



## Empowerment of Rural Women in Bangladesh: A Household Level Analysis

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### **Abstract**

*Although women constitute about half of the Bangladesh population, their social status especially in rural areas remains very low. Rural women belong to the most deprived section of the society facing adverse conditions in terms of social oppression and economic inequality, a visible majority of them being extremely poor. Considering this scenario, this paper investigates the nature and extent of rural women's empowerment and factors influencing it. The paper further outlines a strategic framework for enhancing rural women's empowerment.*

*The methodology of this study is an integration of quantitative and qualitative methods based on data collected in three villages of Mymensingh district. Six key indicators of empowerment covering three dimensions were chosen for this purpose. Data were collected from 156 respondents during January-April 2003 following stratified random sampling. Finally, a cumulative empowerment index (CEI) was developed adding the obtained scores of six empowerment indicators.*

*The distribution of empowerment indicators show that 83% of the women have a very low to low economic contribution, 44% have a very low to low access to resources, 93% have a very poor to poor asset ownership, 73% have a moderate to high participation in household decision-making, 43% have a highly unfavourable to unfavourable perception on gender awareness and 72% have a moderate to high coping capacity to household shocks. The distribution of CEI demonstrates that the majority of rural women have a very low to moderate (82%) level of empowerment. The multiple regression analysis shows that there were strong positive effects of formal and non-formal education, information media exposure and spatial mobility on women's CEI, while traditional socio-cultural norms have a strong negative effect.*

*The study concludes that education, training and exposure to information media have the potential to increase women's empowerment. Therefore, effective initiatives undertaken by the concerned agencies in improving women's education, skill acquisition training and access to information could enhance women's empowerment in order to achieve gender equality and development at all levels in the rural society of Bangladesh.*

**Keywords:** Rural women, Empowerment, Household level, Bangladesh.

## 1 Introduction

The empowerment of women is an essential precondition for the elimination of world poverty and the upholding of human rights (DFID, 2000: 8), in particular at the individual level, it helps building a base for social change. In Bangladesh, women constitute about half of the total population of which 80 percent live in rural areas (BBS, 2001: 21). But their status has been ranked the lowest in the world on the basis of twenty indicators related to health, marriage, children, education, employment and social equality (NCBP, 2000: 27). It is a well established fact that in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, women are ascribed a lower status as men who have the sovereign power to control households and society as a whole, while women are often secluded in their homes (Balk, 1997: 4). The World Bank study in Bangladesh highlights that women have limited role in household decision-making, limited access and control over household resources (physical and financial assets), low level of individual assets, heavy domestic workloads, restricted mobility and inadequate knowledge and skills that leading to women's vulnerability (Sebstad and Cohen 2002: 44). Taking this gloomy picture of women's situation into account, this study was undertaken to address the following two objectives: 1) to analyse and determine the nature and extent of rural women's empowerment and factors influencing it; and 2) to develop a comprehensive strategic framework for improving rural women's empowerment level.

## 2 Conceptual Issues

This study was conceptualised considering basically three important dimensions of women's empowerment (following Malhotra *et al.*, 2002: 13). These dimensions are dynamic, interlinked and mutually reinforcing at household level and recognise the fact that the level of gender equality and development are directly proportional. These dimensions are as follows:

- **Socio-economic dimension:** It includes economic contribution (both from farm and non-farm) to household welfare, access to socio-economic resources and ownership of productive and non-productive assets. This will increase women's earning capacity, bargaining power, control over resources, role in household economic decision-making, meeting the basic needs and altogether improving self-reliance, thereby reducing women's economic subordination.
- **Familial dimension:** It includes participation in household decisions covering six major dimensions. The increased role in household decision-making would enable them to improve their self-determination, bargaining power, control over resources, self-esteem, autonomy, status and power relations within households. That means the increased role of women in household decision-making will lead to their own well-being and that of their children.
- **Psychological dimension:** It includes perception on gender awareness with regard to basic rights of women and coping capacity to different household shocks. It will enhance self-confidence, bargaining power, freedom of choices and coping abilities within the households.

It is hypothesized that various kinds of inputs (e.g. education and skill training) provided by different intervening agencies will encourage women's participation in the development programmes. Subsequently, this process will lead to gender equality through enhanced self-confidence, resources, coping abilities, freedom of choices and power relations. It is assumed that gender equality contributes substantially to the well-being of women and reduces women's vulnerability and poverty.

### 3 Data and Methods

#### 3.1 Sources of Data

The study was conducted in three villages, namely *Sutiakhali*, *Bijoyagar* and *South Charkalibari* of *Sadar Upazilla* (sub-district) of *Mymensingh* district. The farmers' wives in these villages belonging to four categories of farm households *viz.* landless (up to 0.50 acre), marginal (0.51 to 1.50 acre), small (1.51 to 2.50 acre) and medium (2.51 to 4.50 acre) constituted the population of the study. Stratified random sampling with arbitrary allocation was followed to select 156 rural women (39 from each village). Therefore, the primary data were collected during January - April 2003 using a mix of quantitative (household survey) and qualitative methods (focus group discussions, mobility map, ranking and Vann diagram). Finally, most of the qualitative data were recoded to quantitative data by giving suitable scores as and when necessary. Effects of study variables were examined using tabular and multiple regression analysis.

#### 3.2 Operational definitions and measurement of variables

**3.2.1 Empowerment Indicators:** Six indicators of women's empowerment covering a wide range of attributes were comprehensively measured. These are as presented below:

a) *Contribution to household income* refers to the wife's contribution in terms of per cent involvement in subsistence productive activities that are not rewarded in cash or kind to household income. Fourteen activities were selected in this regard, which are as follows: 1) *farm activities* - land and seedbed preparation, sowing-planting-transplanting, intercultural activities, harvesting and threshing, winnowing-parboiling-drying-storage, drying and preservation of straws, homestead cultivation, livestock rearing, poultry rearing, fish culture and marketing related to agricultural production; and 2) *non-farm activities* - service, business and handicraft production.

b) *Access to resources* refers to the right, scope, power or permission to use and/or get benefits from ten selected resources that were divided into mainly two types. These are: 1) *household resources* - equal consumption of nutritious food, handling and spending money, selling of minor agricultural products, interpersonal communication, hiring of helping hands and utilisation of credit money if they receive; and 2) *social resources* - education/training, credit, rural cooperative and bank. It was computed using a four-point scale - 0 for 'no access', 1 for 'low access', 2 for 'medium access' and 3 for 'high access'.

c) *Ownership of assets* refers to the ability of a woman to control her own current assets and enjoy benefits accruing from them. Two categories of assets comprising nine items were selected for the study. They include: 1) *productive* - land, cattle, goat, poultry and cash savings; and 2) *non-productive* - jewellery, television, radio and small vehicle. It was measured in terms of money ('000'*Taka* - Bangladeshi currency) considering the current value of each item that a woman possesses.

d) *Participation in household decision-making (PHDM)* refers to the extent of women's ability to participate in formulating and executing decisions regarding domestic, financial, child-welfare, reproductive health, farming and socio-political matters in coordination with other family members. Twenty items in six major dimensions was analysed and a four-point scale was used to measure women's PHDM - 0 for 'no participation', 1 for 'low participation', 2 for 'medium participation' and 3 for 'high participation'.

e) *Perception on gender awareness* refers to a woman's ability to express her opinion with regard to existing gender inequality and discrimination against women in the society. Fifteen crucial gender issues were selected that include: under-value, education, economic opportunity, inheritance property rights, reproductive choice, early marriage, dowry, divorce

rights, son preference, attitude towards female child, birth registration, feeding priority, wage differentiation, political awareness and violence against women. It was ascertained through a five-point scale having 15 statements, of which seven were positively and eight were negatively stated. The rural women's responses were expressed by 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'undecided', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. A score of 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 was assigned respectively to each positive statement, whereas it was in reverse in case of negative statements.

f) *Coping capacity to household shocks* refers to a woman's ability to face sudden risks, crises and periodic stresses (threats to life or happiness) in the household. Nine major risk aspects related to household management including natural calamities, financial constraints due to crop failure, indebtedness, food unavailability, chronic illnesses, conflict, husbands' torture and unexpected death of children as well as husbands were analysed. A four-point rating scale (1 - 4) was used to measure the coping capacity where 1 indicates 'the best strategy' and 4 'the least suitable strategy'.

### 3.2.2 Cumulative Empowerment Index (CEI): Dependent Variable

The CEI is a composite of six empowerment indicators combining both quantitative and qualitative data in order to get a comprehensive feature of women's empowerment. The quantitative part represents five categories (e.g., 1 = Very low, 5 = Very high), which has been done on the basis of total obtained score for each empowerment indicator from the survey. The qualitative dimension stems out from total weighted scores indicated by twelve focus group participants (where 6 denotes 'very important' and 1 denotes 'less important'). Thus, a total of 77 specific attributes were added together to develop CEI in order to understand the socio-economic, familial and psychological dimensions of women's empowerment (see Table 1). Hence, CEI varied from 25 to 79, where 25 indicates the lowest level of empowerment and 79 means the highest level of empowerment. Maxwell (1995:13) followed the same procedure to measure food insecurity by developing a cumulative food security index.

**Table 1: Measurement of Cumulative Empowerment Index (CEI)**

Indicators	Quantitative rank	Qualitative rank <sup>a</sup>	CEI range: 25-79
Contribution to household income	1 to 5	6	$(1-5) \times 6 = 0-30$
Ownership of assets	1 to 5	5	$(1-5) \times 5 = 5-25$
Access to resources	1 to 5	4	$(1-5) \times 4 = 0-20$
Participation in household decision-making	1 to 5	3	$(1-5) \times 3 = 3-15$
Perception on gender awareness	1 to 5	2	$(1-5) \times 2 = 2-10$
Coping capacity to household shocks	1 to 5	1	$(1-5) \times 1 = 1-5$

<sup>a</sup> Rank order made based on total scores obtained from ranking in focus groups such as 6 = 120, 5 = 109, 4 = 106, 3 = 104, 2 = 102 and 1 = 96.

Source: Own compilation.

### 3.2.3 Determinants of Women's Empowerment: Independent Variables

Seven influential factors, two at individual, two at household and three at social level were used as predictors in order to check for their significance as women's empowerment determinants. Their operational definitions and measurement techniques are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Methodological Aspects of Independent Variables**

Variables	Definitions	Measuring scales	Observed range	Expected influence
1. Formal education	Formal schooling	Number of years	0 - 14	+
2. Non-formal education	Participation in any adult literacy or training programme	Dummy	0 - 1	+
3. Sex of children	Having son or daughter or both or no children	Ordinal ranking	0 - 3	+
4. Spousal relationship	Existing harmony between couples in terms of intimacy, cooperation, mutual understanding and respect	Ordinal ranking	1 - 3	+
5. Media exposure	Extent of contacts in a given period of time with seven channels of information	Scoring	0 - 42	+
6. Spatial mobility	Extent of physical movement (travel or visit) with permission of husband or senior member of the household	Scoring	1 - 10	+
7. Traditional socio-cultural norms	Existing three traditional practices (early marriage, dowry and domestic violence)	Index	0 - 3	-

## 4 Empirical Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Profile of Sample Women

Data contained in Table 3 show that a considerable proportion of the respondents are bounded by a lack of formal (50%) and non-formal education (67%). Women's low literacy rate and lack of access to education are among the several causes of their low social status and their dependence on men prevailing in rural areas. With regard to existing harmony between spouses, it is evident that 41 per cent of the wives have a bad relationship with their husbands that might affect their confidence level. Twenty-four per cent of the women have only sons and 61 per cent have both sons and daughters that give a permanent state of women in their conjugal life. Nearly half of the respondents (46 per cent) have low exposure to information media that highlights the fact that information media could not reach rural women effectively. It can also be seen that women's spatial mobility is low (55 per cent).

**Table 3: Percentage Distribution of Socio-demographic Characteristics of Rural Women**

Variables with category	Respondents (N=156)		Variables with category	Respondents (N=156)	
	Number	Percent		Number	Percent
<b>Formal education</b>			<b>Sex of children</b>		
No schooling	77	49.4	No children	8	5.0
Primary school level	44	28.2	Only girls	16	10.3
Secondary school level	33	21.2	Both boys and girls	95	61.0
Above secondary level	2	1.2	Only boys	37	23.7
<b>Non-formal education</b>			<b>Media exposure</b>		
Yes	51	32.7	Low exposure	72	46.3
No	105	67.3	Medium exposure	61	39.0
<b>Spousal relationship</b>			High exposure	23	14.7
Bad relation	64	41.0	<b>Spatial mobility</b>		
Moderate relation	38	24.4	Low mobility	86	55.0
Good relation	54	34.6	Medium mobility	56	36.0
			High mobility	14	9.0

Source: Own field study result, 2003.

The result regarding traditional norms shows that 85% of the women have been married before reaching the age of 18 years (Figure 1). A majority (92%) have paid dowry during their marriage or have continuous dowry pressure after marriage - either for themselves or in case of elder women for their daughters. A significant part of the women (69%) are the victims of domestic violence.



**Figure 1: Existing Forms of Traditional Socio-cultural Norms**

Source: Own field study result, 2003.

**4.2 Extent of Women’s Empowerment**

The main variable constructed in this study is women’s CEI and its distribution is depicted in Table 4. It reveals that 11% of the respondents fall under a very low empowerment category, 36% low, 35% medium, 12% high empowerment category, respectively and only few of them (5%) belong to a very high empowerment category. It can be noticed, however, that an overwhelming majority of women (82%) are concentrated in very low to moderate tail of empowerment distribution. Due to the low level of empowerment, poor women acutely feel their powerlessness and insecurity, their vulnerability and a lack of dignity within the household.

**Table 4: Distribution of the Rural Women on the basis of CEI**

Category	Number	Percent
Very low empowerment (25-36)	21	11
Low empowerment (36-47)	70	36
Medium empowerment (47-58)	42	35
High empowerment (58-69)	15	12
Very high empowerment (69-79)	8	6
Total	156	100

Source: Own computation.

**4.3 Multiple Linear Regression Analysis**

The multiple regression technique was applied to explore the effects of seven key factors on women’s empowerment. The analysis contained in Table 5 shows positive and highly significant effects of formal and non-formal education, sex of children, spousal relationship, exposure to media and spatial mobility on CEI. These results support the proposition that women’s empowerment is increased by the aforementioned six variables.

According to James and Trail (1995: 18-27), improving literacy skills of women have a beneficial impact on their socio-economic condition. Proper training and implementation of literacy programmes are essential for the empowerment of women and this could be one of the best solutions to rural poverty. Literate women can more easily demand and protect their rights in order to change and improve their situations. Sex of children is noted as a positive

factor in woman's empowerment, especially when one gives birth to a son. It is a common perception that sons will contribute to family income, provide all the necessary care and support to their parents when they are old and carry the family name. On the other hand, daughters are often considered as an economic liability because of dowry based marriage system. Thus, better educated wives having at least one son might form spousal harmony and dignity in patri-local residence.

**Table 5: Effects of Determinants on Rural Women's Empowerment**

Independent Variables	Dependent variable: Cumulative Empowerment Index (CEI)		
	Coefficient	t-value	Significance level
Constant	26.418	7.807	.000
Formal education (score)	0.189	3.162	.002
Non-formal education (dummy)	0.139	2.604	.010
Sex of children (ordinal rank)	0.112	2.069	.040
Spousal relationship (ordinal rank)	0.203	3.666	.000
Media exposure (score)	0.255	4.481	.000
Spatial mobility (score)	0.471	8.747	.000
Traditional social-cultural norms (index)	-0.186	-3.486	.001

N = 156; Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.584; Durbin-Watson = 2.299; F = 32.069 (Significance level: .000)

Source: Own computation.

In rural societies of Bangladesh, women are usually not permitted to interact with men other than their direct close family members and as a result, they have only limited access to development personnel. In such a situation, mass media such as radio and television can create awareness about issues affecting daily life, family planning programmes, poverty alleviation programmes, gender issues, human right issues etc. Spatial mobility is another important factor in women's social, economic and political empowerment. Several studies have revealed that promotion of women's freedom is necessary to make them capable of making their own choices, to change their attitudes, to improve their social networks and reduce their level of poverty. A mobility map analysis shows that rural wives generally visit their natal houses to meet their old or sick parents, to get financial or any other kind of support during crisis periods. They go to the town to buy clothes especially for their children in local Mymensingh town. They visit the health centre mainly for the treatment of their sick children or for their own reproductive health care. Only a very few women go to the crop fields, mainly for activities like weeding or collecting fodder and firewood. It is rare for a woman to cultivate crops in the field due to the restrictions imposed by cultural and religious norms. Thus, the lack of women's physical mobility deprives them of getting better livelihood opportunities.

On the contrary, traditional socio-cultural norms have a significant negative impact on CEI. It is a central premise of gender studies that traditional customs, taboos, norms etc. affect women in a variety of ways particularly in fiercely patriarchal societies like Bangladesh. One impediment that a woman faces is the usual norm of early marriage which implies arranged marriages or forced marriages where a woman has no right to choose her marriage partner, infringing on her sexual and reproductive rights. Early marriage usually leads to early motherhood and young women are often threatened to death due to pregnancy-related causes. Furthermore, the invidious dowry-based marriage system has become an entrenched crime of the present time - the most unfair and prejudiced social practice against women. These usually

involve victims of greedy husbands and their relatives. Generally, a reasonable amount of money and other goods (based on bargaining) need to be paid at the time of the wedding and hardly can any marriage occur without dowry. Even after marriage, additional payments are required to be made from time to time as per demand of the groom's family. Failure to meet this requirement may lead to continuous torture by the husband or in-law members followed by murder in extreme cases. The most common forms of domestic violence against women at the household level include dowry, wife-beating, threat to divorce, polygamy, unwillingness to provide livelihood support, extramarital relationship, family conflict and mental torture (due to giving birth to only female children and less physical beauty). All these have serious cumulative negative consequences on women's health and quality of life.

However, these variables do not explain the whole situation of women's empowerment. There are several quantitative and qualitative factors which could contribute to women's empowerment, particularly qualitative ones, for instance, religious belief, household type, husbands' attitudes etc. Therefore, the regression analysis suggests the need for implementing holistic strategies for women (particularly in the areas of human resource development) that may enhance women's status and quality of life in the face of extremely disabling social conditions.

## **5 Suggested Strategies for Action**

Based on empirical results and discussion, the overall conclusion of this study is that the level of women's empowerment is not satisfactory at the household level. It also highlights the fact that formal and non-formal education, exposure to information media and spatial mobility are the most influential factors that enhance women's empowerment. In contrast, the traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices are deeply entrenched in women's lives that hinder their empowerment. To move forward, some concrete steps need to be undertaken by the major intervening agencies, namely governmental organisations (GOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women's organisations (WOs) and other stakeholders (private initiatives, civil society etc.) aimed at stimulating the process of female empowerment. Interventions should be in the nature of legislative, planning, programme or structural steps to provide greater opportunities for the sustainable development of women at all levels and to reduce discriminatory practices against women as well as all types of gender-based stereotypes.

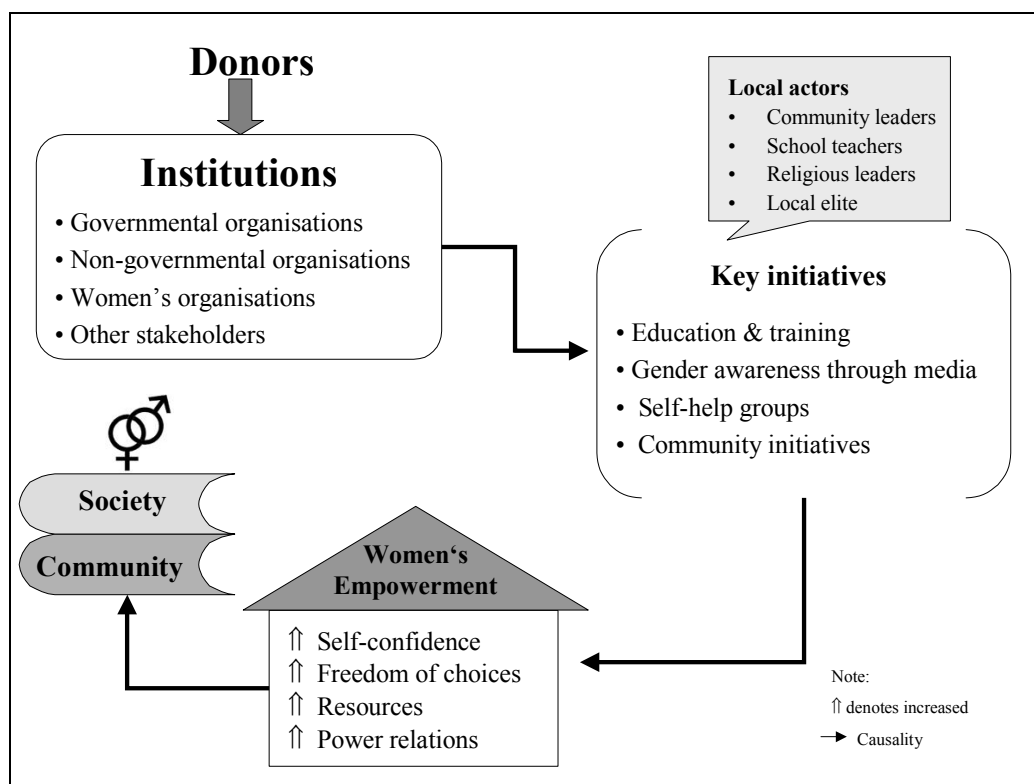
However, strategies to combat the lack of empowerment must address not only the immediate needs of rural women (practical gender need) but must also focus on the root cause of women's powerlessness (strategic gender need). Figure 2 shows some proposed ways of improving the economic and social conditions of poor and vulnerable rural women in the interest of national development.

*Education and training:* The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Women & Children's Affairs and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) should implement education programmes for rural women more effectively. The Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) with the collaboration of BRAC and the Grameen Bank, since they are working in the villages studied, can provide income generation training with financial support in the areas of home gardening, nursery development, cattle fattening, fish culture, craft production and embroidery to advance their skills aiming at economic self-reliance. Adequate extension facilities through female agents could be helpful to achieve the goal of increased income effectively. Gender education must be incorporated into the curricula from primary school level.

*Gender awareness through media:* With a view to create gender awareness amongst women as well as men, it is a prime need to disseminate information through influential media. Major



concerning areas to combat gender disparity must include education, income, nutrition, health, dowry, early marriage, property and divorce rights.



**Figure 2: Suggested Strategic Framework Showing Rural Women's Empowerment Process**

Source: Own representation.

Launching of vigorous conscientising campaigns by organising rallies and public meetings ensuring participation of all rural people could be an effective tool to create massive awareness about gender. It can be carried out on the eve of special significant days (e.g. International Women's Day, Human Rights Day and Mothers' Day) using posters, paper caps, placards, festoons etc. Moreover, all agencies can organise various cultural programmes (e.g. dramas, songs, *jatra*) jointly based on folk traditions and culture frequently to stress the importance of both sexes being involved in development. Students can take part actively in implementing such programmes at local level. The agencies can also conduct workshops with local community and religious leaders to formulate strategies in shaking off gender discriminations and stereotypes from the community.

The extension agents of different departments, besides doing their assigned extension activities can serve as very good individual media to spread gender awareness message to the villagers along with community leaders, religious leaders, school teachers and local elite. They can also support women in social participation. They can jointly organise meetings, group discussions, speeches and counselling for motivating rural people about gender equality and encouraging women to participate in community development.

The electronic media (mainly, radio & television) can play a more proactive role in raising awareness by broadcasting dramas, folk songs, puppet shows and advertisements focusing exclusively on a positive image of women. Some other media such as posters, newsletters and booklets could also be effective for literate people.

Besides these, the Government should establish a legal cell integrated within the family courts or separately at the village level to give free legal advice to women and girls. This cell can

offer voluntary counselling on different issues like marriage, development of self-esteem and confidence, protection from violence etc.

*Self-help groups:* Establishment of women's self-help groups as vehicles for female empowerment is necessary in the rural areas. India, for example, has achieved tremendous progress in women's empowerment through such groups. Donors, NGOs and WOs initiatives' would be fruitful to develop these types of groups in rural areas. It will provide rural women a platform to come together to act as a pressure group, at the same time providing the members economic (e.g., credit) and social support (e.g., legal support and counselling).

*Community initiatives:* There is a need to consider alternative intervention strategies involving community and religious groups. Issues related to women's empowerment should be given priority in the interventions of village councils and of religious groups at the local level. This can be achieved effectively only if all these agencies function as a close network under one umbrella. Their initiatives would build the base for promoting positive family practices, social norms favourable to women, income generation and education encouraging gender equality in the community. Thus, the affluent section of the community can play a dominant role in improving women's status.

*Donors:* Some leading international donors such as World Bank, WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, FAO, OXFAM and CIDA are supporting many projects related to women's development in Bangladesh. They have been playing a major role in advancing legislation that eliminates discrimination against girls and women by funding different projects relating to education, agricultural production, health, human rights etc. implemented through GOs, NGOs and WOs. But apart from that they should monitor and evaluate specifically the gender impact of project interventions on regular basis to control misuse of resources, corruption and other irregularities. Thus, donors constitute a vital contributing factor in upgrading women's status in Bangladesh so as to fulfil the Millennium Development Goals.

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