

Not just a tick box: NGOs should look beyond women's employment and address household power dynamics

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*Women-centric interventions have been a dominant feature of the global development agenda for more than two decades now. In response, NGO projects in Bangladesh have done a great deal to advance higher education for girls and help women to develop employable skills. However, drawing on personal experience of evaluating NGO projects **Tasmiah T. Rahman** argues that women's empowerment and participation in the workforce remains limited by the patriarchal mind-set.*



NGOs and gender policies

Bangladesh is a land of NGOs. She is the birthplace of world's largest NGO [BRAC](#) and the home of Nobel prize winning banker of poor, [Muhammad Yunus](#). She is also the pseudo home of a number of prominent international NGOs. A handsome supply of donor money has met demands by local NGOs sprawling in the last three decades, aiming to improve lives of the poor, more recently with a particular focus on women.

It was proclaimed at the Beijing Conference in 1995 that 70% women were in poverty and since then women-centric interventions became a major part of the global development agenda, for example in the IMF's [Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers](#) and the UN's [Millennium Development Goals](#).

Bangladesh quickly grew into a space where global gender mainstreaming policies became a part of project designs as 'cross-cutting' issues. Motivated by funding opportunities associated with the shift in focus, the women-focussed approach trickled down from global to national and local levels as specific interventions on projects, a discourse to be learnt and beneficiary numbers to be included in the log-frame.

The good and the bad

This practice brought some success. As reported by [UNDP in 2013](#), Bangladesh has achieved higher growth in human development index compared to her neighbours, in increasing entrees to higher education for girls, increasing access to women's employment and mainstreaming gender equality in public sphere.

Though NGOs are quick to take credit for gender equality in the more visible public sphere, they are quite nonchalant when it comes to addressing gender issues in personal sphere. Gender-based violence and sexual harassment remains rampant; according to [Unicef](#), in 2011 the country was cited for having the 4th highest rate of child marriages in the world. Even though there have been sporadic campaigns and actions taken against these crimes, the underlying causes of it have not been challenged.

The government is often blamed for its limited role in implementing laws against domestic violence or abuse against women. But NGOs narrow focus on some donor-favourite areas of gender mainstreaming, without due consideration to other important ones, have not solved the basic equality issues for women. Various feminist researchers including [Sylvia Chant](#) have argued that increasing access to income have not changed the household power dynamics, instead women have been further burdened. Some have even proved women's access to paid labour and micro-credit as causes of violence.

A personal experience

I was working for a skills development project in Bangladesh as a monitoring and evaluation staff for an international NGO. The project was designed to train youth in urban and rural areas in marketable trades for potential future jobs in the local market.

There was a good effort to train women for potential future earnings. While traditional trades like sewing and tailoring brought in more women, a new trade known as 'beautician' also gained popularity among them. Training in non-traditional trades like electrical house wiring or carpentry was advocated for women as that would mean gender mainstreaming in the job market. However, the barriers induced by patriarchal mind-set surfaced after women completed training and set out to find jobs.

On field visits in rural areas, I heard numerous stories of how female graduates were struggling within households. One girl told me that despite successfully completing training, her father did not want her to go out and work. Even when families are in dire financial crisis, male members of the family are sceptical of female members taking on professional roles. Another female graduate confessed that her family is unhappy because she started her own beauty salon. Her husband was threatening her every day that he would destroy the store. Reasons for such apprehensive and aggressive attitude of men in families could be the lack of security for women in the public sphere, which leaves them feeling vulnerable travelling alone or working in male-dominated environments, as well as age-old social norms and practices of limiting women's role to household chores. The unfriendly attitude towards women was also evident outside of household. A training service provider pointed out that it was not practical to train married women because their husbands will never let them work. A garment factory owner told me that he was doing a favour to us by taking in women in his factory. According to him, women do not switch jobs as frequently as men do, but they are weak and slow and are mostly working to find a husband in the factory!

Though the circumstances were mildly better in urban areas the woes of harsh working conditions for women and lack of support from family members continued. Women were employed after the training with decent jobs, especially in the garment factories. While documenting their lives, many women shared stories of working 10 hour shifts, or even longer in pursuit of over-time income. Though they appreciated the additional income from jobs, many women confessed a doubling of their workload because they were still expected to do all the household chores. The raising of children also largely remains a women's job. While most women admit that their say over household decisions have improved, deeper probing brought out issues of insult and abuse when women voiced their concerns. These are just a few examples out of hundreds that I heard every day while working in an organisation that aimed to empowering women through income generation.

The problem

Although there have been successes in women's empowerment, very little has been done to challenge the mindset of patriarchy. Despite heavy criticisms, the design of these projects remain top-down and heavily invested in quantifiable measures. Even though qualitative results are welcome, they hold less value in evaluating a project. A major change in the monitoring system has been to separate male and female beneficiaries at the activity level. This is welcoming because it is easier to identify how many women received support from the project. But the popular gender mainstreaming approach is to focus on income generation with quantifiable results that still ignores complex relations in the household. My project was no different.

Can we expect a change?

The gender strategies should aspire to wider social change rather than just income change. Quantifiable numbers are important but they do not reflect the experiences of women who enter the workforce and the impact on complex social structures cannot always be measured. Long term changes within power structure will take continuous advocacy and discussions with members of the community in local settings. Alongside implementing activities focussed on expanding the skills and opportunities for women, NGO workers need to advocate changing the mind-

set of men in households and workplaces.

There needs to be a trust based system and an altruistic motive to make these changes. Is it understandable that the gender relations in households are difficult to challenge and change will not happen overnight. However, creating an enabling environment is not an over-ambitious aim after three decades of preaching gender friendly policies. So instead of ticking a box on a log frame and calling women's empowerment in Bangladesh a success, let's go beyond that box to make existing NGO efforts more effective.

Cover image: Yanur Begum, a female worker in the Wool Tex Sweaters Limited in Shewrapara, Dhaka Credit: flickr/Asian Development Bank CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, the London School of Economics, nor the institutions referred to above. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Tasmiah Rahman is a current MSc student in the Social Policy and Development dept. at The London School of Economics. Prior to this she was employed as a Monitoring Results Measurement Manager at an international NGO in Bangladesh.



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