Welfare, Work, and Women's Empowerment: Evidence from Bangladesh's Food for Work Program*

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Abstract: Women's empowerment has become a major concern of both developed and developing countries across the world. Women are often largely marginalized from economic, political, and familial spheres because they tend to have limited access to economic resources, health care, and education and suffer disproportionately from the effects of poverty, discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, and so forth. This study assesses the level of women's empowerment by scrutinizing economic, political, and interpersonal and familial factors in rural Bangladesh. The study employed qualitative interviews and focus group discussions to determine the contribution of a food for work program that was not designed to empower women, to women's perception of empowerment. The study interviewed 305 respondents in two districts and ten subdistricts using a purposive sampling procedure. The study showed some evidence of enhanced economic empowerment, strong evidence of increased local political empowerment, and evidence of interpersonal empowerment among women participating in the program.

Keywords: women's empowerment, economic empowerment, political empowerment, interpersonal empowerment, Kajer Binimoye Khaddo (KABIKHA)

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INTRODUCTION

Women make up the majority of the world's population and also make up the majority of the world's poor. According to the World Bank's gender statistics database, women have a higher unemployment rate than men in virtually every country (datacatalog.worldbank.org). In general, women also make up the majority of the lower paid, unorganized informal sector of most economies (Garcia, 1990; Rahman, Kabir, & Helal, 2013) and face numerous challenges in accessing education and health services and in improving their economic circumstances (Yogendrarajah & Semasinghe, 2013). This is as true in Bangladesh as elsewhere, and the families of these women are among the rural landless population that frequently suffer from food scarcity (Von Braun, Teklu, & Webb, 1991; Goletti, 1993; Von Braun & Kennedy, 1995). Although poverty is an almost universal feature of life in Bangladesh, these employed women clearly represent the "poorest of the poor" (Marum, 1982; Ahmad & Hossain, 1985). They are not even allowed to participate in decision-making processes in a male-dominated society.

Bangladesh is a developing country where half of the total population is made up of women whose socioeconomic condition is very low (Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies/International Food Policy Research Institute, 1985). The country is struggling for modernity, over tradition, over men's and women's equality, for social dignity, for security, and over the position of women in the family, is subject to multilateral pressures. Women do not participate equally in social development. They have a lower status compared to men in every sphere of socioeconomic and political life, and they have very limited access to income-generating activities due to a number of social, cultural, and religious obstacles. Moreover, life for women in rural Bangladesh, where 80% of all Bangladeshi women live, is heavily circumscribed by both the prevailing patriarchal system and the religious edicts (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Their presence is forbidden at the market, and they are not supposed to handle money or exercise property rights, either, all of which severely restricts their potential economic activities and choices, leaving them subordinate to and dependent on men (Rahman, Kabir, & Helal, 2013).

Therefore, rural women in Bangladesh typically suffer from the twin problems of poverty and disempowerment. The fact that women make up a sizable proportion of the population suggests that their empowerment could be critical in effecting change, particularly in connection with the fight against poverty (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Narayan, 2002; Narayan-Parker, 2005). Empowerment also helps provide social protection and

increases the status of women, even as it aids in development and reduces poverty (Cook & Kabeer, 2011). Many programs have been designed to address women's poverty directly, and there has been extensive study of the impact of microfinance programs in particular on both development and reducing women's disempowerment (e.g., Schuler & Hashemi, 1994; Hashemi Schuler, & Riley, 1996; Mayoux, 2001).

However, general social protection programs have provided more benefits over a longer period in order to alleviate the problems of poverty in Bangladesh. On the one hand, they have contributed significant resources and may also contribute to the empowerment of women. On the other hand, there have been significant problems with the implementation of many social protection programs in Bangladesh (Masud-All-Kamal & Saha, 2014).

The Bangladeshi food for work program known as Kajer Binimoye Khaddo (KABIKHA) is a general social protection program that has endured because it has played an important role in reducing rural poverty. KABIKHA was created in response to the 1974 famine (Ahmed, 1992; Ahmed & Shams, 1993; Ahmed, Zohir, Kumar, & Chowdhury, 1995). The program provides different forms of assistance to the very poor, focusing especially on food. KABIKHA contributes to long-term food security by improving local agricultural infrastructure and potential.

The broad objective of the study is to address the contribution of general social support to the empowerment of rural women in Bangladesh. The study did this by assessing the effect of the food for work program on the self-reported empowerment of rural women in Bangladesh. In particular, the study divides women's empowerment into economic, political, and interpersonal dimensions and seeks to determine the contribution of KABIKHA to participants' perception of empowerment in relation to each dimension.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

There are many definitions of women's empowerment from a number of perspectives, and the differences in these views are not always clear (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Alkire et al., 2013). For example, Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) produce 30 separate definitions of empowerment. Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender (2002) point out that these generally concern "women's ability to make decisions and affect outcomes of importance to them and their families." They point out that "control over self and resources" is a frequent element in definitions that include the ability to "affect

one's own well-being," and "make strategic life choices" (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002: 5). Different people use empowerment to mean different things (Mosedale, 2005). Not everyone even agrees that it may even be defined, let alone measured (Kabeer, 1999).

Empowerment encompasses a variety of concepts and outcomes, some narrowly defined and some presented very broadly. The term often aligns with policy advocacy, implicitly defined as whatever the policy intervention is advocating. Even feminist writings are uneven in providing clear definitions of empowerment relative to calling for fixes (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). "One reason why the degree of consensus on the conceptualization of empowerment is not readily apparent in the literature is because of the variation in terminology used to encompass it" (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002).

Empowerment has been defined as a function of physical mobility, economic security, ability to make purchases, freedom from domination and violence, legal awareness, and participation in politics (Schuler & Hashemi, 1994; Hashemi Schuler, & Riley, 1996). Many definitions have focused on the economic sphere (Awokuse, 2011), though empowerment is related to power more broadly and is connected to how power is conceptualized in relation to different dimensions of politics, culture, the economy, social life, family life, and the personal sphere (Mosedale, 2005).

Choice is also an element in definitions of women's empowerment, as in a "group's or individual's capacity to make effective choices, that is, to make choices and then to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" (Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006; see also Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Alkire et al., 2013). The ability to make choices is influenced by institutional climate as well as by social and political structures (Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006; Narayan-Parker, 2005).

Empowerment may be seen as zero-sum when it is treated as an end in itself, but it opens up more possibilities for women when it is viewed in terms of agency, access to resources, and achievements, with power seen as an ability to make choices (Kabeer, 1999; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Alkire et al., 2013). Empowerment is a process of "thinking outside the system and challenging the status quo" (Kabeer, 1999; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Alkire et al., 2013). "Options, choice, control, and power" emerge as some of the most common elements in definitions of empowerment (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002).

Though not everyone agrees that empowerment may be defined and measured, a useful definition of empowerment that effectively captures what is common to these definitions and that can be applied across the range of contexts that develop-

ment assistance is concerned with is "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (Kabeer, 1999; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Alkire et al., 2013). This definition is different from the general concept of power in that it incorporates the process of moving away from disempowerment as well as the agency of the previously disempowered in terms of their being able to make their own individual strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Alkire et al., 2013). Empowerment provides social protection and aids in development (Cook & Kabeer, 2011).

Empowerment may involve social inclusion in economic institutions, conflating participation with empowerment, while capitalism itself may be seen as a disempowering force requiring specific interventions via state and civil society institutions (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). On the other hand, interpersonal relations are also an arena for women's empowerment (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). This is particularly the case as women are more than just one group among many disempowered groups. Women are the majority, and simultaneous systemic changes are required both top-down at the state and societal level and bottom-up at the interpersonal and intrafamily level in order to increase women's empowerment (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). The cross-cutting nature of women's empowerment provides the potential to impact numerous other issues, giving it great salience as an instrument for change (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005).

Women's empowerment is both an inherent goal based on the value of women as well as an instrument for achieving other goals like development, poverty reduction, and good governance and is recognized as critical by the World Bank (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). The third millennium development goal links gender equality and women's empowerment and the indicators associated with it include education, employment, and political participation, which are components that contribute to accomplishing the goal (Kabeer, 2005).

Empowering women is necessary for moving large numbers of people out of poverty based on helping those most motivated to do the necessary work (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). Reduction and elimination of poverty require the energy and skills and motivation of the poor to make a difference and, as a majority, empowered women have an important role to play with more information, inclusion, and local organizational capacity in a context of accountability (Narayan, 2002; Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006). Not restricted to gender, empowerment expands the assets and capacity of poor people to participate, negotiate, influence, control, and demand accountability from the institutions that affect their lives (Narayan, 2002).

There are connections between development and social policy as well as social protection programs targeted at women (Cook & Kabeer, 2011).

A lack of democracy harms efforts to achieve women's empowerment (Batliwala, 1994). Empowerment interventions generally advocate macro- and meso-level responses (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). Focusing on opportunities and services is not enough, especially in undemocratic systems and male-dominated social systems. Integrated development, economic empowerment, and consciousness raising have been tried in South Asia as tools for empowerment based on different assumptions about the causes of poverty and disempowerment. Collectively, they have managed to promote political, economic, and social aspects of empowerment (Batliwala, 1994). There is also the question of the ability to confront and change macro-level economic, legal, social, and political institutions (Mayoux, 2001).

The Women-Friendly City Project was created in Korea in an effort to increase women's representation, with public-public cooperative efforts and public-private partnerships both serving as paths leading to representation, though institutional resources did not, suggesting the need for greater reform to institutions in order to support more equal representation for women (Huh & Kim, 2017). The relationship between men and women is a question of the nature of household and kinship group relationships and whether and how men's social capital reinforces gender subordination (Mayoux, 2001). Likewise, relationships between different groups of women may or may not be supportive and empowering (Mayoux, 2001).

A connection has been observed between social capital and empowerment (Mayoux, 2001). Here the assumption is that group-based programs use social capital to promote collective activity, with economic, social, and political outcomes (Mayoux, 2001). Social capital is one of the few resources poor women possess (Mayoux, 2001). "Drawing mainly from the human rights and feminist perspectives, many definitions contain the idea that a fundamental shift in perceptions, or 'inner transformation,' is essential to the formulation of choices" (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002: 7). The move to women's empowerment has helped drive a shift away from charity approaches (Hossain & Mathbor, 2014). Before real change can happen, individuals must use consciousness raising to confront the social construction of gender that subordinates women at home, in their class, caste, religion, economy, and society (Batliwala, 1994).

This study takes place in a context in Bangladesh of local consolidation of power, informality and patronage, even as efforts are made for development, empowerment, and change (Siddiqui, 2005; Lewis & Hossain, 2019). Poverty and the status of women have been recognized as important issues in Bangladesh.

Social work has been an approach for integrating efforts to help women empower themselves in Bangladesh. It has shown some promise, though it has limitations in addressing the challenges of development and empowerment (Hossain & Mathbor, 2014). The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index measures decisions, access to power, control of income, community leadership, and time allocation in addition to the proportion of women's achievements in comparison to men's in their households as well as the relative income gap between men and women, and has been used with some success in Bangladesh, which has been an area of intense interest for development and empowerment (Alkire et al., 2013).

Social safety net programs in Bangladesh are designed to provide either social protection or social empowerment. The expense and effort of these programs do not achieve optimal results, however, due to administrative problems, cost, leakage, poor targeting, poor governance, low transparency and accountability, political capture, corruption, and a trend toward reinforcing patron-client networks at the expense of program performance (Masud-All-Kamal & Saha, 2014). Even measurement of assistance, such as food aid, is inconsistent and can be problematic (Awokuse, 2011).

The Grameen Bank and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee in Bangladesh have provided credit ad have been found to increase different dimensions of women's empowerment through a "skillful use of rules and rituals to make the loan program function" with a focus on credit (Schuler & Hashemi, 1994; Hashemi Schuler, & Riley, 1996). Furthermore, villages where Grameen Bank was active showed an increase in contraceptive use (Schuler & Hashemi, 1994). However, microfinance programs promoting empowerment based on the concept of building social capital might not achieve social and financial sustainability, especially when norms, networks, and power relations are not adequately addressed, leading to underperformance in achieving empowerment (Mayoux, 2001).

Women's empowerment reflects capability related to a variety of factors, including the economic sphere, interpersonal relationships, and political arrangements where the focus of women's empowerment is on certain universally valued functions relating to the basic fundamentals of survival and well-being regardless of context. The following conceptual framework was developed scrutinizing different factors related to economic, political, and interpersonal or family dynamics. The framework reflects the experience of the sampling respondents in the studied area. Women's empowerment was adopted as the dependent variable with three major dimensions (economic, political, and interpersonal/familial empowerment). Economic empowerment includes decision making (particularly over purchases), household income (participation in farm activities), access to resources, ownership,

and resilience (capacity to cope with household shocks) as subfactors, while political and interpersonal or familial empowerment are considered overall as they have received less specific attention in the literature.

METHODOLOGY

KABIKHA, the Food for Work Program

KABIKHA, is a national program in Bangladesh that plays an important role in the reduction of rural poverty, primarily through generating employment opportunities. KABIKHA has been operating in Bangladesh since 1975 (Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, 2007). Although the program started in 1975, it had its origins in the earlier Pakistani Village Aid program initiated in 1952, which was revived after independence in response to the great famine of 1974 (Ahmed et al., 1995).

The program provides various advantages to the hardcore poor, particularly providing food aid to poor people aiming at helping to develop the local economy by supporting local businesses and food producers. At the same time, this program strengthens long-term food security by improving local infrastructure and/or agricultural potential. Women have been participating in KABIKHA projects since the first 1975-76 work season (Chowdhury, 1983). In return for food assistance, women are employed in local development projects such as road construction and maintenance, reforestation of Bangladesh's endangered forests, and local cottage industries (Siddiqui, 2005). Simultaneously, the program serves as an important source of food.

This assistance is critical because the women employed through the program (as well as parallel cash for work programs) belong to large rural families who are frequently landless and often suffer from food scarcity. The women employed are among the poorest in a nation marked by ever-present poverty, particularly in rural areas (Marum, 1982; Chowdhury, 1983).

Though the program does not target women, there are particular incentives for women to participate. For example, women are often paid more than men for their scarce labor in order to attract more workers into the program. While men are paid 47 kilograms of wheat for every 1000 cubic feet moved on road and embankment projects, women are paid 65 kilograms (Ahmed et al., 1995). As a result, KABIKHA is an option not only for relief and insurance against shocks but also assists longer-term development efforts and the empowerment of women living in

rural areas.

Food for work programs are powerful tools for improving the economic development of rural women but have also have long been used to encourage the participation of women along with men and to increase their purchasing power and thus ensure a more equal position (Subbarao, 2006). Such participation by women in the workplace, leadership roles in politics and society, and access to credit can be regarded as empowering since women's empowerment is a reflection of gender equality. This is a precursor to moving the country forward towards middle-income status and inclusive and sustainable development. In addition, women's empowerment in the economic and social fields constitutes a fundamental objective of all development efforts in rural areas and has emerged as an important issue in recent times (Yogendrarajah & Semasinghe, 2013). It is necessary to carry out an investigation into the empowerment of women through food for work programs so that policy makers can take proper steps on the basis of research findings.

Research Methods and Hypotheses

The study used qualitative methods to address the question of women's perception of the empowering effects of the food for work program. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted from May to July in 2015 in order to explore the economic, political, and interpersonal empowerment of women living in rural Bangladesh through KABIKHA. The study was conducted among 305 women aged 20 to 45 working under KABIKHA in ten various upazilas (subdistricts) in Dhaka and Bogra. Five upazilas where KABIKHA was in progress were randomly selected from each district. An attempt was made to select 30 participants randomly from each upazila, though 31 were recruited from five districts where more women accepted than expected.

Each woman was interviewed and asked about her perception of the impact of the program on her economic empowerment in terms of enhancing her economic decision making (Kabeer 1999; Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Alkire et al., 2013), household income (Schuler & Hashemi, 1994; Kabeer, 1999), access to resources (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Alkire et al., 2013), ability to own assets (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002), economic resilience (Kabeer, 1999), and overall well-being (Awokuse, 2011). They were then asked about the impact of KABIKHA on their political empowerment (Mayoux, 2001; Narayan, 2002; Cook & Kabeer, 2011; Alkire et al., 2013) and enhancing their interpersonal empowerment (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Mosedale, 2005). Economic empowerment was divided into five subdimensions

due to the greater number of specific economic measures in the literature. One woman from each of the five upazilas from the district was randomly selected for a focus group discussion among women from the district.

The expectation was that participation in the program would enhance a women's sense of empowerment with respect to all three empowerment dimensions, including all of the subdimensions of economic empowerment. In particular, it was hypothesized that the participants would perceive the program as enhancing 1) their economic decision making capacity; 2) their role in earning household income; 3) their access to resources; 4) their ability to own assets; 5) their economic resilience; 6) their economic empowerment; 7) their political empowerment; and 8) their interpersonal empowerment.

Sociodemographic Profile of the Respondents

The sociodemographic factors covered are age, occupation, monthly income, religion, level of education, marital status, housing, distance from nearest urban area, and sanitation (see table 1). All of the participants were women. Table 1 shows the details based on fieldwork conducted from May to July 2015. Age ranged from under 20 to 45 years old, with the greatest number of respondents falling between 26 to 30 (24.3%), followed by those in the 36 to 40 age group (22.3%). Respondents from 41 to 45 years old made up 15.4%, those between 21 to 25 constituted 12.1%, and those under 20 comprised 5.9%. The under 20 group was likely the smallest because members of that cohort are less motivated and reluctant to work in the program and are less likely to have families to support. The members of the 26 to 30 age group are more likely to take up the challenge of physical labor for their economic support. Older people are less likely to feel they have the physical strength for the work. Most respondents (74.1%) were married, 12.8% were unmarried, and 11.1% were widowed. The overwhelming majority lived in an improvised kacha house made of mud, straw, and tin (95.1%), while the rest lived in a tin shed with walls and rooms. Most (79.3%) had a sanitary latrine, while 20.7% did not have enough money to build one. Almost all (95.1%) said they lived far away from a town, while only 4.9% lived within five miles of a town. About two-thirds (69.7%) had less than 3000 taka per month (1BDT is approximately $US0.012). Most (85.2%) were Muslim and the rest Hindu. Most (83.9%) were illiterate, while only 15.3% had completed a primary education and the other 0.08% had completed secondary school.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Category	N	Proportion
Age	Below 20	18	5.9%
	21-25	37	12.1%
	26-30	74	24.3%
	36-40	68	22.3%
	41-45	47	15.4%
Marital Status	Married	226	74.1%
	Unmarried	39	12.8%
	Widowed	34	11.1%
Housing	*Kacha* Mud House	290	95.1%
	Tin Shed	15	4.9%
Sanitation	Latrine	242	79.3%
	No Latrine	63	20.7%
Proximity to Urban Area	Far away	290	95.1%
	5 miles or less	15	4.9%
Monthly income (1BDT = $US0.012)	Less than 3000 BDT	205	69.7%
	3000 to 5000 BDT	100	31.3%
Religion	Muslim	260	85.2%
	Hindu	45	14.8%
Education	Illiterate	256	83.9%
	primary	47	15.3%
	Secondary	2	0.08%

(Fieldwork, May to July, 2015)

ANALYSIS

Women's Economic Empowerment

Decision Making

Factors mentioned by the women in the area of household budgeting and decision making included many that were expected from the literature. The most important women brought up was that they had the clout to make decisions on their

own about large purchases, or at least in consultation, where they had not been able to before. Where they may have had limitations before on shopping, their ability to secure more resources for the household gave them more freedom in shopping on their own unsupervised and without strict guidelines or instructions. Many women spoke of a new or greater role in budgeting or planning family expenses, as well as in making education decisions for children. Increased resources also led in a few cases to the ability to start a new business, as well as to more women considering that as a future option.

It had been expected from the literature that making small purchases and buying children's clothing might be effects of the program, but they were not mentioned. When asked, women generally responded they already had the freedom to make small purchases and that purchasing children's clothing was also already one of their responsibilities. The ability to spend their own income was also not in question. The interviews and focus groups generally provided support for the hypothesis that the women would perceive KABIKHA as enhancing their economic decision-making capacity.

Household Income

Although most of the household income related to farming activities, very little was mentioned with respect to these activities, in contrast to expectations. New earnings were largely restricted to areas like handicrafts that had either already been their province or were peripheral to the household income. Many women mentioned they had greater ability to engage in productive handicraft production as part of a new business, new work, or occasionally on the side. Many also mentioned being able to play a larger role in preparing land for planting, though very rarely did this translate into helping with actual sowing, planting, or transplanting beyond anything they had done before.

Women made no mention in any change of their role in harvesting, threshing, preparing straw, cultivation, or caring for livestock, poultry, or fish. These activities were unaffected by the program. Overall, the interviews and focus groups generally provided very little support for the hypothesis that KABIKHA would enhance their role in earning household income.

Access to Resources

This was another area where the food for work program had limited perceived impact on the empowerment of the participants. Even so, most mentioned that the

program gave them more equal access to nutritious food for their own consumption after bringing more food to the household. Some made mention of the program encouraging them to access, join, or form rural financial cooperatives.

On the other hand, their ability to hire help, to gain and use credit, to handle and spend money, and to sell minor agricultural products remained generally unchanged, though they had already generally felt able to sell and spend to the extent that they wanted. No one mentioned they had acquired the right to receive training in new skills, though a number of women mentioned that they had received training since participating in KABIKHA. Therefore, there was little support for the hypothesis that KABIKHA would be perceived as enhancing access to resources.

Ownership of Assets

One of the most significant changes mentioned by women regarding their ability to own and control their own assets was that many had been able to purchase or gain primary use over a small vehicle, often initially for helping them get to their project work. A much smaller proportion mentioned having greater control over their own land. A few mentioned being able to buy their first TV or a radio of their own. Some mentioned some greater ability to manage land and livestock.

Most women already had the ability to buy and sell the poultry that they raised on their own. Women also continued to be or not to be able to control their own jewelry independent of the program. No mention was made of a change in their ability to own or purchase more land or equipment, to sell livestock, or to access funds when their assets were sold. There was therefore limited support for the hypothesis that KABIKHA would be perceived as enhancing the ability to own and control assets.

Resilience

Perceived improvement in the final area of economic empowerment was similarly mixed. Many women receiving food through KABIKHA in exchange for work said that they were better able to manage properly when facing a food shortage. A few also mentioned greater resilience in their ability to manage chronic illnesses in the family.

However, important areas such as managing indebtedness, financial constraints, and natural disasters well were not perceived by many as having been enhanced through participation in the program, though they were meaningful when they had

been. The interviews and focus group discussions provided limited support for the hypothesis that KABIKHA participants would perceive the food for work program as enhancing their economic resilience.

Overall Economic Empowerment

No meaningful differences were found in responses among the different districts and subdistricts with respect to economic empowerment. While the women generally felt they had made economic gains as a result of their participation in the program, they only perceived a noticeable increase in empowerment in one of the five economic areas. Therefore, there was limited support the hypothesis that KABIKHA participants would regard the program as enhancing their economic empowerment.

Even though not all areas covered in the literature were mentioned by the women in the study and the program made a difference in their lives, although they readily acknowledged that even significant changes were limited. One focus group participant described the importance to her of her participation in KABIKHA:

> My name is Afia Khatun [pseudonym]. I have four children, three girls and a boy. My husband is rickshaw puller working in town. At the beginning of my married life, we had a very poor quality of life because we did not have economic solvency. Due to economic insolvency, I couldn't enroll my eldest daughter in school. Therefore, she grew up illiterate and had to work as servant in a rich people's house. Besides, I had to work preparing and harvesting others' land. Since then I thought that if I had a small piece of land, I could have enjoyed working on my own land very much. However, being involved with KABIKHA, I am now economically more independent and have achieved an improved status regarding household and social issues. I have also recently improved my sewing skills at NOTRAMS [an independent nongovernmental organization] in Bogra City, so I am planning to buy a sewing machine with my next three months' salary. I have been able to start my own small business and can now contribute to our three children's education along with my husband. Their futures were uncertain earlier due to our poverty. My husband and I can now assure them better food, better clothes, better lives, and better futures, which were merely a dream before I started working, too. We can indulge ourselves in little luxuries, as I can now shop more freely, and I also get to treat myself to things like dresses and accessories. My husband now discusses the budgeting of family expenses and small and big purchases with me. I am also able to make decisions. Other than all these, I can make little contribution without my husband's consent.

Some of the sample respondents specifically mentioned the program's impact on their access to and ownership of resources. One focus group participant told of the big difference her participation in KABIKHA had made to her and women she knew in the program:

> My name is Suchitra Sutrodhor [pseudonym], and I am twenty-nine years old. Recently, I bought a [black and white] television because my younger girl likes to watch TV programs, and thus she frequently was going to another's house [who had a TV]. However, five years back, I couldn't even get three meals in a day and never imagined making a cooperative bank in our village. However, we are thinking now of launching a local cooperative bank because we are feeling the need to pool our money for a little bit bigger investment like leasing a small pond or making a poultry farm. Furthermore, I bought two goats in the last month by depositing money I earned from the wages of the last two months. In this connection, I am planning to nurture them properly so that I can earn the most I can by selling them in the upcoming Eid [a major Muslim festival]. I also have a cow from which I get five liters of milk each day and earn one hundred taka [about $1.20]. Food for Work has also allowed me the right to utilize and sell my livestock, and I have control and enjoy the land we own, the cash savings, etc. In addition, it has given us the capability to manage properly when we face any natural calamities, food unavailability, chronic illnesses, etc. In the last cyclone, two of our rooms [made of straw, mud and tin] were completely destroyed by the storm wind, and we had a serious problem. Since we had some money in our hands, we were easily able to repair the house, which would not have been possible five years back when I was not exactly involved with these [kinds of] tasks. Truly speaking, the program is helping tremendously to improve the economic condition of my family as well as of others who are involved in it.

In summary, women in the program mentioned that it had improved their economic empowerment by making it easier for them to operate small-scale farms, to keep more and earn more from livestock, to purchase agricultural supplies such as fertilizers, better seeds, and mechanical equipment, to invest in their children's education, particularly that of their daughters, to maintain their own property, to access part-time, seasonal, and regular jobs, and to receive more equal wages for the same work as men.

Overall, the program was viewed very positively, and almost all participants mentioned that they had benefited economically, even if the benefits were not as broad as covered in the literature.

Women's Political Empowerment

The overall development of a country depends on the maximum utilization of all people, both men and women. However, the status of women in Bangladesh is much lower than that of men in every sphere of life, especially in the political arena. Women are identified with domestic life, while politics is viewed as a male-dominated public activity that is typically masculine in nature. The study participants were asked about the dynamics of their household and community and about their level of political consciousness and activities in order to assess women's political empowerment in various areas.

The most common change was that a clear majority of the women spoke of a new confidence, ranging from an increased to a strongly increased willingness to protest against a man beating his wife. A surprisingly common instance of political empowerment that the women also brought up was that a lot of those who had participated in KABIKHA had been nominated for election to represent their village in the local council (union parishad), though none mentioned having been nominated for election to a leadership position. A similarly large number had been consulted regarding aid and relief decisions related to the food for work program itself. A very large number had been encouraged to attend small village meetings (salish) since joining the program. Many women had been encouraged to participate in decisions regarding the distribution of vulnerable-group-feeding (VGF) relief cards. In addition, they also felt more empowered to protest against corruption and misappropriation of relief goods. A slightly smaller group felt better able to protest against corruption in the vulnerable group feeding program, which is national. Although many had already felt free in the exercise of their vote, many more felt freer than before and more able to vote without consulting or even in contradiction to their husband. Some also found themselves in a position to consult on decisions regarding distribution of pensions to widows.

A limited number of women also referred to leading or helping to lead a salish. Some also mentioned being able to protest against men divorcing their wives (effectively abandoning them). There was anecdotal discussion of political campaigning and participating in independent local government elections. A few brought up the ability to protest unfair wages paid by a man. Similarly, a small number had been able to consult on the distribution of old-age pensions. Here is an example of what this meant in the words of one focus group participant, 35-year-old Sazida Begum:

> We don't have much knowledge about national politics, but we know better

> what our chairman and other UP [union parishad, the local council] members do for the development of our society and village. During union parishad elections, all the potential candidates come to us and beg for votes. In the last union parishad election, I cast my vote on my own. However, sometimes my husband pressures me to vote for a particular person selected by him, and I am not always able to make my own choice. Many times, our union chairman and members have tried to distribute rice and wheat from the VGF [vulnerable-group-feeding] card illegally, and then we all try to protest the unfair activities together. Sometimes we succeed and sometimes we fail. But in case of the beating of a wife by her husband, we can strongly protest. In the last week, one of my cousins was seriously beaten by her husband, and then we went together with my mother and sister into her home and talked with her husband and made him understand that beating one's wife is very serious offense. And [we told him, if] you do so again, we will get you into police custody.

The overall support for the hypothesis that KABIKHA participants would perceive the program as enhancing their political empowerment was greater and more consistent than for economic empowerment, with at least some mention made of most areas of possible political activity. Even so, the baseline for political empowerment was very low to begin with and is usually only relevant at a very local level and with respect to areas in which women in the program are most likely to have expertise. With regard to the level of community political empowerment, another focus group member, Runu Akhter, a 40-year-old, teacher, stated that

> I think it is still tough or quite impossible to get a nomination as a candidate for chairperson in a local government election. But at least women can get nominated as candidates for [council] members in local government elections. My point of view is that because the head of local government is titled "chairman," not "chairwoman," it is biased. However, in 2013, I heard that a woman had been elected to chairperson in a UP located near my village, and she was the wife of a former chairman. Therefore, it was possible because she was from a rich and politically powerful family. In respect to distribution of VGF cards and KABIKHA cards, I can't contribute or play a significant role, because our chairman is largely a corrupt person, and he has made a huge amount of money from illegally selling wheat and rice that was supposed to be provided to the poor widows and aged women in our village. A very small number of people get relief from the chairman's office, and they are basically related to him either by politically supporting him or living at the same area.

In summary, the women in the program mentioned that it improved their political empowerment by enabling them to participate in salish, to protest against men

for beating their wives as well as against baseless grounds for divorce brought by men, protest unfair prices at market, to attend to their needs and interests with respect to daily functions, to join political parties and campaigns at a local level, to cast their vote without pressure from husbands and male family members, and to more freely discuss issues like gender equality, education, work, health, and housing.

There were no noticeable differences between the districts and subdistricts. The women spoke less positively about their political empowerment overall, as they were often cynical and outraged over local conditions, though they did give a great number of specific concrete examples as noted of how they had been empowered.

Interpersonal/Familial Empowerment

The most widespread perception with respect to the interpersonal empowerment gained through participation in the program was that it had enhanced the position of almost all participants in their family. However, only a very few noted that their improved standing led to an increased ability to exercise power within the family. Participants also felt that they had increased ability to wait to get married. They felt that they had or would have a much greater ability to make their own choices regarding marriage. Most at least felt a desire to restrict the practice of dowry, and many felt themselves able to take more action to limit or reduce it. Participants often mentioned greater autonomy over personal decisions as well as decisions regarding children and child discipline.

A number of women felt they had more control over divorce. Some also felt they had more control over domestic decisions. A few indicated they had more ability to curb domestic violence. Several noted that they felt freer to make reproductive health decisions. Others mentioned they had been able to improve their literacy. A small number stated that they had more power in the family. Few mentioned they had control over their choice of spouse.

Perception of greater interpersonal empowerment was stronger and more consistent than for economic empowerment, though less than for political empowerment. That is, there was moderate support for the hypothesis that KABIKHA participants would perceive the program as enhancing their interpersonal empowerment.

The following statement from a focus group participant on interpersonal empowerment offers an example of what this meant in practice to the women:

> II am Kakoli Khatun [pseudonym], and I am thirty-two years old. I grew up in

> an economically poor family where I had no opportunity to get even a primary-school education. When I was fifteen years old, my father decided to arrange my marriage. And my father even didn't think to ask my opinion while arranging my marriage. The groom demanded joutuk [dowry] from my father in the amount of fifty thousand taka [about $600] along with a bicycle and a color television. The most surprising part was that he agreed to provide that huge amount of money to the groom by selling the small piece of land we had left. Therefore, my parents became beggars after my marriage. After marriage, coming into my husband's house I decided to work so that I could earn money, but I failed. My husband didn't pay much attention to me when it came to family issues, and he made every important decision on his own. If I had tried to interfere, he would have even beaten me. However, once I got a job with the help of the [KABIKHA] program, I was able to earn money. I, therefore, was able to help my husband by providing and sharing money for properly managing family expenses. As a result, my husband started to pay proper attention to me and to honor me. Before making any decisions even to buy a shirt, he asks my opinion on choosing the color of the shirt. Since then, I have made the decision that, at any cost, I will enroll my children in primary school.

Another focus group participant, 42-year-old Pesta Khatun, spoke about the difficult situation she faced:

> Regarding the factor of spouse selection, in our closed society, one still doesn't get permission to choose one's spouse individually, especially in the rural areas. Our society dictates that parents will choose your life partners. Despite my objection, I got married three years ago when I was only fifteen years old. Being married at an early age, I couldn't even understand some of the family matters. As a result, they tried to take advantage of me in many silly cases, and I felt very embarrassed during that time. Since then, I have decided that, if I am a mother, I will let my children marry at a mature age. Later marriage is a curse in our society because if a girl doesn't get married at an early age, she probably will not get a life partner at all. One of my cousins is now forty-eight years old and is still single because nobody wants to marry a woman older than thirty-five, especially in a rural area. I can never even think about divorcing my husband, though he is not decent, skilled, or social. I heard that the husband of one of my cousins was a drunk and didn't even help the family financially or socially. She was pressured by her parents to divorce her husband and go back to them. However, she didn't do it, because she thought that if she left her husband and divorced him, the society or community would not have received it well. Participating in KABIKHA, I have been involved in adult education and thus I regularly go to adult school in the

> evening. I am basically learning how I can earn money and guide the family properly.

In summary, the women in the program mentioned that it improved their familial/interpersonal empowerment by making it less difficult for them to share their opinions with husbands, parents, and brothers, to access adequate sanitary facilities, to access reproductive/maternal and sexual information and services (such as information about HIV transmission), to circumvent early marriages, to finish their education and break out of poverty, and to access health services.

As with the other areas, there were no differences found between the districts and subdistricts in terms of perceptions of interpersonal empowerment. The women were often very unhappy in their personal situations and spoke about their difficulties, but they also provided many examples of how they had been empowered in their personal and family life.

DISCUSSION

Economic, political, and interpersonal empowerment are essential components of women's empowerment. KABIKHA has contributed to enhancing women's capacity in all spheres of empowerment particularly on economic, political and interpersonal/familial fronts from the beginning of the program in 1975, though little attention has been paid to its contribution.

This study found that there was a positive perception of the program's contribution to women's empowerment, though the number of areas mentioned by women in interviews was much smaller overall than those the literature describes. As a result, there was limited evidence for overall economic empowerment and for empowerment with respect to four of the five dimensions. There was evidence supporting a perception among participants of enhanced decision-making power. This is related to the fact that women now have more options in the economic realm (Kabeer, 1999; 2002), including ones that are strategic and affect their own well-being (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). That is, they are better able to make choices that promote desired outcomes (Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Alkire et al., 2013). Although the evidence was not strong that the participation in the program helped women increase their income, access to resources, ability to own assets, or economic resilience, there was mention of perceived improved empowerment in all of these areas.

Women's economic participation and empowerment are a prerequisite for meet-

ing the fundamental needs of women, strengthening their rights, and enabling them to exert control over their lives and influence in their respective families and societies. Women in general in Bangladesh often face exploitation and discrimination and persistent gender inequalities and some of these women experience multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion because of factors relating to factors such as poor socioeconomic conditions, ethnicity, and caste.

The testimony by participants, such as that of 36-year-old Zorina Begum, reflects the contribution of economic factors to empowerment:

> I did many jobs in my family, including taking care of my children, husband and in-laws, cooking three times a day, teaching them [children)] at home. However, I didn't receive any attention, especially from my husband. Once I asked him why he didn't pay attention properly honor me, and he replied, "There is no value in the work related to household matters that you accomplished." My husband added that it is only money that brings honor and prestige and that add values to the family as well as society.

Women are more honored and valued by their husbands, brothers, and even society when they earn payment from any source and contribute to their own family. This is particularly true for women who are illiterate and live from hand to mouth.

This study found strong support for a perception of political empowerment, particularly at the local level. The immediate value to women might not be as great as added income, though the increased participation (Kabeer, 2005) and achievements (Kabeer, 1999; 2002) help them to confront and cope with a society that is often corrupt (Masud-All-Kamal & Saha, 2014) and undemocratic (Batliwala, 1994) and inhospitable to them. Though this program has not given them the capacity to confront the system on a societal level, they are much more able to do so at the local level (Mayoux, 2001).

Bangladeshi men often view women's political participation as a matter of crossing the purdh (boundary). Women's leadership and political participation are still restricted, and, moreover, women are underrepresented as voters and cannot necessarily even freely exercise their own political choices without interference (Kabeer, 2002; Narayan, 2002). Discriminatory laws and institutions still limit women who want to run for office because women are less likely than men to have the education, contacts, and resources required. Even so, this study found that KABIKHA encouraged women's participation even when it came to running for office.

This study also found that the food for work program had enhanced women's perception interpersonal and familial empowerment. Expectations regarding behaviors that are appropriate for women and men are essentially shaped by culture, tradition, and history. In Bangladesh, women generally have less personal autonomy in areas in which they have fewer resources and limited influence over the decision-making processes that affect their own lives and their society. In the cases of the respondents in the study, KABIKHA provided some of those resources, and participants felt that they had been able to improve their interpersonal and familial position in a culture in which they were still very limited (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). This did not always translate to greater perception of overall family power, but many women welcomed the increased autonomy (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Mosedale, 2005) and ability to make personal choices (Kabeer, 1999) that followed from their participation in the food for work program.

CONCLUSION

Women in Bangladesh face obstacles and disadvantages in nearly every aspect of their lives, such as limited options for economic opportunity, restricted access to health services, and a restricted ability to engage politically and to participate in decision making in the family and society. Women's empowerment is a multidimensional concept that encompasses economic, political, and interpersonal and familial factors. Many programs introduced by the government and NGOs in Bangladesh have tried to deliver increased economic, political, and interpersonal empowerment to poor and vulnerable women. KABIKHA has been in place for a long time and was not designed specifically to empower women, and it has not been evaluated much in those terms. Even so, this study found evidence that it increased women's self-reported local political participation and interpersonal/familial empowerment and limited evidence of their empowerment in economic activities.

The role of women participating in the program in politics, the family, and to a lesser extent the economy has been enhanced, which ultimately allows them greater and fuller participation in society. Although there is a long way to go, KABIKHA has helped poor and distressed women, allowing them to help their family. As a result, women's roles have begun to expand and social boundaries are stretching to accommodate a variety of manifestations of self-efficacy for women who are able to develop skills. Women's roles have evolved to the extent that the women in this

study at least perceive themselves as able to demonstrate their self-confidence and personal skills in an increasing variety of social contexts. Improving women's well-being in economic, political, and familial spheres contributes to a cycle of better health and education outcomes, more stable societies, and sustainable development. Meanwhile, empowering women helps them realize their full human potential. KABIKHA plays a significant role by involving women in income-generating activities that ultimately assist their families, though largely on a local scale.

This has been achieved through a program not specifically designed to empower women but open to both men and women. The program design offers incentives to encourage women to participate (Ahmed & Hossain, 1990; Ahmed et al., 1995) and so disproportionately benefits the poorest and most marginal participants, who also happen to be women. The results here suggest that even better results could be obtained through a program carefully designed to empower women. Even so, this study suggests that women do not need to participate in programs designed to benefit them alone in order to be empowered.

A lesson for more advanced economies that still need to empower women is that policy does not need to target empowering women in particular to be effective. Designing programs with special incentives for women to participate can deliver them extra resources, particularly to women from marginal backgrounds. This can provide disproportionate resources to those who need them most, pulling them up from the bottom economically, socially, and interpersonally. This may be just as true in the United States or Korea as in Bangladesh.

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