thoughts and ideology regarding gender equity. On the basis of study findings, a pathways of changes in the ideology, attitudes and aspirations regarding issues of gender equity was charted. In that pathway, three crucial issues were identified which had a major influence on women's thought and ideology, e.g., money (savings and credit), knowledge and skill and mobility.

Conclusion

The pathways of changes in the ideology, attitudes and aspirations of BRAC women on the issue of gender equity suggested that BRAC interventions contributed changes in gender stereotyped ideology and attitudes.

Introduction

Background and the problem

In Bangladesh, patriarchal norms, ideology and social institutions shape women's role and status in general. Generally, patriarchy is used to refer male domination in power relationships with women (Bhasin 1993:3). However, within this patriarchal system, external forces like NGOs may affect the relationships between men and women with respect to prestige, power and control, by enhancing or lowering the status of women in the different spheres and locations. BRAC as a national NGO involved in poverty alleviation and women's development acts as one of these external forces (Chen and Mahmud 1995:5).

BRAC's Rural Development Programme (RDP) provides comprehensive services to the rural poor including awareness building, skill training, savings generation, credit disbursement and income generating activities. RDP operates with the knowledge that poor women in Bangladesh are disadvantaged and they have a strong desire to increase their well-being and are willing to engage in activities that would empower them economically and socially. Being an advocate of social change, BRAC explores for ways to involve these women and enhance their participation in the development process, ultimately bringing them out of the cycle of poverty. Besides poverty alleviation, BRAC also concentrates on women's empowerment as a means to improve women's lives (BRAC report 1997:15,16).

Impact assessment studies of BRAC's RDP have indicated that the impact of RDP inputs on changes in women's lives is small but discernible. The status of the female members of RDP at the household level is found to improve as a result of increased access to micro credit and as indicated by greater control over assets and involvement in household decision making (Mustafa et al 1996). The second impact assessment study revealed that women experienced similar changes over time according to the length of BRAC membership. However, given the strength of prevailing socio-cultural norms, values, beliefs and practices the research indicated that much could not be expected (Hussain 1998:xxvi). In another study, although micro credit was found to have an impact on women's economic well-being, it had no tangible effect on their social and economic status given the deeply rooted nature of patriarchal values (Khan 1998). Similar conclusions were drawn during an assessment of a rural development program in North India. Although credit resulted in some improvement in women's economic status, patriarchal ideology remained firmly rooted (Varma 1993). Clearly, the provision of microcredit alone will not overcome the patriarchal system in Bangladesh unless underlying structural issues are addressed.

A question that emerges from the above considerations is the manner in which development interventions alter women's cognitive understanding and the extent to which these are permeated by patriarchal thoughts and ideologies. Through BRAC's interventions, group members (more than 90% women) not only receive training on different gender sensitive issues but are exposed to different life experiences. These are assumed to have an inevitable impact on women's thoughts and ideology regarding patriarchy and the nature of gender relations in the society. These changes may or may not be reflected in women's day to day behavior and practice. By comparing the situation of BRAC and non-BRAC women, it is possible to explore differences in gender related issues and the manner in which BRAC's programs are challenging patriarchal ideology, if at all.

The present study was done under the framework of BRAC-ICDDR, B Joint Research Project at Matlab. A major aim of joint project is to understand the pathways through which the BRAC development efforts impact the well-being of individuals and families in rural Bangladesh, with particular interest about the effect of changes on women's lives. Through exploring women's changing ideology, behavior and aspirations with respect to gender issues, the present study provides new insights about changes in women's cognitive domain as a result of participation in BRAC's development interventions.

Objectives

The study was conducted with two broad objectives:

1. To explore the changes in ideology, attitude and aspiration of the rural women involved with BRAC VO regarding gender issues.
2. To compare and contrast the differences between women involved with BRAC and other women of identical socio-economic status with respect to gender issues.

The specific objectives of the study were:

- To solicit women's knowledge, attitudes and behavior regarding marriage, dowry and divorce.
- To elicit women's notion and practices concerning mobility and purdah.
- To understand women's perceptions about division of labor in the household.
- To investigate women's views and attitudes towards participation in decision making process and male dominance within the household domain.
- To identify women's attitudes, behavior and aspirations regarding male and female children.

Methodology

This study used a number of qualitative methods to describe the prevailing scenario regarding gender issues in Matlab. It also draws insight into the problem by comparing the situation of BRAC and non-BRAC women. As a part of BRAC-ICDDR, B Joint Research Project, the study was conducted in three villages of Matlab Thana. Among the study

villages, two were located in areas in which BRAC/RDP activities were ongoing and the remaining village was without any BRAC intervention.

Data collection techniques

Data was collected from mid of June to early August 1999 and different data collection techniques were utilized in the study to collect information. Different data collection techniques were: life histories for case studies, key informant interview and group discussion. These different data collection techniques were complementary to one another and triangulation of various techniques and sources was done to maximize the validity and reliability of data and reduce the chance of bias. During data collection the context or the setting was always taken into consideration.

Checklists were followed for life histories, group discussions and key informant interviews. Some secondary sources such as previous research conducted as part of the in BRAC-ICDDR,B Joint Research Project and other literature on women's empowerment, autonomy and changes in women's lives were reviewed for the study.

Study population and sampling

The study population comprised of BRAC eligible women from three villages of Matlab. For the purpose of comparison, eighteen cases of BRAC and non-BRAC women were selected using a quota sampling technique of similar socioeconomic status. Different age categories were considered: i) twenty to thirty years ii) thirty one to forty years iii) forty one years and above. In selecting women in each age category, representation from different educational backgrounds and household income was taken into account.

Participants for two group discussions (men and BRAC women) were selected on the basis of availability of the villagers. Village elite, elderly women, VO leaders and husbands of group members were identified as potential key informants in the study. In total, five key informants were selected purposively from the study villages.

Data processing and analysis

The data were processed and analyzed manually. Data processing included coding of different themes, compilation of data under different themes, comparison of the facts and relation between the themes.

Limitation

Since the study themes were translated into English from Bangla, sometimes it was not always possible to keep all the cultural connotations. Therefore, there was a chance of losing the exact meaning. To overcome this limitation, quotations and terminology in Bangla were used along with the English translation. The study was conducted in a particular rural area in Bangladesh and as such, the study results may not be generalized to other contexts.

Study findings

Marriage, dowry and divorce

Patriarchal ideology is manifested through attitudes to and practices of marriage, dowry and divorce. Study findings indicated that the majority of the non-BRAC women respondents retained the idea that girls should be married off during their adolescence because at that time their demand was usually high (*taner somoy biya dewa uchit*). In contrast, BRAC women were largely not in favor of early marriage of their daughter. Rather, they expressed an interest in continuing their daughters' study at least up to secondary level. However, in keeping with the views of non-BRAC women, they mentioned that daughter's marriage should be arranged during their peak demand period.

Attitudes and behavior to men's polygamy were markedly distinct between BRAC and non-BRAC women. The following two cases illustrate the differences.

Case 1.

Shahida, a BRAC VO member, had been married for ten years. She had three children. When she got married, her husband used to work as an agri-laborer in their village. According to her, he was an idle person and did not want to work hard. Meanwhile Shahida joined BRAC VO and used her first loan to buy a rickshaw for him. She thought that the income of the rickshaw would assist the family run economically. However, her husband started to live in Matlab town. According to her husband, it was very tiring to go back to the village every night after doing hard labor like rickshaw pulling. Instead, he used to visit his household in the village every weekend to meet the family and buy them staples. After some months, Shahida found that her husband was very unwilling to visit them at the weekend. Suspicious Shahida decided to visit her husband in Matlab town. There she found that her husband had been living with a woman for few weeks to whom he had not yet been married. Shahida complained to the neighboring people and compelled him to leave that woman and return to their village. A few months later, her husband sold the rickshaw and told her that he got a job in the jute mill in Chittagong. With this excuse he went to Chittagong to live there alone and from then on he did not send any money to his family. Shahida became concerned about her husband and repeatedly make inquiries about his whereabouts. During this period, she had to live on the wheat, which her son received from school. Once her brother-in-law went to Chittagong and tried to look for her husband. There he found that Shahida's husband had married another woman. After hearing this Shahida was enraged, but she did not know how to get hold of them to solve the problem. After some months her husband returned home with his new wife. Shahida became very furious and did not permit the new wife to enter the house. In response, her husband found another house in the village. Shahida went to Matlab to complain to the Chairman and Member of the Union Parishad, and arranged a meeting with the elite of the village and

Thana and sent some young men to bring her husband forcefully in that meeting. At the meeting, she compelled her husband to transfer all his properties to her as punishment.

Case 2.

Shomiron, a non-BRAC woman had been married for eight years. She had two children. Her husband was an agri-laborer and during the peak season, used to go to Srimongal to work as migrant labor. There he married another woman although Shomiron was not informed. Once he went to Srimongol and did not come back for six months and then Shomiron became worried and sent somebody from her village to find her husband. After meeting the husband, the person informed Shomiron about his second marriage. Shomiron was very upset and did not know what to do. Moreover, she was worried that her husband would not return to her again. She and her mother-in-law worked very hard to run the family in her husband's absence. When her husband came back and she was uncertain about living with him. Yet, her mother-in-law emphasized that-*"it is normal for men, they are allowed to keep several wives together (pooroshera omon korei thake, tara ek songe koekjon bou rekhte pare)*. Although she was happy for the return of her husband, she remained unhappy for his second marriage. Ultimately, she decided to live with the co-wife (*shotin*).

The above two cases clearly contrast the attitude and behavior between BRAC and non-BRAC women. The BRAC woman was aware of mechanism for taking legal action against husband's multiple marriage, she was mobile and vocal; she could protest against her husband's behavior. The non-BRAC woman was also upset about her husband's behavior, but she did not know how to express her disapproval or take action. Ultimately she had to accept the situation.

The study made an effort to understand women's attitudes and practices regarding dowry transaction during marriage. Although BRAC women were noted to memorize one of the seventeen promises that --*"we will neither give nor will receive joutook (dowry)"*, a key informant remarked *"BRAC women know about the legal action against dowry, still they save dowry money to arrange a fair marriage for their daughter. They also receive joutook for the benefit of their son; for instance, their sons can do business or go to overseas countries through it. Besides they justify that joutook transaction is a common practice all over the country. Yet the women emphasized the point that it hampers the prestige of their sons in their in-laws house and they have to obey their wives in every respect of the life (jeboner sob jaygai bouer kotha mainna cholta hoi). Nevertheless, they continue dowry transaction."*

However, some instances of changing dowry practices were apparent among BRAC

women. For example one BRAC woman, Fooljan refused to arrange her daughter's marriage since the groom's family asked for Taka fifteen thousand as dowry. She explained --*"The groom party did not value my daughter, they assessed the dowry money. That is unfair to my daughter. I will rather spend that money for my daughter's higher education instead of paying them dowry, and that would be more useful for my daughter in future."*

Although most of the non-BRAC women expressed anti-dowry views, unlike BRAC women, they were not equipped with legal knowledge to translate these views into action. They pointed to its harmful aspects, explaining how dowry payment could completely destroy a family. At the same time they argued that it was good because it increased their daughter's prestige in their in-laws house and nobody could look down on them. Moreover, they added, if dowry was not paid, their daughter would be unhappy as it had become a norm in the society.

The issue of divorce was raised in the course of discussion. Almost all non-BRAC women expressed the view that a good woman never asked for divorce. Rather, they would doggedly remain in their husband's house by "holding his leg if necessary". Women should continue their married life even though their husbands may constantly inflict violence on them. Non-BRAC women were unaware about the legal rights of the women for securing divorce, and believed it to be the sole right of men.

BRAC women on the other hand opined that if the husband and wife did not go along, they should divorce. Having received the Human Rights and Legal Education (HRLE) training of RDP, they were aware of their legal rights in securing a divorce. In spite of all these changing attitudes, key informants reported that it was rare for BRAC women to resort to legal means and end their marriage. Rather, every effort was focused on enduring their marriage till the very end. Shokhina, an aged women clarified --*"though the BRAC women know they have the right to divorce their husband but they are reluctant to lose their household (sonsarer maya charthe chaina). Besides, the others will harshly criticize them if they leave their husband. So, they have no other alternative but to tolerate their husband's mistreatment."* She also pointed --*"they feel insecure as well, as they have no other place to go with their children. Ultimately, they have to marry again and nobody wants to marry a woman with children. Apart from that there is no guarantee that the second husband would be better than the first one. Considering these fact BRAC women remain with their husbands though their peers (other BRAC women) often advise them to leave the household and try to earn their own livelihood instead of tolerating their husband's abuse."*

Mobility and purdah

In patriarchal society, women's mobility is regulated in order to control their sexuality, production and reproduction. The imposition of purdah, restrictions on leaving domestic space, a strict separation of private and public limits on interaction between sexes and so

on are for controlling women's mobility and freedom (Bhasin 1993:8, 9). In Bangladesh, custom and their social and economic dependence on men limit women's mobility. Because of purdah their contact with the outside world is extremely limited. Nonetheless, several studies on BRAC's Rural Development Program suggested that BRAC involvement had increased women's mobility and communication with the outside world. Since it was perceived to be a break of purdah, BRAC women often encountered severe criticisms from village elite and religious clerics (Mustafa et al. 1996, Hussain 1998, Islam 1998). The present study made an effort to explore women's notion and attitudes toward mobility and purdah.

Women revealed that in their natal home their mobility was restricted within the village and they were not allowed to go to the public places like market. When visiting their relatives in other villages, they were accompanied by either their mother or grandmother or by younger brothers and sisters. The efforts were to protect them from possible harassment and disgrace that might reflect badly on their marriage prospects. When recalling the degree of their restricted mobility in natal place during childhood and adolescent periods, almost all BRAC women clearly stated their dissatisfaction. One BRAC woman, Nasiron stated *"if my mobility was not restricted in my parents' home, I would be educated and could earn money on my own. I could never go anywhere on my own and that my parents reduced my opportunity of becoming self- dependent and intelligent."*

On the other hand, non-BRAC women had very different view. They appreciated their parents' attitude and behavior and said that their parents controlled their mobility for the sake of their well-being. Because it was indecent for a woman to move around in public places (usually market) among men, it impelled men to pass ugly remarks, which was a matter of disgrace for the women. Interestingly, BRAC women interpreted this scenario very differently. If a man made indecent comments to a woman, it is improper and a sin for that particular man, certainly not for the woman; rather, the woman should protest this offensive behavior in public. This would discourage the man from being indecent with any other woman in the future.

Confirming the changing nature of notion and attitudes about mobility among BRAC women, Jomila, one of the key informants stated *"notion about mobility has been changing among BRAC women since they have joined BRAC. In previous days they were afraid to go to Matlab town all alone, but now they have the courage to go anywhere on their own, even to Dhaka city. They are very proud of their mobility and often they say that now they are very happy that they can buy their own things without any dependency on men. They think, it indeed saves their money in the sense that, when they requested other persons to buy things for them, they do not usually spend economically. Where as when they do their own shopping they calculate carefully and bargain properly with the shopkeepers to save money as much as possible."*

The key informants further reported that non-BRAC women were still afraid to go out of

the village and they would rather starve inside the house instead of going out to buy their necessities if there were no male member in the house. Moreover, they disliked BRAC women going out to the market. They grumbled that because women were going to market, the day had come for "the market under eggplant (begoon tolay haat boshbe)"¹, keyamat² was really imminent to destroy the earth. They also complained that women walk side by side with men on the way. Earlier, they used to wait and let the men pass first but nowadays they were found to overtake instead of waiting if they are in a hurry. The non-BRAC women considered it a sinful behavior for women. While BRAC women replied that it could not be a sinful behavior, because they had right to walk on the way as men did; besides, government had given equal rights to men and women.

Although BRAC women still instructed their daughters to speak softly and politely, they also advised them to protest if anybody passed any bad remarks. As one BRAC woman said *"the era has changed nowadays; our daughter cannot remain inside the house, they have to go out in the town for various purposes. We have told them to protest if anybody makes any bad remarks."* Clearly, BRAC women's ideas and attitudes concerning mobility were changing and being transferred to the next generation.

Concepts of purdah were also changing among BRAC women while non-BRAC women still endorsed the practice. As Fulbanu, a non-BRAC woman stated *"women should stay inside five fences (panch berar bhiton)"*³ and while going out they should cover themselves with borkha (long black veil). They should not expose themselves to any male stranger." Among BRAC women, notions of purdah were not confined to covering the body and avoiding exposure to male strangers. Rather, it was concerned with maintaining Iman (faith in Allah). Some of them clarified *"Our purdah does not break when we go to the BRAC office or to the market because we do not have any bad intention in our mind and our Iman is strong. We do not think it is a sin to come in front of our PO and PA bhai (BRAC staff) without covering ourselves with borkha."* Some of the BRAC women even suggested that men should maintain purdah as well, i.e. their purdah was also broken when they talk to the women with bad intention.

Division of labor in the household

Patriarchal values and ideology usually regulate the division of labor in the household in Bangladeshi society. There is a clear demarcation between public and domestic spheres of activities. Women have traditionally worked within the domestic sphere. However, with participation in development programs outside activities are increasingly common. The study tried to explore the extent to which women's involvement in the outside activities had affected their ideas and attitudes about the division of labor in the household.

A large number of women respondents admitted that traditional notions about the general

¹ It is a metaphor to express a lawlessness situation.

² The day of judgement, according to Islamic faith.

³ Through five fences they meant a house (four walls and a roof).

division of labor in the household were changing, and increasingly the young men were assisting their wives in different household activities. Other non-BRAC women such as Poribanu did not share this view. She stated *"I do not like the idea of men helping their wife in household activities. Men's and women's work should be separate. Men should do outside activities and women should work within the domestic sphere. It does not look proper if a man does cooking and washing for the household. Besides, my mother-in-law used to say it is sinister for a household if the men touch the cooking pot. Even I think, if the husband enters into the kitchen he gets the opportunity to take account of his wife's cooking and that is not proper at all."* Comparatively younger non-BRAC women, however affirmed that there was no harm if husbands helped their wives in looking after children or performing household duties. It was the trend of the age (*joog dhormo*).

According to the reports of key informants, the ideology of BRAC women regarding the household division of labor was very different: *"domestic activities are not only their responsibility; their husband should come forward to help them in this regard. Especially when they go to the VO meeting early in the morning, they expect their husband to look after the household and the children in their absence. In cases where their husbands are careless, they complain that their children are weltering on the mud and they do not even care. The husbands should feed them and prepare them for school since they have gone to the meeting (samity) for the household's well-being."*

BRAC members confirmed this account: *"there should not be any clear-cut gender distinction of labor within the household. Nowadays, like men many women are going out to earn money for their family and they will be encumbered if their husbands do not help them in doing household works. That will make them annoyed which results in conflict between husband and wife."* They further added *"It is really nice to see the husband and wife chatting together and playing with their children after finishing all the household work together."*

Key informants pointed out that although women expected their husbands to help them in household activities in their absence, in reality most BRAC women made effort to complete their household chores and organize in advance before they attend VO meetings in the morning. As Jomiron, a VO member grumbled --*"I would be happy if my husband would share some household activities with me, but he doesn't. On the day of samity meetings I have to get up very early in the morning and prepare and organize a meal for my children; otherwise, they would go to the school with an empty stomach. Often my husband raises a hue and cry if I am absent in the house when he goes to work in the morning and he wants me to send the installment money with someone else. I have found in most cases our husbands' attitude and behavior have not changed in this respect and we are becoming overburdened day by day."*

Indeed, study findings supported the fact that, in addition to attending weekly meeting, training and other income generating activities, the BRAC women had to manage their domestic activities all alone. Being overburdened, they felt that their husband should assist

them in household chores as their activities contribute to the household well-being as well. However, the study found that husbands of some BRAC women extended their cooperation to their wives in different domestic affairs such as looking after the children, bringing water, etc. Sometimes, they even washed their wives' clothes in the pond and were highly criticized by the other neighboring women.

Women's participation in household decision making and male domination

The impact assessment studies of RDP indicated that the role of men as the sole decision maker in the household was declining over the time. Especially, they found that the practice of joint decision making by BRAC women and their husbands was more pronounced among households with a longer association with BRAC (Mustafa et al. 1996, Hussain 1998). Emerging from these findings was the need to consider women's views about female participation in household decision making and to what extent it was affecting power relation within the household.

In the study BRAC women expressed their satisfaction that nowadays their husbands were gradually giving importance to their opinion. As one of VO member said --*"since my interaction with the outside world has increased I have learnt different ways of earning income and upgrading the household. Besides, it has sharpened my ability to differentiate right from wrong. Apart from that, I can run the household on my own in my husband's absence. I do not have to wait for him to solve any immediate problem of the household so why should my husband not value my opinion in deciding any household matter?"* Regarding BRAC women's participation in decision making key informants pointed out that --*"A notable change has been observed among BRAC women. Their level of confidence has increased up to such a level that sometimes they take decisions on their own and just inform their husbands. They are becoming so courageous that neither their husbands are unable to disagree with them nor can they can abuse them for being independent in decision making, as they are contributing to the well-being of the household. Ironically, if the husbands of BRAC women do not pay heed to their wives opinion, arguments ensue and more often they end up agreeing under threat that their wives would refuse to get further loans for the household. That is why husbands are often found to grumble that BRAC VO has taught women how to be more vocal (kotha beshi bolte sikhaiche)."*

This dramatic shift in attitudes and practices regarding male dominance in BRAC households was not apparent among non-BRAC households. They continued to rely on and submit to the authority of their husbands or any other superior men in the household. As Lalbanu stated --*"decision making is men's domain as they understand better than us. And they have more rights in the household than we have, because the household belongs to them and we are just taking care of it."* Although some women affirmed that sometimes they took part in the decision making process in the household, it was unusual for them to make decisions independently without the consent of their husbands or other adult male members. An indifferent attitude to participating in household was expressed:

Noorjahan, a non-BRAC woman had three daughters. When her youngest daughter turned sixteen, her husband and other male guardians in the household began arranging her marriage. Noorjahan did not like the idea but refrained from giving any opinion. After sometime they succeeded in arranging her daughter's marriage with an agri-labourer. They did not ask her opinion about the groom or the marriage. After the marriage, her daughter found that the man was already married with two children. In addition, her husband was very ill-tempered and always abused her if he found any excuse. Noorjahan's daughter could not tolerate these conditions and returned to her natal home. She wanted to continue her studies but her father and uncles were more concerned with arranging a second marriage for her. Noorjahan remained totally silent from the beginning to the end. She stated --*"I have never opposed any of their decisions in my life time. Even though I did not like that they arranged the marriage of my daughter at such an early age I kept quiet. Now they are trying for a second marriage. What can I say, she is their daughter, and so they will decide about her future."*

A similar situation provided a very different reaction from a BRAC women:

When Rabotoon's daughter turned sixteen, her father, grand father and elder uncles began to search an eligible groom. From the beginning, Rabitoon expressed her dissatisfaction with the matter to her husband. Yet, the male members of the household did not listen to her and began negotiations with one groom party. When the groom party came to see the bride, however, Rabitoon refused to bring her daughter in front of them. She said--*"I am not willing at all to arrange my daughter's marriage at such an early age. Above all, she has to complete her studies."* Rabitoon's husband and the other men were very annoyed with her but she replied --*"from the very beginning you were negotiating marriage without my consent but I also work hard to bring up my children. Besides, you will not be able to accumulate the money for dowry without my assistance. Of course you should take my opinion into consideration."*

The examples mentioned above clearly illustrate the degree to which power relations have changed in BRAC households. As participants in focus group discussion elaborated: *"BRAC women not only show their husbands how to generate income, they also provide the capital for it. Their husbands are compelled to submit all their daily earnings into their wives' hand. As a result, BRAC women gain control over household income. From that money they run their family and repay the weekly installment of BRAC. So they are doing the mattabori (domination) within the household now."*

These changing attitudes challenge the foundation of the patriarchal system. It is not surprising, hence that most of the men in the study criticized BRAC women's behavior and attitudes: *"though it is true that women are somehow aiding in family well-being, still domination at the same level as the husband is not fair in an Islamic society like Bangladesh. Husbands are like masters, so women should certainly obey them, but BRAC women are dominating over their husbands. Other women are being exposed to their example."* They further added --*"of course we appreciate receiving BRAC loans as they support the well-being of the household. Nevertheless, BRAC has not taught the women how to be gentle and behave well. Rather they are becoming more impolite day by day. They do not care for their husband at all, they express their opinion independently. In the past they used to stay inside the home and depend on their husbands. Nowadays, they go out without permission from their husbands and talk openly with other strangers. This is really improper!"*

Attitudes, behavior and aspirations regarding male and female children

Women's attitudes, behavior and aspirations regarding their male and female children were explored by examining the distribution of food and domestic works and education within the household.

Study findings reveal that although most BRAC women denied that they discriminate between boy and girl children in terms of food distribution, but the key informants pointed that preference of male children remained widespread. This view is further supported by a study on intra household food distribution in Matlab (DasRoy et al. 1998). In the present study most of non-BRAC women conceded that they favored their male child as they had traditionally accustomed to it. One woman justified --*"it is natural that a male child should be preferred in giving more food to a female child, because he is the future security of the household. Besides, a female child should learn to eat less from childhood so that she will demand less in her in-laws' house."* However, other younger non-BRAC women denied that they were biased to their male children in this regard.

Regarding domestic work almost all BRAC women affirmed that if required, they asked their son to help them with cooking or sweeping the floor and so on. Moreover, they mentioned that they considered their male and female children equal in this regard although they try to avoid disturbing while they were studying. Yet, close observation revealed that mothers' stated attitudes and their actual behavior were quite different. Mothers' were found to order their daughters to do domestic work whenever needed without consideration for their studies. Many non-BRAC women on the other hand, confessed that they usually asked their daughters to help them with household activities, because it was a learning process. Because their daughters would have to cook and perform other household duties in their in-laws' house in future, it was important to learn these activities by helping their mothers. While the attitude and behavior of non-BRAC women appeared consistent, this was not the case among BRAC women.

Aspirations regarding male and female children were addressed by exploring investments in children's education. A remarkable shift was noted, especially in the case of BRAC women. Presently, BRAC women appeared to be more interested in daughters' education than their sons. This study was direct contrast to a previous study undertaken in Matlab in 1992 when RDP intervention was just initiated (Mahbub et al. 1995). In that study BRAC women emphasized the importance of their son's education as they would become the emperors (*badsha*) of the family and they stated their unwillingness in providing education to their daughters as it would lead them to become a prostitute (*beshsa*).

According to key informants, in the past, parents did not have any expectations from their daughters. Since it was highly unusual for a daughter to provide financial assistance to her parents, they were not inclined to spend on her education: *"we bring up our daughters to send them to their in-laws' house. If we spend money on their education it will be useless for us, as her earnings will only aid her future in-laws."* Nowadays BRAC women's attitudes were different and to them daughters' education was essential in the sense: *"A boy can survive in any way but a girl has to have a strong place to stand and education assists in achieving that."* They stressed that *--"nowadays girls have greater opportunity to get a job earlier than boys, and daughters feel more responsible for their parents than do sons. So, it is profitable to invest in a daughter's education, and then gradually that daughter will help other children to get educated."*

Many BRAC women hoped that their daughters would help them financially after their marriage since increasing number of women were involved in income earning activities and were in a better position to support their aged parents. By contrast, non-BRAC women were less enthusiastic about spending money on their daughters' education claiming that such investment would be wasted and future in-laws would have all rights on their incomes.

Discussion and conclusion

The existing literature suggested that BRAC's interventions rendered substantial changes in women's lives in terms of facilitating their material, perceptual and relational pathways to empowerment, both at the individual and family level (Mustafa et al. 1996, Hussain 1998, Banu et al. 1998, Islam 1998, Khan 1998, Huda and Mahmood 1998). However, these studies did not assess changes in women's cognitive understandings of their value in society which are powerfully influenced by patriarchal thought and ideology. The study attempts to fill this gap by exploring changes in the ideology, attitudes and aspirations of rural women involved with BRAC regarding issues of gender equity in power and access to and control over resources.

Study findings revealed that in certain areas the thoughts and ideology of BRAC women appear quite distinct from non-BRAC women. Many of these differences were apparent in their attitudes and some through their actual practices and behavior. Confusion and contradiction between attitudes and practices however, suggested that BRAC women were in a period of transition. Although they were becoming more aware of the importance of gender equity, the dilemmas they experienced regarding marriage, dowry and divorce indicated their ongoing uncertainty about applying their social and legal knowledge.

Notable differences were also evident in their notion of purdah and male power in the household, compared to non-BRAC women. In the case of BRAC women, the ideology of purdah had been transformed to an abstract level and to some extent transcended gender. Giving greater emphasis to an individual's intention and *iman* (faith on Allah), some BRAC women suggested that purdah was equally applicable for both men and women.

Interestingly, with regard to power relations within the household, many BRAC women indicated how control over household resources and decisions was no longer an area of male monopoly. Aware of their increasing knowledge and capacity due to BRAC programs, many women understood their implications for the existing power relations in patriarchal society. Thus BRAC women encountered severe criticisms from various parts of the society who were in fear of losing their age-old exclusive power.

A remarkable shift in gender preferences with regard to boy and girl children was also apparent among BRAC women in the study. Two issues can be identified in explaining this spectacular change. One is government's scholarship for girl's education and another is job availability in the garment industries in the cities. Apparently, many parents perceived that supporting their daughters' education up to class eight could be accomplished with minimal financial effort. Afterwards, if continued up to the School Secondary Certificate (SSC) exam, their daughters might secure a lucrative job in the garments industries in the city and provide financial assistance to them. With financial assistance, parents would be able to bear the educational expenses of other children. Indeed, there were a few instances in the village in which BRAC women had stopped their son's study due to financial constraints but were still trying to collect money for their daughter's SSC exam fees.

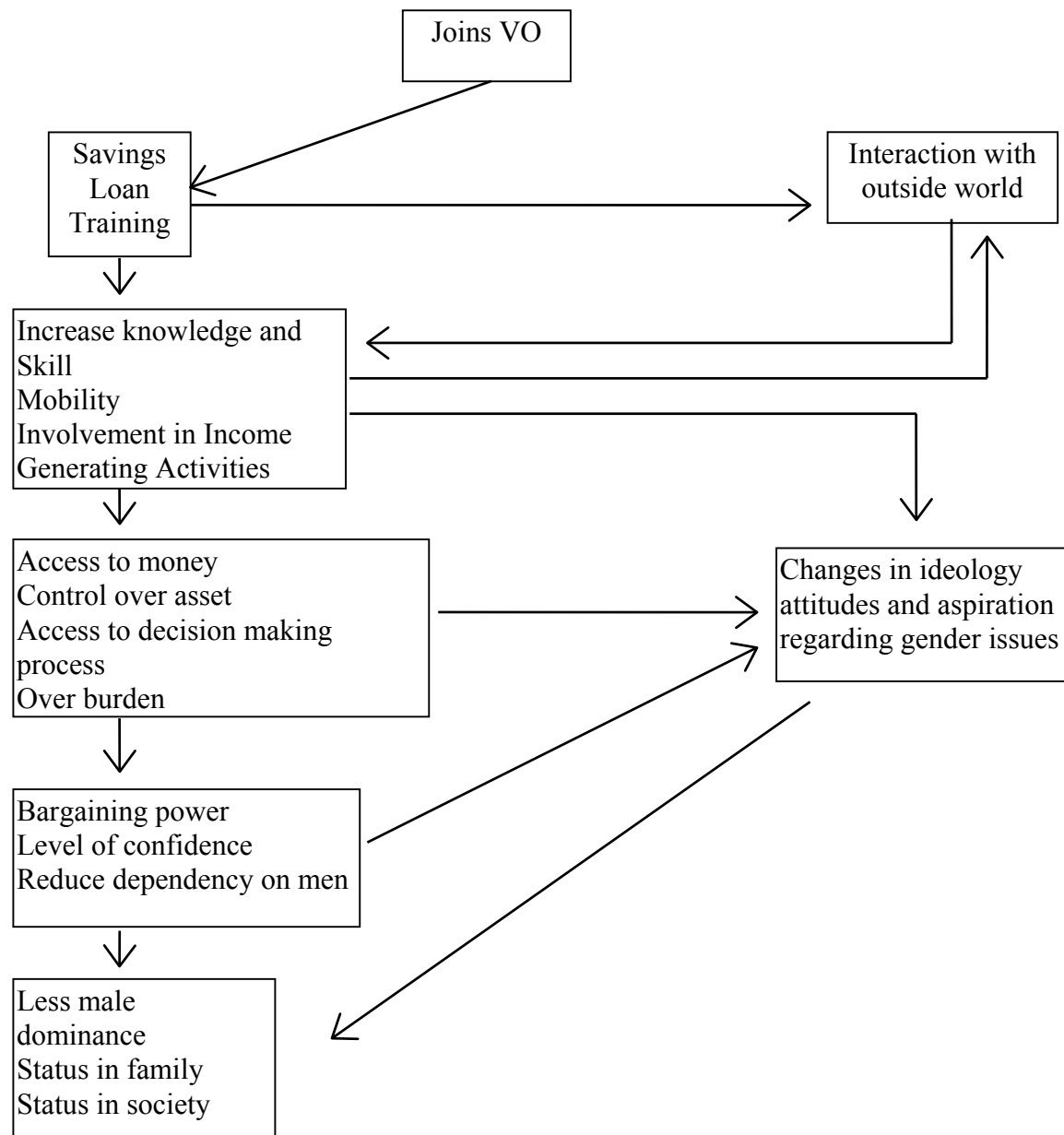
Given that these macro level forces that were encouraging female education would be expected to alert non-BRAC women equally, it is notable that change in gender preference was not apparent. Clearly, involvement in BRAC produced important changes in women's notions of the value of girl children by reinforcing the legal rights of women and exposing them to the outside world. Changing notions of equity in the household division of labor resulted from these same macro and micro level forces and more directly from the example of BRAC women coping with the dual workload of BRAC related activities and

household chores.

On the basis of study findings, the following diagram attempts to indicate the pathway of changes in the ideology, attitudes and aspirations of BRAC women regarding issues of gender equity. In the diagram three factors can be identified as crucial which have a major influence on BRAC women's thought and ideology i.e. money (savings and credit), knowledge and skill, and mobility.

Therefore it can be concluded that development interventions like BRAC's Rural Development Programme (RDP) have stimulated changes in patriarchal ideology and attitudes; however, the translation of these cognitive changes into equitable opportunities and outcomes for women will take many years to accomplish.

Pathways of changes in the ideology, attitudes and aspiration of BRAC women regarding issues of gender equity



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