

An Analysis of the Role of Community Empowerment Program (CEP) in combatting Domestic Violence against women: A Case study of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the impact of Community Empowerment Program (CEP) of Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), one of largest and diversified NGOs in Bangladesh, more popularly known by its acronyms BRAC, in challenging violence against women. The reference point for analysis in the paper is the women CEP members' own perception about their life transformation in general and their stand towards violence in particular. Unlike other research studies conducted in this area that focuses on women's financial freedom, this paper focuses on violence against women, one of the most vital indicator of women's socio-political empowerment. The paper is based on both primary and secondary data. Qualitative primary data were collected from women beneficiaries of CEP program in Bangladesh. This paper argues that CEP can be a useful empowerment tool that can reduce domestic violence against women but only when combined with women and their husband's education and training. It concludes that education and training are more important that should be the focus of all CEP programs.

Keywords: Community empowerment program, socio political empowerment, women's mobility

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INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is characterized by classic patriarchy and inequality in general and gender inequality in particular. This is not unique to any particular region or country but sometimes it takes on different forms that result in different consequences. The gender norms and practices that prevail in

a patriarchal country like Bangladesh keep women isolated from the outside world. This is a country that restricts women to undertaking purely reproductive roles or sometimes productive roles that can be carried out largely within the home. Women's domestic and family work is essential yet it is unpaid, ignored and rarely considered to be of the same value as work that is primarily undertaken by men (Efroymsen, Biswas, & Ruma, 2007).

In addition to this, gender-based violence is not uncommon in a patriarchal country like Bangladesh. Various forms of violence experienced during a woman's lifetime that starts at birth and continue until her death. Violence against women is an important indicator of women's overall subordination in rural Bangladesh. From childhood, women are raised with an understanding that they are worthless in comparison to men and that they have to depend on males for every single matter. Some situations and incidents of domestic violence demonstrate the male's assertion of superiority and dominance in the household. The paper analyses the role of Community Empowerment Program (CEP) in combatting domestic violence against Bangladeshi women. It was very difficult to assess spousal violence against women at home as it is a confidential and sensitive issue. However, for this research, an open and secure environment was offered to each and every participant, ensuring that each interviewee had no fear of their discussion being overheard by her husband, NGO officials or other women from within the group or the community. The study

revealed that many respondents showed less hesitation in discussing violence issues, due to their acceptance of the researcher as their trustworthy friend.

Background of the Paper

In Bangladesh, women are raised with messages that convey their lack of value and capability in comparison with men. The patriarchal culture and social norms place them in a position of subordination and oppression in their families, neighbourhoods and communities. Their upbringing trains them to be good mothers and wives and to perform all household chores perfectly. Bangladesh is a classic patriarchal society where women are expected to live and stay in their husbands' homes when they marry. This is often a long distance from where they were born and grew up and they are treated with very little respect (Kabeer, Milward, & Sudarshan, 2013). Thus, women in Bangladesh are underprivileged and oppressed, not only by the family but right up to the state level, and this is totally unacceptable. Gender equality and women's empowerment is not only a development issue but also a human rights and social justice issue.

Therefore, in order to ensure gender quality, gender -based violence has to be combatted. In order to be rid of the curse of poverty and to progress development, male supremacy and the oppression and domination of women need to be ceased and strategies must be put in place to advance the empowerment process from the household to the state level. One of the experimental

tools being applied to empower women is the Community empowerment program of BRAC.

BRAC is an organization that has rapidly evolved over the last three decades. It is the largest NGO in Bangladesh and was founded by Mr Fazle Hasan Abed. It commenced its activities in 1972 to assist the settlement of returning refugees in Sullah, Sylhet, under the banner Bangladesh Relief and Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC). Gradually BRAC transformed its mission, vision and goals and re-emerged as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee. BRAC works with people whose lives are dominated by extreme poverty, illiteracy, disease and other handicaps. BRAC is actively involved in promoting human rights, dignity and gender equity through building the social, economic, political and human capacity of disadvantaged people. Although the emphasis of BRAC's work is at the individual level, sustaining the work of the organization depends on an environment that permits disadvantaged people to break out of the cycle of poverty and hopelessness (Nawaz, 2011).

BRAC's mission seems to have affected positive life changing impacts on the lives of people who were threatened by extreme poverty and vulnerability. Since women are, by and large, the most marginalized, disadvantaged and vulnerable group of any society, BRAC's mission is to bring positive changes in the quality of life of this group, especially the poor. Although their mission statement mentions serving men and women, in reality, their key focus is on

women. BRAC's mission statement also mentions their aim to develop the members of the organization. Although BRAC was established as a relief and rehabilitation organization in a disaster prone, newly born country, gradually it shifted its approach to target group, community development and social transformation. Although BRAC came forward to offer microcredit to the disadvantaged people, it is not an exclusively microcredit-based NGO.

BRAC also provides other complementary programs relating to health, education and legal support. In addition to these programs, BRAC introduced the Community Empowerment Program (CEP)¹ in mid-1998. Through the formation of community-based organizations, this program aims to empower women at the grassroots level as well as mobilizing them to translate awareness into action. Through CEP programs women are made aware of their rights and this enables them to resist

¹CEP refers to Community Empowerment program. CEP focuses on empowerment of the rural poor as a pathway to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs) and sustainable development. With the motto 'translating awareness into action', CEP aims for socio-political empowerment of the rural poor, particularly women, by enabling them to build, secure and use their socio-political assets to improve their wellbeing, exercise their rights, take advantage of new opportunities and play a more active role in public life. This is achieved through a set of programmatic interventions in the areas of rural resource mobilization, community institution building, strengthening local governance, creating awareness and access to information and addressing violence particularly against women (www.brac.com)

exploitation by mobilizing human, social and political assets. Among four different goals of CEP program mentioned in the footnote, this paper addresses only one important goal which is violence against women. The paper explores whether and how CEP program addresses violence against women.

Theoretical Foundation

As NGOs have assumed wider roles, there has been simultaneous growth in the debate and controversy surrounding them, not only in Bangladesh but also globally. Different schools of thought have emerged to explain the controversy surrounding the role of NGOs. Modernization theorists hold positive views regarding the function of NGOs. From the positive point of view, it is argued that NGOs have a constructive association with the state and have emerged in order to help the state perform different developmental activities (Holloway, 1998). Rankin (2002) NGOs foster democratic participation within microfinance groups and this promotes collective decision making. Similarly, other researchers have found some improvement in women's individual capacities such as community mobility and decision making. Some supporters of NGOs consider women's empowerment purely from an economic perspective and believe that women can simply be empowered if they are economically developed. They argue that NGOs have concentrated their efforts on women's economic development by involving the women in income-generating activities and providing them with training,

credit and other inputs and that the financial support given by NGOs is beneficial to women and ensures their empowerment in rural Bangladesh (Shailo, 1994).

Researchers who have a negative view have often criticized the contribution of NGOs, considering their endeavours as repetitious and their activities as largely insignificant (Islam & Hussain, 1993). Ahmed (1993) claimed that strong national and international backing had encouraged NGOs to defy decisions of the state by setting their own agendas. Haque in Nawaz (2013) had made the observation that the influence of NGOs had increased in most developing nations over recent years. It is quite conceivable that NGOs have become a formidable force in Bangladesh, affecting the political and economic environment and the power and legitimacy of the government. They are the alternative voice who frequently expresses their opinions against the power of political society and the state.

A number of studies have highlighted the point that NGOs do not reach the poorest population of the country. Excluding those below the poverty line is a risk as they tend to be clustered in areas amongst the predominantly moderately poor or the vulnerable non-poor (Islam, 2007). Findings relating to the impact of microfinance on the incidence of domestic violence are also conflicting. Hashemi, Schule and Riley (1996) argued that microcredit reduced domestic violence, yet Mahmud et al. (1996) opposed this argument and claimed that microcredit increased household violence. They suggest that microcredit

may have a detrimental effect on the women's position within her family and community. Therefore, there has been substantial debate and controversy regarding the role of NGOs specially in women's empowerment. Although there are some researchers have already been conducted on the role of microfinance of NGOs in general and BRAC in particular in reducing domestic violence against women, there is no research has so far been conducted on the role of Community Empowerment Program, another significant program of BRAC in combatting domestic violence. The importance of finding an answer to these issues was the first justification for undertaking this research study and from this perspective the findings could a make a significant contribution to the theory and practice of women's empowerment.

Theoretical Key Concepts

Community Empowerment Program.

The central objective of BRAC is poverty alleviation and the empowerment of the economically disadvantaged, especially women. To achieve this, BRAC has developed programs that provide access to credit and contribute to socio-economic empowerment through the provision of training and consciousness-raising amongst rural disadvantaged communities who have the least access to resources. BRAC believes that rural disadvantaged people can be economically active and can improve their economic situation if they are given access to credit and made aware of their status in society (Khandker & Khalily, 1996). They provide other supplementary

services mainly to microcredit clients, their children and sometimes to non-microcredit clients. From time to time, integrating all their services has been challenging because health, education, legal support and community empowerment programs are, by and large, either voluntary or services are offered at little cost.

The objective of CEP is to achieve socio political empowerment of poor women by enabling them to play more active role in social activities. The BRAC CEP operates through major four program interventions such as community institution building, strengthening local governance, access to information and addressing violence against women. Under this program BRAC organizes rural communities though democratic grassroots organization called *Polli Shomaj*. BRAC's approach to institution building is carried out through the women's federation (*Polli Shomaj*) following the promulgation of a law by the government of Bangladesh whereby each *Union Parishad* is divided into nine wards. The women's federation meets once every two months. The members of *Polli Shomaj* are encouraged to maintain funds within the federation to help vulnerable women in case of an emergency. The *Polli Shomaj* works as an advocacy body to ensure the rights and privileges of its members are upheld. As mentioned previously, it operates in four broad areas and the current research revealed that the majority of *Polli Shomaj* members were common members of a microfinance program.

Socio Political Empowerment. Socio-political empowerment encompasses the ‘power with’ dimension of power relationships. Its focus is on permitting women to examine and articulate their interests, that is, to organize them, achieve them and link with other women’s and men’s organisations to facilitate change (Basargekar, 2010). The socio-political dimension of empowerment encompasses women’s decision making agency, women’s mobility in the public domain, their ability to meet strategic gender needs and women’s changed perception and reaction towards spousal violence against women. These concepts have been adapted from Malhotra, Schule and Boender (2002), Moser in March, Smyth and Mukhopadhyay (1999), and Kabeer (1996).

Violence against Women

Violence itself is defined as both physical and verbal abuse against women in the household. The indicators for exploring violence against women include issues such as whether women are afraid of their husbands; whether they are beaten by their husbands; whether they are both afraid and beaten by their husbands; how women perceive and react against spousal violence; whether they protest against violence either against themselves or on behalf of someone else in their neighbourhood and community; and whether they seek legal advice or aid from any institutions (Jejeebhoy in Kabeer, 1998).

METHODOLOGY

An interpretive research paradigm had been used for this study to emphasize the value placed on the learning experience of the participants. In order to gain an understanding of the impact that microfinance has had on disadvantaged women in their real-life environment, an ethnographic research design was chosen for this study. For doing ethnographic research it is essential to reflect participants’ views, ideas and thoughts rather than researcher’s own ideas, opinion and interpretation. In this process participants are researched in their natural settings and are ideally not controlled by the researcher’s preconceived knowledge. For conducting an ethnographic study, the researcher attempts to collect and interpret data from the perspective of the population under study (Hancock, 1998). Silverman (2001) stated that “social scientists do something extra with observations, they write ethnographies. Ethnography refers to social scientific writing about particular folks”.

Within the parameters of my research, the author tried to understand and explore information about the role of women in their families and outside their home as well as any changes in their attitude and activities following their involvement in microfinance programs. The author investigated the respondent’s views regarding changes they experienced following their involvement in microfinance, any positive and negative impacts microfinance had on their life transformation and what was needed to

make the program more client-oriented. The ethnographic approach enabled me to obtain essential data from my respondents. The author had no relationship and no conflict of interest with the participants. The author made my position very clear to my respondents within the context of my study. The author interviewed participants and drove the research process personally. The research has no specific cultural or religious focus, although the author acknowledges that participants were mainly from the Islamic religion as it is the dominant religion of Bangladesh. The author did not face any religious conflict while collecting data as I also belong to the same religion.

The author's epistemological position drove her choice of methodology, guiding her to choose inductive (qualitative) research and data collection techniques to conduct the study. The present study follows a qualitative strategy with inductive reasoning, i.e., based on the on-going construction of reality by both the participants and the researcher. Broader generalization and theory formation are attempted. This study emphasizes 'words' rather than 'numbers' and gives higher priority on the participants' ideas, actions, and method of constructing 'realities.' Moreover, the author focused on the process—why and how things happened—rather than the outcomes. Therefore, importance has been given on the 'depth' rather than the 'breadth' as well as on the participants' real world. The study also followed a triangulation approach involving different qualitative methods of data collection such as semi-structured

in-depth interview, focus group discussion and observation, and multi-perspectives analyses involving both the participants and NGO officials.

The data were collected to explore the processes by which microfinance may perhaps make a difference to the lives of the borrowers. A village named Haragram under Paba Upazila was selected for the purpose because of physical accessibility (from the nearest city—Rajshahi), existence and length of the microfinance programs, and number of women participating in the microfinance program. Since the main purpose of the fieldwork was to have a complete in-depth understanding of the selected cases, purposive sampling sizes were achieved through the 'theoretical saturation technique' (i.e., the marginal case did not bring additional insights to the research questions). Yin (1994) argued the evaluation of case studies should be based on the theoretical construct, not on the size of the sample, as was done in conventional quantitative strategies. Thus, the respondents were chosen through purposive, network sampling for detailed interviewing, considering the purpose of the study that did not require representative large sampling. A total of 50 women beneficiaries were chosen for this research. Data was collected through the following data collection techniques:

In-depth Interviews

In the first phase, microfinance beneficiaries were chosen for one-to-one in-depth interviews in order to examine the impact of

the microfinance programs. The beneficiaries were selected according to their knowledge, experience, and period of involvement in the program. In the first instance, the researcher was introduced to the participants by the NGO staff, and the researcher then selected the respondents for further correspondence. Each and every Microfinance client was invited verbally to participate in the in-depth interview session. The researcher obtained a list of forty beneficiaries from the selected NGOs but felt to have achieved the 'saturation point' with the 30th respondent. One-to-one interviews with twenty women were conducted in their usual group meeting places. The main aim of the in-depth interview was to collect qualitative data to examine the level of impact of the microfinance on women's empowerment. Each interview session lasted approximately an hour and a half and was used to collect detailed case stories.

Focus Group Discussion

In the second phase, a number of focus group discussions (FGDs) was arranged with the microfinance beneficiaries. The FGDs were conducted to gain an understanding of and compare the participants' views about the details of the two microfinance programs. The women from the first phase were requested and did agree to take part in the second phase. This method served a useful purpose. It was a tool for collecting more in-depth information since people, especially women, in Bangladesh feel comfortable talking in a group (so the expectation was

that they would add to their original one-to-one discussions). All in all four FGDs were conducted with twenty microfinance beneficiaries to explore and understand their views about the programs offered by the NGOs. Only five respondents were included in each group, so the participants could focus on the questions and avoid personal chatting. Each FGD took roughly 45–50 min.

Observation

Observation refers to a technique which operates by systematically selecting, watching, listening, reading and recording behaviour and characteristics of living beings, objects or phenomena (Islam, 2008). The observation method was also used for collecting data from the rural women. This method was very useful for collecting actual data about respondents' behaviour and attitudes during the process of my interviewing. I tried to examine the respondents' thoughts and attitudes regarding the impact of CEP on their life particularly in respect of domestic violence.

Ethical Considerations in Data Collection

Violating respondents' privacy may create a threat to their integrity and may cause emotional and psychological anxiety and should be avoided by any means. During her stay in Bangladesh, the researcher lived in a secured environment that ensured information she collected was stored carefully and confidentially. Participants were assured that no identifying information

would be published in the thesis unless prior approval was given, their privacy would be maintained, and the confidentiality of any personal information shared by them would be respected. She clearly described the purpose of my interviews, explaining that their participation would not affect them in any way and she also informed them that the information would be used for academic purpose only. The researcher explained that she was in no way affiliated with any NGOs and reassured them that they could feel free to explain any changes to their lives brought about by their involvement in the NGO programs.

All interviews she recorded were retained by me and were not made available for any other purpose. The Letter of Introduction and Consent Forms stated the purpose of the research. As a woman of Bangladesh, the researcher was very careful to maintain the women's security and the safety of the research data. Initially no women participants were approached directly. All interviews with the participants were audio-taped with their permission and later transcribed and then translated into English. Photographs were taken only with their full consent. Any identifying information was removed, and the typed-up file stored on a password protected computer to which only she had access.

The participants were anonymous and although she endeavoured to always maintain their anonymity, due to the specific groups of women who were receiving microfinance, this was sometimes difficult

to achieve during data collection. To address this issue, throughout the thesis she has used codes to describe each woman's narratives in order to ensure anonymity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Despite this careful planning, 10% of respondents were still not very comfortable sharing their own stories, but they still articulated their grievances against men's bad attitudes towards women. Whilst participating in a series of individual in-depth interviews, the respondents reported that the majority of village women who were involved in CEP programs had a changed attitude and perception towards their husbands. They identified '*Polli Shomaj*' as an important factor that contributed to an increase in their status within the family as well as to their husbands' behavioural change towards them. Most of the women also identified many direct and indirect benefits of their involvement in '*Polli shomaj*'.

The author categorized 50 respondents into four different groups on the basis of the length of membership in Community Empowerment Program:

Table 1 demonstrates that 28 (56%) women respondents of group 1 are involved in CEP program for 4-5 years. Twelve (24%) women respondents are involved in this program for 3-4 years. Three (12%) respondents of group 3 are involved in this program for 2-3 years while rest 04 (8%) respondents of group 4 are involved in this program for 1-2 years.

Table 1
Groups based on length of membership

Category of women respondents	Length of Membership in CEP	No of respondents	Percentage
Group-1	4<5 years	28	56%
Group-2	3<4 years	12	24%
Group-3	2<3 years	06	12%
Group-4	1<2 years	04	8%
Total		50	100

What Changes Have Occurred in Women's Attitude and Action towards Violence? How?

The author was unable to uncover further evidence about domestic violence through the focus group discussions as participants did not want to disclose information about such a sensitive issue in front of others. The information she gathered regarding male violence came from individual in-depth interviews only. The study revealed that before joining CEP programs, women were afraid of their husbands and some were beaten by their husbands.

The interviews also revealed that the women who received training for both for themselves and their husbands tended to experience less spousal physical violence towards them. One of the respondents from group 1 said:

I am a five-year old member of a CEP program. I can remember my husband's attitude five years back. He used to abuse me verbally (gala gali) and sometimes hit me physically. But when we attended some

training together he started to change his attitude towards me. Since then my husband started to behave politely as he understood what he did was not right. (CEP-28, in depth interview on 6 Jun 17)

Another woman from group 2 reported that:

I got married eight years back. My husband used to be verbally abusive. After being a member of polli shomaj, NGO apa (sister) tells us about our righth. I am now able to explain to my husband that his verbal abuse towards me is unacceptable. He now speaks more politely to me and shows me respect. (CEP-26, in-depth interview on 25 Jun 17)

However, there still remained some women respondents (20%) from group 3 and 4 who acknowledged that they did not dare protest against violence and still abided by the prevailing social norms and practices.

I have been married for ten years and have two daughters in my family. My husband sometimes rebukes me in front of my daughters. Sometimes my husband's attitude hurts me but I know some women in the village whose husbands beat them quite often. I am happy that at least my husband does not beat me. I can't complain that he scolds me as he provides us with food. (CEP-25, group 3, in depth interview on 25 Apr 17)

My husband is my guardian. He provides for my children and meets their needs. Although he sometimes hits me with a stick, he also goes to doctor to get medicine for me when I need it. Since he is taking care of me I have to obey him. I won't complain that he beats me because he is an 'umbrella for my life'. Who will give us food if he is not there? (CEP-02, group 4, in depth interview on 10 Apr 17)

The data confirm that 20% women respondents still acknowledged their husbands as their guardians and accepted their husband's perceived right to inflict physical violence if they made mistakes. Such attitudes and beliefs are shaped by a gender biased social structure that does not allow women to think differently. Findings of the field investigation reveal

that the majority of the respondents are very determined to challenge such social norms by protesting against masculine domination and domestic violence. I found most of the women to be very conscious of their rights and to have strong opinions against domestic violence. The women challenged masculine domination and supremacy in families where males make all the decisions and women have no rights. Their protests against male domination challenged the social norm. The Community Empowerment program influenced the women's changed practices in a number of ways.

The findings reveal that group 1 and group 2 are more proactive to challenge domestic violence against them. I started to explore what are factors except the length of service that are responsible for women's transformed attitudes towards violence. Table 2 demonstrates the categories of women respondents on the basis of education and training.

Table 2 demonstrates that 50% respondents of group 1 and 20% respondents of group 2 have training and education up to class 4 and 2 respectively. Those women and their husbands received social training/awareness raising training. Education also enables them to establish their rights and protest against violence through training and advocacy. On the other, women respondents of group 3 and 4 only know how to sign and did not receive any training from NGOs. The above field data can be justified by following qualitative evidences that achieved through some case stories. Field data demonstrates that CEP respondents', who were more

Table 2
Groups based on education and training

Categories of women respondents in terms of education and Training	Education	Training (women and their husbands)	Respondents	Percentage
Group- 1	Up to Class 4	Yes	28	50%
Group-2	Up to Class 2	Yes	12	20%
Group-3	Signature only	No	06	10%
Group-4	Signature only	No	04	20%
Total			50	100%

Source: Field research

educated and trained, were more able to protest against violence not only at household level but also at community level. Moreover, their husbands supported their actions since they also received those training with their wives and consequently their attitudes towards violence were transmuted.

It is important to look at whether they can challenge violence at the community level either individually or collectively or, in other words, whether they are able to work collectively with other women in the community to protect each other from domestic violence. The field study revealed that the woman who lived in the Ashgram village was badly injured by her husband. Her husband occasionally assaulted her physically. She wanted to take legal action against her husband but when he became aware of her plans, he tried to kill her. His attempt to murder his wife was unsuccessful as a group of the women from *polli shomaj* went to the home and broke the door down to save her. Although the woman had serious head injuries and was bleeding, her husband

left her inside the home. When the leader of a nearby *Polli Shomaj* was made aware of the incident, she provided their collective fund² to cover the cost of her treatment. Unfortunately, the fund was not enough to transport her to the hospital for the necessary treatment, so some group members of *Polli shomaj* took the initiative to take her there. After her admission, the group members became aware that the woman needed surgery that would require more money. Women respondents from group 1 and 2 then hurried back to the village to raise more funds for her surgery.

Although more women were needed to collect funds, unfortunately only ten respondents from group 1 and 2 came forward to join the effort. Some women respondents refused to be involved in the collective attempt to save the woman. The

²Collective fund refers to a special type of fund which is collected from every member of the group once a fortnight. Every member of the group is obliged to hand over 2 *Taka* to the group leader for the fund which is used for providing various welfare activities for the community, especially vulnerable females.

group then canvassed other village members to raise funds and finally collected the full amount necessary for the surgery. One of the members of *Polli Shomaj* stated that:

The woman had to remain in hospital for five days so some of the members of our group organized a roster to provide the food. We needed more people to do our job more efficiently but many women from our polli shomaj refused to help us. Luckily a few women who were more educated and received different awareness raising training at times, went to the local schools daily to collect donations and the woman had successful head surgery and was fully cured. We went to the NGO leader and filed a complaint against the woman's husband. BRAC's top level officials along with our group of women visited the woman's parent's to ask whether they were happy for us to pursue legal action. After gaining their approval, BRAC sought legal action against the man pertaining to his domestic violence. Following that the man became scared and with a newly acquired respect for his wife he went to the hospital to take her back home. I believe membership of Polli Shomaj gives us courage as a group

and helps us to be aware of our rights and duties. (CEP-12, FGD on 12 May 17)

The field research revealed that another woman of the village was often physically assaulted by her cruel husband and mother-in-law. The woman went to a nearby women's *polli shomaj* to make a complaint against her in-laws. She also wanted to go to *Union Parishad* to seek a legal judgment but an eight *Polli shomaj* members of group 1 and 2 used their influence to arrange *shalish* with village leaders to help find a solution to their problems. The husband was penalized and was bound to follow the ruling. Now the couple is leading a happy life. They invited other women of *Polli shomaj* to join in *shalish*, yet many of them refused to participate. When one of them (CEP-11) from group 3 was asked the reason why she didn't join in *shalish*, she answered: "It's their personal matter and I don't think it is wise to become involved in others' personal matters". Therefore, it seems that it is usually only a particular group of women respondents who are willing to take part in challenging actions.

Policy Implications

The field study reveals that women respondents of group 1 and 2 were more active in protesting against violence not only at home but also at community level. First factor was their length of membership which has a positive effect on outcomes. Transformation of attitudes and translating attitudes into actions is a continuous process of change and the study revealed that the

women's action towards violence against women was greatly influenced by the length of time they were members of CEP program. The longer their membership, the more opportunities they had available to them to increase their self-development. These opportunities brought about positive changes to their lives and enabled them to become more empowered. The study revealed that the women in groups 1 and 2 were involved in CEP for a longer period of time (up to 5 years) than those of other groups. These women received more training opportunities because they were more well-known to the NGO officials. They also held leadership positions in the Polli shomaj.

Apart from this, two important factors are education and training. Education also enables women to have an impact at the immediate family, neighbourhood and community levels. Higher literacy levels bring more participatory space for women in their families. The comparatively well-educated women are also selected for training and this helps develop and increase their leadership skills. These women can more easily influence their husband's attitude and behaviour towards their empowerment. The author found that all women of groups 1 and 2 had received social training from NGOs and they are comparatively more active in protesting violence.

With regard to women respondents, the research indicates that where husbands were comparatively better educated and had received awareness raising training

from NGOs, they tended to support their wives' activities more than those who were illiterate and had no training. The study suggests that husbands of the women in groups 1 and 2 met these criteria more often than husbands of the women in the other groups. The husband's training was also a factor. Therefore, awareness raising training for women and their husbands should be the key focus of all CEP programs

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The paper contributes to the content since most of the earlier studies focused mainly on the impact of microfinance program of NGO on women's economic empowerment, ignoring the fact that empowerment is a complex construct that has to be looked at not only from economic perspective but also social perspective. Women's attitudes and actions towards violence is one of the key indicators of women's socio-political empowerment. While many researchers have so far been conducted on microfinance program of BRAC, there is hardly any research on CEP program of BRAC. Therefore, the findings of this research would contribute to the theory and practice of NGO and Gender mainstreaming in Bangladesh. Most importantly, it reveals that social/ awareness raising training is fundamental and should be a compulsory training component of all CEP programs of BRAC. Husband's training is also important and should be provided to as many beneficiaries' husbands as possible.

The field data substantiate the fact that the training programs create significant positive impact of the program participants and contribute to power transmutation. The study was restricted to one upazila only. Similar research could also be conducted with wider coverage in a similar socio-economic context.

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