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CONFRONTING THE GAP

Strategies to Address the Needs of the Poorest
in Bangladesh: An Argument for a Flexible
Framework

by

Juliette Prodhan

DPP Working Paper No 45

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Development Policy and Practice Research Group

Faculty of Technology
The Open University

September 2001

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FORWARD

An introduction to the Working Paper

This is the first of a continuing series of DPP Working Papers resulting from the Final Project dissertations of the Open University Global Postgraduate Programme in Development Management. Many of the dissertations contain publishable material and the Development Policy and Practice Research Group decided to ask some of the authors who gained distinctions for their dissertations to produce papers from their research.

...

Joanna Chataway

Abstract

This study explores factors contributing to the continued impoverishment of the poorest in Bangladeshi urban slums. Participatory research was conducted in Saidpur, north-western Bangladesh, with groups of women, some of whom had been involved in urban development initiatives and some who had not. While women who had participated in development programmes in the past experienced a higher degree of awareness of factors which constrained their ability to control decision-making over their own lives, both categories of women faced similar problems. The greatest problems defined by these women were an inability to earn an income, and 'husbandcare', which, derived from the term 'childcare', indicates all factors pertaining to the nurturing of their husbands' needs for cultural reassurance and a sense of dignity.

Constraining factors which limit the lives of the poorest in urban areas are examined, including the breakdown of social support mechanisms and increasing individualisation of labour. It argues that women experience poverty to a greater extent than men through being denied basic access to the external slum environment, but that men who do participate in the external environment also experience poverty by being denied increased earning opportunities and thereby their dignity. In an attempt to reassert their sense of male identity and worth, men undermine the worth of female community members, thus re-emphasising the poverty of women. Parallels are drawn with studies from other urban areas in South Asia which reinforce the findings of the Saidpur study.

The study concludes by recommending that research towards interventions in urban slum environments is undertaken in an open-minded and flexible manner which is free from pre-defined agendas of donor funding opportunities. Important areas to be researched are notably the needs of men and ideas of masculinity, and the building of bridges between urban slum communities and the external environment of local government and elites, in order to establish a more holistic understanding of factors which enforce urban poverty and thus means to address these.

The research undertaken in this study was conducted by the author in 1999, at the closure of the WTC programmes in Bangladesh. The recommendations which follow are for development policy and practice, based on considerations around development of programmes to target the poorest in Bangladesh in 2000. It may be that since the date of the research there have been further developments within the strategy of the case study organisation which are not fully represented in the scope of this article. The author intends no misrepresentation, and refers the reader for further information on the organisation to the Concern website: www.concern.ie. The views expressed are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisation.

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Special thanks to Katharine Grantham and to Daniel Blake Burt.

Abbreviations

ALP:	Adult Literacy Programme
BBS:	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BRAC:	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
EIU:	Economist Intelligence Unit
GO:	Guardian Orientation
INGOs:	International Non-Governmental Organisations
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organisation
PD:	Personal Development
PRA:	Participatory Rural Appraisal
Tk.:	Taka, Bangladeshi Currency
UCDP:	Urban Community Development Programme
UN:	United Nations
UNDP:	United Nations Development Programme
WFP:	World Food Programme
WID:	Women in Development
WTC:	Women's Training Centre

1 Introduction and Background

1.1 Social and Cultural Beliefs and Practices Affecting Women's Mobility

The War of Liberation, which divided East from West Pakistan, led to the formation of the sovereign state of Bangladesh¹ in 1971. Although, like Pakistan, the predominant religion is Islam², Bangladesh is a secular state, whose members enjoy democratic rights and freedoms. In this latter respect, the country is closer in ideology to its neighbour, India, with export promotion and economic liberalisation forming a large part of its economic strategy. However, the logic inherent in partition from India in 1947 continues to exert a strong influence in community and family life, and the social and cultural freedoms associated ideologically with economic liberalism do not extend to the more private spheres of life. There, Islamic law is largely the guiding principle, particularly among the poorer sections of society.

At the community level, the *mullahs*³ exert a stronger presence of governance over beliefs and ideologies than does the state or economy, arbitrating in community conflicts and solving intra-familial disputes. This means arbitrating under the laws of Islam, and not necessarily under the laws of the state. Although the Koran teaches that men and women are equal and have equal rights, it also teaches that “women were created in order to provide physical, mental and spiritual comfort to men”⁴. This has expressed itself in practices which do not prioritise men and women equally, with women playing a supportive or subordinate role. Although polygamy and the practice of giving *dowry* are illegal, it is common for a man to have more than one wife⁵, or to divorce his wife for another in order to gain another dowry⁶. Girls are married as young as twelve or thirteen, although the legal age for marriage is eighteen, in order to ensure their marriageability and alleviate the burden of provision for them on their families. The logic of early marriage, although not unique to Islam and extending also to other religions and cultures, is that a woman must belong to a man and be under his protection. An unmarried young woman is otherwise vulnerable to harassment and violation from young men in her sphere of life. *Purdah*⁷ is a common practice among those families who can afford to keep their women confined inside. It is uncommon for a woman to travel alone outside her community, and taboo for a woman to venture out alone after dark. The price to pay for transgressing these social norms is often to be ostracised and vulnerable to a wide range of abuses.

Such social and cultural laws paint a life for a woman as one far from economic freedoms, where even to venture physically into the marketplace at times is to have broken a social taboo. While the laws which govern the country state that opportunities are open to all, the laws which govern the community and family raise heavy restrictions against women's freedom of movement, and national NGOs Grameen and BRAC have been criticised by *mullahs* for having attempted to break with Islamic tradition by encouraging women to act independently⁸.

¹ Formerly East Pakistan.

² 88% Muslim. EIU Country Profile 1999-2000, 12.

³ Religious leaders.

⁴ Matsui, 95-6.

⁵ Islam states that a man may have up to four wives.

⁶ Ease of this is facilitated by ignorance in poorer communities of the need for registration of marriages.

⁷ The practice of keeping women confined to the home for their protection and as a symbol of their worth.

⁸ This is substantiated by Monan (1995), 19, and Newton, Wagenhauser and Murray (1996), 39.

1.2 Background to the Study

The case study forming the practical basis of this work was undertaken with Concern Worldwide, a non-denominational international non-governmental organization (INGO), in Bangladesh. Concern has been operational in Bangladesh since 1972, with programmes to meet the basic needs of displaced peoples following the War of Liberation⁹. The famine of 1974-5 brought increasing numbers of rural-urban migrants, and new slum communities were established on the outskirts of cities, with emerging new groups of severely poor. In 1974 Concern established feeding centres, and by 1980¹⁰ Women's Training Centres (WTCs) were established in five major cities in Bangladesh. Activities at these Centres were based around programmes providing a monthly grain provision to feed a family, together with education and health provision for vulnerable women and their children, and skills training in traditional women's skills¹¹ (sewing, tailoring, embroidery) for a period of one year. These WTC programmes were seen as the flagships of Concern Bangladesh and fitted well with the emergent WID¹² agenda and its emphasis on women as economic agents.

WTC programmes appeared to be functioning exceptionally well at the beginning of the eighties, and images of women working together outside the home impressed both individual and institutional donors. The number of activities increased to include 'Personal Development' classes, which involved discussions on such issues as dowry and divorce rights; and a one-week 'Guardian Orientation' course was mandatory for male guardians (usually husbands) of the women attending. However, as notions of sustainability¹³ began to assume greater importance on the policy agenda, the effectiveness of the WTC programme became increasingly questioned, as it seemed as if the main benefits of the WTC programme were in terms of welfare¹⁴. Two independent evaluations, by Jennings (1997) and Corlett (1998) concluded that women lacked the necessary skills to market their goods, and "remain[ed] wholly dependent on Concern"¹⁵ for supporting their work in handicrafts¹⁶.

The centrality of the food provision to the programme's popularity is made apparent in Jennings's evaluation, in which the women "themselves stated that if food were not provided then the centres would have to choose women slightly better off who had

⁹ It may be significant that the majority of these new slum dwellers were from the Bihari population, who supported West Pakistan in the conflict. Significant numbers of urban slums today are comprised of the Biharis, who due to historical prejudices have received very little assistance from either national NGOs or the state.

¹⁰ Evidence as to the exact date of start-up is conflictual. Corlett, for example, states that the WTC programmes were established in the "mid '70s" (Corlett, 2.1, pages unnumbered), whereas Grantham and Rahman cite 1980.

¹¹ Most often sewing, tailoring and embroidery, although the programmes in Chittagong and Kamalapur, Dhaka, were able to offer training in industrialised sewing and knitting for periods of six months.

¹² *Women in Development: an approach to increasing the visibility and participation of women in economic activities*, based on liberal feminist theories that women were equal to men and equally capable of participating in the marketplace. cf. Kabeer, xi-xiii.

¹³ Eade and Williams (1995) "suggest two important aspects of sustainability: self-reliance, and the ability to continue with an activity after early forms of support have finished". *ibid.*, 7. These two aspects particularly illustrate ways in which the WTC programmes were not sustainable.

¹⁴ Although this in itself may not be a valid criticism of the programme. In the policy agenda of the '80s, *welfarism* and the associated connotations of dependence came to assume a negative significance as being in opposition to sustainability. For an interesting discussion of welfare versus welfarism cf. Kabeer, 1994., 69-94.

¹⁵ Corlett, 2.3, unnumbered. Jennings also writes that the skills taught "have a limited and for the women inaccessible market" (Jennings, 11).

¹⁶ "...not only for orders but also for assistance in procuring raw materials, production management, accounts, quality control, packing, delivery, etc." (Corlett, *ibid.*).

some level of food security”¹⁷. The evaluation found that women tended to keep two-thirds of their wheat or rice provision to feed their families, and to sell the remaining third to meet basic needs. This suggests that food provision became a substitute for income from economic activities, and that the skills training in handicrafts was in some respects incidental to the programme’s benefits. While there has been some acknowledgement of the contribution that mobility outside the home has made to women’s lives, the social position of women relative to men changed little over the period of twenty years for which the WTCs were functional.

In 1990, Concern began work with a lesser low-income target group, whose average family income was below Tk. 2,000¹⁸ per month, as opposed to the income below Tk.1,000 per month criterion of the WTC programme¹⁹. This became the Urban Community Development Programme (UCDP), and is based around savings and credit, typically including skills training and adult literacy classes as part of the programme. This fits with the programmes of other NGOs, such as BRAC and Grameen, whose work, which has been internationally recognised as successful, is able to be sustainable precisely because it does not target those who are the very poorest²⁰. While the UCDP has managed to keep abreast of the fluctuations in donor requirements and the development agenda, the WTC programme became increasingly difficult to fund, and by 1999 the final WFP wheat provision contract had ended.

While Concern continues successfully with its UCDP and other programmes, clarification of a strategy which is able successfully and sustainably to replace the WTC in targeting the poorest remains a concern. The organisation now faces the challenge of avoiding similar difficulties to other NGOs, in being unable to address the needs and thus adding to the invisibility of the poorest 10% in Bangladeshi society. While the first and dominant strategic objective of Concern Bangladesh is “Reaching more people living in absolute poverty”²¹, the organisation now faces the conundrum of needing a programme to address the needs of the very poorest, whilst being aware of donor fatigue, the hazards of a dependency mentality, and the lack of sustainability which has characterised such programmes in the past.

¹⁷ Jennings, 11. Evidence from Saidpur, the study area of this project.

¹⁸ £1=approximately 80 Taka (Tk.).

¹⁹ This was not the only criterion. The programme used both economic and social criteria to identify its target participants. Other criteria were having children under 5 years, poor health and housing conditions, and women who were socially disadvantaged (widowed, separated, abandoned, divorced, or with a disabled husband) were particularly targeted.

²⁰ Reasons for this are factors such as inability of the poorest to save, remoteness of access of rural populations, and transience and complexity of factors in the external environment with urban populations (repeated anecdotal evidence from NGO community in Bangladesh).

²¹ Concern Bangladesh Strategic Plan 1999-2004., 23.

2 The Nature of the Problem

2.1 A Poverty-Based Approach

The Concern Bangladesh Strategic Plan quotes the UNDP (1997) definition of poverty as a guideline for participant selection:

Poverty can mean more than a lack of what is necessary for material well being. It can also mean the denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development – to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and the respect of others²².

Building on this definition, the Strategic Plan aims to adopt a vulnerability approach, which “takes a more dynamic and subjective view of poverty focusing on poor people’s own perception and priorities and their active participation in measures to bring about change”²³. As well as creating a multitude of opportunities, this poses a problem. Focusing on poor people’s own perceptions and priorities may, for example, lead a course of action directly back to a programme akin to the WTC, as women interviewed in past evaluations of the WTC programme have stated that their priority is the food provision provided through the centres.

The difficulty of working immediately through ‘poor people’s own perception’ has been examined by Sen (1990), in his paper ‘Gender and Cooperative Conflicts’. Sen writes that in some contexts the family may exert such a strong influence on one’s own identity that one becomes unable any longer to identify one’s individual interests. This identification of self with family welfare is precisely what is needed to maintain traditional inequities, whereby “The underdog comes to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and becomes an implicit accomplice”²⁴. Thus any approach to poverty analysis which focuses on perceptions of the poorest alone will need to be aware of this possible acceptance or embracing of the status quo, which in Bangladesh is as much a function of women’s need for male protection in a male-dominated society as of the limited opportunities for education or possibilities for choice available to women thus far. Hence, it will be necessary to examine perceptions of needs beyond their face value, and to probe and contextualise these. Sen draws attention to the need to “distinguish between the *perception* of interest... and some more *objective* notion of their respective well-being”²⁵. He continues, “Focusing on the “capabilities” of a person –what he or she can *do* or can *be* – provides a direct approach to a person’s well-being”²⁶.

If we are to focus on this approach of well-being as an index of poverty, which takes into consideration factors such as creativity, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and the respect of others, as quoted in the Strategic Plan, then a rather more open definition of the poorest emerges, which is characterised by diversity and linked through inequity. This approach does not of necessity ignore the individual or collective perceptions or experiences of community members; rather, it seeks to contextualise these within the

²² UNDP Human Development Report (HDI), 1997. in Concern Bangladesh Strategic Plan 1999-2004, 23.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Sen (1990), 126.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 133.

²⁶ *ibid.*

prevailing cultural ideologies and be aware that people's perceptions may be limited by the information and choices they have been exposed to thus far.

The poorest under this agreed definition are often unable to influence choices over what they are or what they will become. Causes of this may be found in traditional and ingrained biases over what it is right and proper for them to be, given their physical or social status. Members of such a group may be, for example, the elderly, both men and women, the disabled, including a large number of blind in Bangladesh²⁷, or women who are heads of households and without male 'protection' in a male-dominated society. Such members are discriminated against as they are seen as burdensome, in the respect that they are not able to play a fully active traditional role in society. Typically, these poorest would need to depend on the support of others. In reality, there may be no others able to support them. In the context of the poor in Bangladesh, where there is a struggle among all members of a slum community simply in order to survive, the poorest are marginalised, and thereby forgotten. In the process, they are deprived of the channels of communication and social linkages which would allow them access to influencing their external environment and their own lives. Any programme which attempts to work with the poorest must thus first educate the wider community to work for the inclusiveness of the poorest in society, and to reduce their invisibility. Thus, it will be just as necessary to work at the macro- as at the micro-level, lobbying for the participation of the poorest in societal decision-making processes.

2.2 The Urban Poor

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) reports for 1997 that 49.7% of urban and 47.1% of rural people live in absolute poverty²⁸. This reflects an increasing trend towards urban poverty, as natural disasters and land acquisition by the rural elite lead to decreased coping capacity among the rural poor and increased rural to urban migration. When the definition of poverty is extended beyond the BBS criterion of calorific intake to factors of deprivation, vulnerability, and limited choices, in the well-being approach, then it becomes apparent that the extent of urban poverty is even more widespread.

In a study of urban poverty in Pakistan, Jo Beall (1995) explores factors which compound effects of poverty in a specifically urban context. Among these factors are relative economic and political powerlessness in a fiercely contested terrain, insecurity of tenure or residence, physical danger and violence, and harassment by officials. In the context of Pakistan, Beall states that despite a greater variety of employment possibilities than in rural areas, "the urban poor often have fewer buffers against contingencies"²⁹.

Thorbeck (1995) extends this idea of insecurity to relations between men and women in urban slums:

Urbanization may be seen as the social processes that are linked to migration to cities – i.e., not merely the move from rural to urban areas itself, but also the changes this brings, in particular the importance of wage-earning jobs either as actual work or as the

²⁷ Blindness in Bangladesh is widespread, due to Vitamin 'A' deficiency.

²⁸ Defined as receiving less than 2,122 kcals/day/person. Quoted in Grantham and Rahman, 3.

²⁹ Beall (1995), 433.

abstract model for work. Urbanization also involves a closer contact with the state, political processes and government administration. Added to this are the cultural changes that these relationships bring with them... Women experience urbanization in this sense, as an interplay of many social processes, more radically than do men, and urbanization changes the relationships between the sexes, intensifying the gender struggle.³⁰

Whereas in rural areas production is organised by gender into male and female tasks, each of which is vital to the end product, instilling a sense of common identity and dignity, Thorbek writes that in the cities this organisation is broken down. Labour as an exchange mechanism for commodities takes place typically on a more individualistic basis. As the majority of types of productive employment are available outside and often at a distance from the home, women are discouraged from and often forbidden to engage in such activities. The inability to participate in such processes of exchange devalues the work of women, as more value is placed on productive work³¹. Without the same opportunities to work together and share common experiences in urban slum communities, women become isolated from one other and from the external sphere in which decision-making takes place.

There are several pertinent implications. Firstly, from a sociological perspective, the urban poor are at the immediate mercy of a far greater variety of actors than are the rural poor. A breakdown of common patterns of understanding roles and an increasing commoditisation of life leads to confusion and fragmentation of social relations. Secondly, both women and men in urban slums experience isolation and feelings of powerlessness. Men under pressure of traditional "breadwinner" roles in Bangladesh find themselves unable to provide for the family in a highly competitive environment, or find employment such as rickshaw-pulling which is exhausting and demoralising in many cases³². The need for men to regain their sense of control and assert their masculinity often expresses itself in violence within the home, or in social censorship of women within the community³³. Women, who often marry at or move to a distance from their families, find themselves without social support or solidarity. The importance of realising the feelings of powerlessness experienced by both women *and* men in slum communities; and of recognising the interrelatedness of urban poverty with its wider context (thereby the need to address wider structures as well as relations within families and communities), is paramount in designing interventions to target the urban poor.

2.3 Poverty as Forms of Exclusion

Throughout history, the predominant interpretation of events has always been through the voices of those who have most power. This presents only a limited picture. In order to gain a wider understanding of the inequities which exist in power relations, and thereby to address these, it is as important to listen to 'voices from below' as

³⁰ Thorbek, 12-13.

³¹ cf. also Arnold (1995): "In rural areas, women have well-defined roles in fetching water, collecting firewood and agricultural work. In the slums, however, women from migrant families typically lose their traditional responsibilities and feel underemployed and undervalued." Arnold, C. 'Volunteers in Health and Family Planning in Dhaka.' in Beall, 1997., 228-37.

³² However, those in slum communities who are able to rent or purchase rickshaws are often regarded as the 'lucky ones' who have secured a means of earning a living.

³³ cf. also Kannabiran and Kannabiran "The growing sense of helplessness that men experience in a hostile environment is sought to be compensated by a reassertion of power and control over women within the family". Kannabiran, V. and Kannabiran, K. 'The Frying Pan or the Fire?: Endangered Identities, Gendered Institutions and Women's Survival'. in Sarkar and Butalia(1995), 121-35.

‘voices from above’, as “those who have been most disenfranchised by growth-dominated development strategies”³⁴ are most able to understand the mechanisms which operate between the ‘oppressors’ and the ‘oppressed’. In order to understand the inequities which act upon the lives of the poorest in Bangladesh, it is just as necessary to listen to the localised voices of those who have been marginalised and discriminated against through existing power systems (political, economic, religious, cultural, social) as to follow the knowledge and experience of Northern NGOs, whose decisions are in turn shaped by powerful academics and policymakers, and by knowledge of the prevailing political environment.

There is a sense in which development has become a type of ‘fadism’, where approaches to poverty alleviation emulate from analysis in the North³⁵ and are followed by NGOs as they emerge or are discarded, either due to a belief that those in positions of decision-making power also have a power of right judgement, or by a need to meet the requirements of donors who have set their agendas according to such analysis.

The current lack of sustainability of the WTCs and the association of welfare with the programme have led to their closure. While acknowledging that there is much sense in the requirements of donors³⁶ in calling for proposals which emphasise increased participation of the poorest in civil society and measures to increase good governance, it is interesting that such objectives are also consistent with, and possibly influenced by, global economic objectives set by the IMF and World Bank. Both donors and world economic institutions call for approaches which represent decreased public spending (in comparison with a former development approach of direct service provision) and economic accountability of states. While this may be a sensible approach, it may not be the only or the most suitable approach in this instance. In seeking solutions, therefore, the study aims to set aside the current conventional and accepted approaches to poverty alleviation, and to start instead from a well-being approach to poverty, which begins with the perspectives of the poorest themselves. It is with this objective in mind that the researches in the following section were undertaken.

³⁴Kabeer, 84.

³⁵ Albeit based on experiences in the South.

³⁶ In this case ‘donors’ refers to major donors representing governance bodies, e.g. DFID, EU.

3 Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Research Techniques

In order to gain perspectives of the poorest in designing interventions to target their specific needs, a variety of participatory approaches were employed. These began with a series of semi-structured interviews over a period of two weeks. The interviewees were 50 women from urban slums in Saidpur, north-west Bangladesh, where WTCs had been operative since the late '70s³⁷. Twenty-five of the participants interviewed were women who had attended the WTCs for one year, and twenty-five were women who were selected as being amongst the poorest in their community. Selection of ex-WTC women was based on past lists, and selection was at random. Selection of other, poorest, women was based on observations of Concern field staff who worked in urban slums targeted in the study. This group included at least 20% elderly and/or disabled. Participants were asked questions based around daily activities, access to and control of resources, social support mechanisms, livelihoods and environment³⁸.

For the second part of the analysis, two one-day workshops using PRA techniques were held, with twenty women at each workshop. The first group of women were present attendees of the WTC programme, and the second group were ex-WTC women. Local materials were used, and women were free to adapt techniques as best suited the purposes of their groups³⁹.

Both semi-structured interviews and PRA sessions were conducted by female staff members. Women in the PRA sessions were happy to share their experiences with other women, and developed a sense of solidarity through doing so. Although female staff members were specifically selected for this reason, cultural and religious decorum would also have been a restricting factor on women sharing their experiences with men who were not related to them.

There was a vast difference in degrees of success between the two techniques. The semi-structured interviews yielded fairly stolid answers. This is as much a reflection of the interviewers, perhaps, as of the interviewing context. The interviewers in the semi-structured interviews were not permanent staff members, and had had only one day of training on interview techniques. Responses reported were standardised, and there was a sense that the interviewers were trying to report the 'correct' answers, just as the women they interviewed were anxious to continue or commence involvement with Concern and sought to provide the 'correct' responses. However, it was still possible from the interviews to gain a perspective on individual life experiences and perceptions of these poorest women.

The PRA sessions, in contrast, were a success. Sessions were facilitated by the author and two female Concern permanent staff members, together with the male WTC

³⁷ The majority of participants selected for the study were from Bihari slum communities (see footnote 9), and had received very little development assistance from either national NGOs or the state in the past. As Concern has been working consistently in these communities since the 1970s, any changes that have taken part in the participants' lives can be simplified for the purposes of this study to be attributed either to Concern programmes or to the external environment.

³⁸ For further details cf. Annex I.

³⁹ For further details cf. Annex II.

manager as translator⁴⁰. Women were animated and engaged actively and openly in discussion, and a spirit of concentration and common purpose shared by the group led the discussion in some interesting directions.

3.2 Study Findings

Despite certain limitations⁴¹, it was possible to gain an understanding of the individual adversities and opportunities experienced by the poorest, as well as an idea of collective social understandings. As the findings are too voluminous to be listed point by point within the scope of this study, this section will focus on collective social understandings, in order to work towards proposing some general strategies, and will report only on selected elements of the study which are most able to provide an open framework for analysis. Section 3.2.1, however, allows for full variety of detail, in order to provide as broad as possible an understanding of daily realities.

3.2.1 Activities Undertaken by Women in a Day

In an average day, all women were involved in reproductive activities such as cooking, baking, feeding, making tea, grinding spices, cleaning/washing/sweeping the house and yard, washing clothes, making fuel, collecting water, childcare including helping children with their education, 'husbandcare'⁴², caring for other family members, going to the market and shopping locally. Several women mentioned resting time, which was described positively, in activities such as gossiping, strolling or praying. There are differing perceptions on what constitutes work and what leisure time. Some women stated that they were idle all day, yet mentioned numerous household and childcare tasks among their activities.

Approximately 40% of women who had not attended the WTC programme previously and 50% of women who had attended were engaged in productive work. Of those who had not attended, begging and working as a maidservant were main productive activities. Productive activities outside the home were most diverse among this group, and also included brick breaking, selling saris, sugar, or hearth door-to-door, and working in a biscuit factory. All productive activities were in the informal sector, and the majority based around the home, such as making spice packets and filling bobbins with thread. Of those women who were involved in WTC programmes, approximately 50% were employed in tailoring, crochet or embroidery work, and a few had been able to invest in poultry, duck and cow rearing. One woman was employed in teaching Arabic. Community work was mentioned only by those involved in WTC programmes, and included attending group meetings and going to the bank.

3.2.2 Constraints on Daily Activities

Participants in the PRA sessions were asked to rank their major daily activities in order of difficulty, with a ranking of 5 indicating greatest difficulty and 1, least. Following the ranking, a whole group discussion focused around causes of the

⁴⁰ This male manager had a very gentle approach to the women he worked with, being approachable and popular at the WTC. However, at certain moments, such as during discussions on 'husbandcare', he was asked to leave the room.

⁴¹ cf. 4.1.

⁴² By this women meant all activities which related to the emotional and physical support required by their husbands. The term (or its Bengali equivalent) was selected by the women themselves, derived from the term 'childcare', indicating that they felt they provided a similar supporting and nurturing role.

problems, and which inputs or supports might be needed to alleviate these. One point which emerged from this discussion is that women's work can in fact be divided into four categories, in their perception: household work, emotional caring work, productive work and community work. While household work is not perceived as a problem, it is the emotional caring aspect of reproductive work which absorbs much energy.

Table 3.1 represents the ranking accorded by women from the Ex-WTC group, with variations from the Present WTC sample given in brackets. Short summary notes from discussions are in the right-hand column. A profile emerges from this table of women's lives which are restricted at least equally by social as by economic factors. Among major social constraints are perceptions of participants' husbands and the wider community.

3.2.3 Perceptions of WTC Programme Effectiveness

A matrix pairwise ranking undertaken by Present WTC women to rank the usefulness of programme components scored childcare and health most highly, followed by food provision and the Adult Literacy Programme. Women in both PRA groups stated that they were now using government and non-government healthcare facilities regularly. The value accorded to literacy skills was mainly in terms of empowering women to assist their children with their education. Learning legal awareness through Personal Development classes was valued⁴³, and women asserted that they would not give away a daughter or sister in marriage without registration. Some women had stopped being beaten by their husbands after attending the WTC programme, and in other cases some husbands sometimes helped with some work. However, the women agreed that the attitude of their husbands⁴⁴ had not changed in most respects. Nevertheless, those who were earning said that this had earned them increased respect among family members.

⁴³ However, the matrix pairwise ranking with Present WTC women gave this the lowest ranking, of 0.

⁴⁴ This is applicable to those women who had husbands, who represented around 60-75% across these sample groups.

Activity	Ranking	What needed/ Why not easy
Husbandcare	5 (4)	Have to complete all work for household and then husbandcare follows; husband beats wife; pressure for sleeping with wife; (when women are ill husband goes off with another woman; if husband earned more money he could give support to family; need active husband—some are idle; if husband used condoms many diseases would be prevented; husband needs to take care of children then woman could work)
Tailoring, embroidery, crochet	5 (4)	Time; husband's permission; lack of security when going to market for materials; money for inputs; energy, and food for energy; orders not available; lack of new designs; lack of customers; (space needed; raw materials; selling finished goods)
Going to market	4 (5)	Keeping accounts; bargaining with shopkeepers; short of money; criticised by men for going to market; men do not take them seriously and call them names; children upset when mothers go to market; (no permission from husband and community; no security—nighttime thefts and attacks; husband not interested to go to market with a wife who is not beautiful; 3-4 women could go or husband could go with wife depending on husband's permission; no interest to go at night although daytime is not a problem)
Earning money <i>Present WTC only</i>	(5)	(Energy; knowledge; education; training; space; good understanding between husband and wife; time; collecting orders from different sources; small businesses could be supported by a loan; earning money could be through trained skills)
Childcare	4 (3)	Time and concern spent on children's health, bathing, eating; dressing; money; energy; worry over kidnapping (no help from husband; husband is tense through lack of work therefore no ability to look after children; childcare sometimes limits time available for earning money; children and husband earning little; family planning would be useful; women use family planning but husbands are not interested, therefore early abortion is often used as contraception)
Group meetings	4 (3)	Collecting money; time; not getting loans according to needs; keeping accounts; time needed for going to bank; not always getting husband's permission; not able to deposit every week (meeting place rent; shortage of space)
Other IGAs <i>Ex-WTC only</i>	4	Problems with illegal businesses—police harassment; husband's permission; time, energy and strength; little profit; problems with quality control; seasonal business
Going to bank <i>Ex-WTC only</i>	3	Time—can take 3 hours; writing official documents; husband creates problems—beating when late
Sending children to school/ teaching children to read	3 (3)	Women already have huge workload; money for school fees; lack of own education and need for private tutor; (books; clothes; teachers are not helping-minded)
Coming to Concern <i>Present WTC only</i>	(3)	Carrying children; road accidents; weather; 2-3km walk; need to cook very early for husband and cook again on return; time; hard work; a community-based programme would eliminate these problems
Order collection <i>Present WTC only</i>	(3)	Need to be familiar with market and advertising; need to be able to make and show products to shopkeepers; need costing-related and fashion design training; husband could help with e.g. material purchase, order supply, going to market
Cooking	3 (2)	Money; food and fuelwood; water; market; cooking space; energy; time
Housework <i>Present WTC only</i>	(1)	No problems

Table 3.1: Ranking and discussion of problems faced by Ex- (and Present) WTC women.

A final activity with Present WTC women⁴⁵ was a matrix ranking of effectiveness of WTC components against problems faced. This activity was conceptually difficult and time consuming. Scores were allocated after lengthy discussions, and due to this reasons for scoring may not at first be apparent. The matrix reads horizontally and then vertically, for example, whether the provision of food (first horizontal box) is useful in addressing the problems associated with cooking (first vertical box). Ranking is on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 representing most and 1 least useful at addressing needs. Table 3.2 is a reproduction of this matrix:

⁴⁵ This was not possible with Ex-WTC women due to time constraints.

	Food	Skills	ALP ⁴⁶	PD ⁴⁷	GO ⁴⁸	Childcare	Health	TOTAL
Cooking	2	3	2	X	X	X	3	10
Tailoring	X	4	2	1	4	X	3	14
Going to market	1	2	3	1	4	2	1	14
Children to school	2	3	2	1	3	X	3	16
Group meeting	2	2	3	3	3	1	2	16
Earning money	4	5	3	2	3	2	2	21
Order collection	2	3	2	1	4	1	3	16
Childcare	2	1	3	3	2	4	3	18
Husband care	X	2	X	1	3	2	2	10
TOTAL	15	25	20	13	26	12	22	

Table 3.2: Matrix ranking of usefulness of WTC components in addressing problems⁴⁹

A crude overview of the matrix indicates that Guardian Orientation was the most useful element of the programme in addressing the reality of problems and needs in women's lives, closely followed by skills training. Read horizontally, the programme was most effective at addressing problems women were facing in earning money. This is corroborated by Section 3.2.1, above, which demonstrates the differences in types of employment between women who had attended the programme and those who had not.

The final activity in the workshop with Ex-WTC women involved participants thinking of one thing which had changed in their lives since joining the WTC and one thing which remained a big problem. Stories told by the women illustrated their continued vulnerability. Elements of training, savings and credit, and education have made a difference to women's lives, but unexpected shocks such as illness, divorce or death of family members still cause major setbacks, from which recovery may not be possible without further supports. Lack of knowledge of how to use the skills taught is also apparent in some cases.

⁴⁶ Adult Literacy Programme.

⁴⁷ Personal Development.

⁴⁸ Guardian Orientation, a one-week awareness course for a male guardian, e.g. husband or father.

⁴⁹ Although this is a numerical ranking, the matrix is reproduced as much for each individual component as for an overview. 'X' indicates that the component was not perceived as relevant to addressing the corresponding problem or need.

4 Analysis and Findings

4.1 Effectiveness and Comprehensiveness of Participatory Analysis

The study seeks to establish an appropriate approach to working with the poorest 10% in Bangladesh, and has proposed that these poorest are a diverse grouping, including the elderly and disabled, some of whom are men. While the elderly and disabled were included in the semi-structured interviews, there were no disabled and only one or two elderly participants in the PRA sessions. There were also no male participants in any stage of the study, as the target group for participants had been specifically women associated with the WTC programme. Using this data alone, therefore, would limit the comprehensiveness of any conclusions that could be drawn in relation to current development thought and future policy formulation, despite the fact that it has managed to highlight the perceptions of a high vulnerability group in Saidpur slums. For this reason, the results of a more comprehensive gender study which took place in Khulna, south-west Bangladesh⁵⁰, will be referred to in parallel in the analysis which follows. The Khulna study worked with women, men, children and adolescents in focus group discussions and other participatory analysis, and is useful both for its depth of analysis and its ability to strengthen the findings of the study in Saidpur. Additionally, parallel linkages will be established with case studies from Thorbek and others where appropriate.

4.2 A Socio-Economic Portrait of the Urban Poor in Bangladesh

Two major preoccupations in relation to needs emerged from the PRA sessions. The first was the lack of skills possessed and need for a higher earning capacity; the second was the restriction on women's movements outside the home and the perceptions of male family and community members. For this reason, the following section is divided into earning capacity and power relations, although in the reality of women's lives the two are inseparably linked.

4.2.1 Economic Status and Earning Capacity

All activities associated with earning money scored highly in the difficulty ranking of problems in women's lives in Saidpur⁵¹. Ex-WTC women experienced difficulties with using the handicraft skills which had been taught, once the supports of the WTC programme had ended. Present WTC women also experienced difficulties in sourcing materials and selling products despite the supports available to them. Both groups mentioned the need for male guardians', particularly husbands', permission as a factor limiting their earning potential. However, constraints among the poorest in earning potential are not limited to women alone. In the Khulna study, both women and men ranked skills training as their greatest need⁵².

The idea of women working, and women working outside the home, has long been established in Bangladesh due to the work of NGOs in skills training for women, and the rise of garments factories whose employees are mainly women. However, the reality of women's productive work is a social sphere in which discrimination is perpetuated through division of male/female tasks and types of work, so that

⁵⁰ cf. Grantham and Rahman. This study took place over a period of six weeks, almost concurrently with the analysis of WTCs in Saidpur.

⁵¹ Ranking of 4/5 out of 5 for each of these activities.

⁵² Grantham and Rahman, 23, 28.

handicrafts and working in garments factories⁵³, for example, are acceptable for women, following the pattern of traditionally designated women's work, whereas work involving movement outside the community and into the marketplace, a typically male sphere, are not. In the urban informal sector the ratio of women's to men's earnings in Bangladesh is 32%⁵⁴, and women in the PRA sessions stated that they are afraid to venture into the marketplace as they are criticised by men and feel a lack of security. Thus discrimination against women's productive work persists in both an economic and a social sense.

Nevertheless, women in Saidpur and Khulna study groups were anxious to become involved in paid employment, both in order to meet household needs and to earn the respect of their husbands and families⁵⁵. Simultaneously, the women are aware that one of the greatest barriers to their ability to earn an income is the need to secure their husbands' or guardians' permission before becoming involved in activities which take too much time or take them too far away from the home⁵⁶.

In an economic climate where earning opportunities for both men and women are limited, and the majority of vocational training offered to the poorest is through NGOs, it is women who are being offered the economic opportunities which the whole community desires. Two issues arise from this. The first is that if it is women only who are being offered new economic opportunities, it is paramount that these opportunities are clearly thought through, and that the opportunities offered are feasible options which are guaranteed to bring increased revenue to the slum communities which these women inhabit, in order to enhance the economic status of the community as a whole. Without the business planning skills which are necessary to market the goods manufactured, or the social acceptance of women's entry into the marketplace, the effectiveness of teaching handicrafts as a means of increasing women's economic potential is limited. It could be argued that the WTC programmes were after all introduced to alter women's social position within society, and that the earnings generated are a secondary objective of the programme. However, teaching traditional handicrafts which typically can be produced within the household does not challenge greatly the restrictions on women's social mobility within Bangladeshi slum communities. Additionally, this is neglecting the real need of the community for increased economic independence.

The second issue is that if women are being offered opportunities to move into a typically male arena of productive work, then the effect that this has on the men in the community and their relations with women has to be clearly thought through. Men in Khulna slum communities who had ranked skills training and income generating work as their greatest need related that they were unable to secure good jobs as they were illiterate and lacked marketable skills. These men emphasised the lack of opportunity for vocational training which they faced, and estimated that 90% of men in their area were underemployed⁵⁷. As women move into the traditional male sphere of

⁵³ Although accepted as 'women's work', the physical aspect of mobility outside the community required in order to go to work in garments factories often meets with resistance from family and community members.

⁵⁴ UNDP (1996); quoted in Grantham and Rahman, 4.

⁵⁵ cf. e.g. Grantham and Rahman, 23 "[Women] feel they would be able to achieve some degree of independence and would receive more honour and respect from their husbands and families if they too were earning". cf. also Table 4.1.

⁵⁶ cf. Table 3.1.

⁵⁷ Grantham and Rahman, 27.

productive work in urban areas in addition to their multiple roles within the family and community, there *is* a sense in which men feel threatened in terms of their masculinity⁵⁸, and an awareness of this is important to programme planning. This is borne out by the contribution which women felt Guardian Orientation had made to alleviating the problems faced in their daily lives. In Table 3.2 it is ranked by Present WTC women as the most effective element of the programme, despite its duration of one week in a programme which lasted for one year. It may also be significant that Ex-WTC women ranked going to the market, which normally requires guardians' permission, as a step less difficult (4 out of 5) than did Present WTC women (5 out of 5). Involving men in an understanding of women's potential and contribution to the development process facilitated access of women to the market and increased cooperation between women and their male guardians.

In a case study of women garment factory workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Naila Kabeer explores the reasoning behind women's going to work and breaking the boundaries of *purdah*. Women in Kabeer's study were unlikely to work outside the home where this was absolutely forbidden, as the social vulnerability incurred through breaking with male authority was a greater threat than their economic vulnerability as it persisted within their households. For those women who had defied their husbands and who were consequently separated, the satisfaction of being able to support themselves was dampened by the social exclusion they endured. This further emphasises the need to increase understanding between women and men in the process of creation of economic opportunities involving women. However, it may be that with the increasing social fragmentation associated with urbanisation, and increasing insecurity of women in communities with high incidence of divorce or desertion, that economic independence is coming to be viewed as a greater security than a husband: "Now we know that husbands do not last forever. Every girl with any sense wants to secure her future"⁵⁹. If this is the case, then the importance of teaching skills relevant to the marketplace cannot be too strongly emphasised.

4.2.2 Social Status and Power Relations

Women in the Ex-WTC group in Saidpur ranked 'husbandcare' as the activity linked with the highest degree of difficulty in their daily lives, with the Present WTC group according this the second highest ranking, and almost every problem identified by both Present- and Ex-WTC women contained an element of the need for "husband's permission", or "good understanding between husband and wife"⁶⁰. In the Khulna gender study, "Women told how without the permission of their husband, they can't do anything"⁶¹. Lack of cooperation from husbands expressed itself in restrictions on women's mobility outside the household and violence within the home when women were felt to be neglecting their reproductive duties. This violence is accepted as a social norm⁶² and is discussed freely by both women⁶³ and men. Men in the Khulna

⁵⁸ cf. e.g. Kabeer (2000), 124 "The presence of a working woman within their family was seen to reflect poorly on their own capacity to fulfil their breadwinning role".

⁵⁹Kabeer, 141.

⁶⁰ cf. Table 3.1.

⁶¹ Grantham and Rahman, 23.

⁶² There are indications that this is as much a function of culture as it is of religion, if not more so. In Ratmalana slums in Sri Lanka, Thorbek writes that "women agreed that it was both common and right for a young, married man to beat his wife, 'so that she can behave properly, and to control her and make sure everything is in good order.'...The women at the meeting emphasized that they also worshipped their husbands every day 'because he gets us our food'. Thorbek, 89.

⁶³ cf. Table 3.1.

study spoke of the frustration of being unable to provide financially for their families and the physical exhaustion they suffer from working long hours outside, offering this as justification for their beating of their wives:

*I am a rickshaw driver. I work all day in the sun. I try to understand my wife, but when I come in from work, I am hot and aching. Nobody can make me control my temper. I have to hit her.*⁶⁴

The prevalence of violence within the home is accepted by women due to religio-cultural beliefs, as Grantham and Rahman have explained, that “paradise lies under the feet of their husband”⁶⁵, and that it is the husband’s right to decide what is right within the family. It is also an expression of the “cooperative conflicts” which Sen (1990) proposes exist within the family, where the fall-back position of women is less assured than that of men, and where women need men for their social protection. Thus a trade-off occurs (albeit subconsciously) between the need for male protection and the unequal power relations which exist in the family.

Perceptions of poorest women in the Khulna study cooperate with the violence they suffer within the home, rationalised by the belief that the husband has the right to beat his wife. However, in the Saidpur discussion, Ex-WTC women discussing husbandcare raised beatings as a problem, and appear to be questioning this more openly. This awareness may be due to certain components of the WTC programme, such as Personal Development classes, which *may* have given women a sense of how to protect their own well-being.

While religious and cultural beliefs legitimate subordination of women countrywide as common practice, there is a sense that in urban areas this may also be a reflection of the disempowerment faced by men, as well as women, in entering into the marketplace. Increasing individualisation of labour associated with economic liberalisation, as reflected in the urban environment, and limited earning potential of those who are illiterate and unskilled, increase men’s own sense of powerlessness and isolation within the cities which they inhabit. This frustration, as above, and helplessness in an attempt to provide for their families, means that the polarisation of power between men and women in urban slum communities often becomes more pronounced, even as it becomes clearer that both men and women face daily realities of disempowerment, as Beall (1997) has written:

For a host of reasons ranging from a nostalgia for roots to competition for resources, some groups retain and even exaggerate their cultural identity and exclusiveness in the city⁶⁶.

Thus in attempting to retain or regain their sense of dignity, communities may look inward to those elements of their culture which previously have given them a sense of identity, which the freedoms associated with economic liberalisation and democratic rights may have seemed to threaten. Kannabiran and Kannabiran (1995) argue that while the urban environment promises increased opportunities for women, it also by its individualised and confusing nature places an increased burden on them for providing a sense of social cohesiveness:

⁶⁴ Grantham and Rahman, 44.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 42.

⁶⁶ Beall (1997), 20.

Men become citizens and claim democratic rights in these new spaces which are essentially alienating. However, they still look back and actively depend for their sense of identity and rootedness on the old community which has now shrunk to family and a religio-cultural fringe. Women then take on the added responsibility of absorbing and nurturing this need for stability on the part of men.⁶⁷

This function of nurturing men's need for stability corresponds well to the Ex-WTC women's own designation of husbandcare as their greatest and most problematic responsibility. It also emphasises the importance of understanding the needs of men in programmes which attempt to meet the needs of women, and the need to understand a community within a wider urban environment in designing policies to target the poorest in urban slums. In the conclusion which follows, a number of possible approaches to these ends are explored.

⁶⁷ Kannabiran and Kannabiran (1995), 20.

5 Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions of the WTC Research

The study has examined the effects of the WTC programme on the lives of the poorest women in Saidpur. Despite the fact that the majority of women who have been associated with WTCs still remain in the poorest 10% of Bangladeshi society, there are some gradual changes, most notably an increased sense of their own well-being, observable among those women who had previously attended the centres (Ex-WTC women). Many of these women now access government health services, persuade their female relatives of the need to register marriages, and show the first signs of accessing markets, albeit while shouldering the associated social burdens of doing so. Ex-WTC women have an increased awareness of the contribution that they make to nurturing the family and to 'husbandcare'. While they are not openly critical of violence within the home they are also far from accepting it willingly.

The economic status of women has changed only slightly after their involvement with WTCs, mainly due lack of available market linkages in terms of necessary skills, connections, and the need to secure permission of male guardians for accessing these markets. Yet women who have been associated with WTCs (Present and Ex-WTC women) show a higher degree of initiative and are involved in marginally less exploitative types of employment, which allows them more dignity than those women who have not attended the centres⁶⁸.

The successes of the WTCs are limited, and the continued need for food security among those women who had attended the WTC programme and who are amongst the poorest 10% in Bangladeshi society remains a major concern, indicating that the economic status of the households to which these women belong has not changed greatly. However, there are positive outcomes of these limited successes which can be learned from and built upon in designing future interventions to be more inclusive of the poorest, and suggestions of how this could be approached are outlined in Section 5.3.

The aim of the WTCs was to improve women's social position, and while this improvement has been marginal it has also been nevertheless significant when the differences in awareness, independence and mobility are compared between non-WTC and Present- or Ex-WTC women. The target group of the WTCs were indeed those who were among the poorest, and this is another success, remaining consistent with the Concern Bangladesh Strategic Plan. In future interventions to target the poorest it will be important for Concern to continue to work with this poorest grouping while widening the field to include other marginalised community members, including men, as the WTC research has demonstrated that the involvement of men in gaining acceptance and understanding of women's work and rights has been one of the most successful elements of the programme.

5.2 Conclusions and Implications of the Study

By linkages to findings from other studies in Bangladesh (Kabeer, Grantham and Rahman), Pakistan (Beall) and Sri Lanka (Thorbeck) in urban contexts, a number of

⁶⁸ cf. Section 3.2 for differences in productive activities between those women who had been associated with WTCs and those who had not.

the hypotheses formulated in the opening chapters have found verification. The correspondence of evidence from contexts which were Islamic as well as Buddhist suggests that the basis for the impoverishment faced by the poorest women in urban areas is as much a function of culture, and external forces acting upon a community culture, as it is of religion.

Beall (1997) and Thorbek have written that the breakdown of social support networks based on kinship and community, and change from collective to individualised patterns of working, are reasons for decreased opportunities for solidarity between women in urban contexts. The WTC programme was successful in the respect that it provided a forum within which women could share their ideas, and support and learn from each other. This is a basis of strength which could be built on in future programmes. Nevertheless, within the wider social structures very little has changed. Women still have an inferior social position relative to men, supported by religious and cultural norms that their rightful place is 'below the feet of their husband'. Men are equally convinced that the status quo is just. Women have little or no access to decision-making fora on issues which concern their own lives, and very few linkages to the external world, to elites, local government or even the marketplace proper. Urban poverty is increasing, not decreasing, and urban women are possibly the largest group of poorest and most disenfranchised in Bangladesh.

Creating an awareness among women of their rights and building solidarity in a vacuum can only be of limited effectiveness. While women in Khulna and Saidpur are aware of the unequal distribution of workloads and unequal share of responsibilities which they contend with, they are also unwilling to challenge the status quo, and in fact support many aspects of their subordination. Sen (1990), Kabeer (1995) and others⁶⁹ have provided frameworks and evidence to suggest that it is in women's best interests, in terms of immediate welfare, to continue to support and respect the decision-making power of their husbands and male guardians as a trade-off made for social protection. This is supported by Kannabiran and Kannabiran in Section 4, whereby women meet the needs for nurturing, self-esteem, and cultural identity of the men in their communities within a harsh and alien external environment, even at the expense of their own identities.

Yet there are also other factors at stake. Although women ranked 'husbandcare' with the greatest degree of hardship, they were rarely critical of their husbands themselves; rather they appeared to possess a deeper understanding of the problems of poverty which the men in their communities also had to confront. This support role of women is a reflection of centuries of cultural tradition, which northern-led philosophies of development alone will not reverse. 'Empowering' women against traditional beliefs of their communities will result in increased insecurity⁷⁰ and intra-community fragmentation unless a more holistic approach is involved which involves whole community perceptions. This must aim to build trust and capacities from within, rather than imposing donor-led agendas, and must be context-specific.

Any development intervention which seeks to challenge prevailing ideologies subordinating the poorest groups must first seek to understand those ideologies. It may be that research sanctioned by development funding bodies to date has worked

⁶⁹ For example: Thorbek, Feldman, Kannabiran and Kannabiran.

⁷⁰ cf. e.g. Kabeer, 2000.

within a particular agenda of making women and their needs more visible, and by focusing on the realities of women's lives has by default omitted to develop the fullest understanding of the external forces which shape those realities. In order to understand the women in a community it is also necessary to understand the men who shape their opportunities for empowerment and for change. Both women and men are able to contribute to this understanding. Men, as the traditional 'breadwinners' and point of contact between women's realities and the environment external to the slum communities, are also disempowered and disillusioned, and there is a real sense in which the control men exercise over women is an expression of the limited opportunities open to poor men to challenge the oppression which they also face.

Development is a process in which there are many interacting levels of power relations. In an urban context, the interacting levels and factors involved are multiplied. Whereas programmes to address the needs of the poorest women in a rural context were able to achieve successes with a purely women-focused approach, these programmes were able to build on already existing networks of solidarity based on kinship and production, which formed the basis of cultural identity⁷¹. In an urban environment, these mechanisms are fragmented, and livelihoods are individualistic while cultural constraints are often exaggerated. Added to this is an external environment which is not controllable; in many cases actively hostile. Both women and men face oppressions from a variety of sources, and programmes which seek a sustainable freedom from these oppressions for the poorest must first seek to understand their sources. This will involve a thorough consideration of lack of opportunities, choices, freedom, dignity and self-esteem in the definition of poverty.

5.3 Recommendations and Future Challenges

The main recommendation is to argue for a flexible framework, which does not evaluate the causes and extent of poverty within a pre-defined agenda, attempting to match needs to available funding possibilities, but rather seeks to understand the interacting forces which combine to enforce the conditions of poverty within an urban slum community before formulating a strategy to address these. This will involve an open-ended approach to research, which matches research techniques to community realities and opportunities for participation. Based on the results of this research, attempts can be made to advocate to influential agencies⁷² the necessity of meeting the specific needs which exist. For this reason, specific development interventions are not recommended, as each situation will be context-specific. However, there are a number of general approaches and guidelines which might be suggested. For reasons of conciseness, these are presented in bullet-point format.

5.3.1 Participatory Research Techniques

- Community-based researches which are more than a token attempt at participatory assessment of community needs. This will take time, and techniques used should be varied, in order to find those techniques which best fit the target group.
- Recognition that the process of assessment is as much a development intervention as the 'actions' which follow, in creating an awareness among community members of the interacting factors which act to provide constraints and opportunities in their lives. Presented as such, this may allow for a greater

⁷¹ Although the extent to which these programmes have addressed the social *position* of women is also questionable.

⁷² For example: community committees, local government, donors.

allocation of donor resources to the assessment phases of interventions, if it can be proven that it will contribute to greater sustainability of interventions in the long-term.

- Research which involves both men and women, in separate and mixed-sex groups where appropriate; and which involves both the powerless and the powerful (i.e. inclusive of local elites, local politicians) in an attempt to understand the interacting dynamics of poverty⁷³.
- Design of interventions which are based as much on perceived needs in context and community dynamics as on past NGO experience, in order to guarantee their acceptance and ability to bring about change among the broader community, rather than one selected target group within that community.
- Continuous process of monitoring and evaluation of interventions, in order to assess whether new opportunities to bring about further changes have arisen during the process of intervention thus far. Continual 'updating' of interventions in line with changing community perceptions.

5.3.2 *Research and Investigative Strategies*

- Research into perceptions of men and ideas of 'masculinity', in order to deepen understanding of the existing relations between men and women, and possibilities for change within the constraints which bind both women and men⁷⁴.
- Research into problems faced by specific groups of the poorest, and learning between organisations of effective approaches towards increasing the social position of e.g. the disabled and elderly⁷⁵.
- Research into the links between urban slum communities and local government provision of services and political discussion fora. Investigation of the links between urban slum communities and local elites and businesses. Learning from cases where these links have been successfully forged to the benefit of target communities, and translation of this learning into context-specific practice.
- Context-specific research into traditional and non-traditional skills and abilities training for women, accompanied by context-specific research into opportunities for traditional and non-traditional skills and abilities training for men⁷⁶. Simultaneous recognition that 'solutions' to limited employment possibilities will be found as much in social anthropology as in economics.
- Research and awareness-building within NGOs and other influential development agencies on the balance of power between women and men in those agencies and the opportunities for representation of the disenfranchised.

⁷³ Inclusion of local elites in the research process was not possible within the scope of this study. However, such techniques have already been proven as successful in building relations between poor communities and local power structures within the work of Concern Bangladesh, and have allowed the poor communities involved to better access the services which these local power structures are responsible for providing.

⁷⁴ This does not imply a return to male-focused policies. As Kabeer (1994) has written: "...Nor does gender analysis imply the symmetrical treatment of women and men. Just as a class analysis can be used to understand and address the problems of the poor, so too a gender analysis can be used to understand and address the problems of women's subordination". Kabeer, 1994., xii-xiii.

⁷⁵ Again, it was not possible to explore this fully within the scope of this study, and there is very limited available information on work undertaken with such groups in Bangladesh. This re-emphasises the need for work with this least visible and most vulnerable section of the poorest.

⁷⁶ Not all women, e.g. only 20% of this study sample, would be willing to diversify into non-traditional skills. However, those who are willing could be involved in piloting new business ventures, for example. In Saidpur, male and female family members are now working together in e.g. candle making and marketing, and roadside snack making and vending businesses, with initial capital start-up grants from Concern. These have so far been proving economically successful ventures.

5.3.3 Advocacy Strategies

- Advocacy by NGOs on behalf of the poorest to local power structures, to establish linkages between local community groups and decision-making agencies which can be managed by local community groups as their capacity and capabilities grow.
- Advocacy at the level of NGO and donor policy-making for a more flexible framework within which to assess needs, and for each proposed intervention to be considered on its own merit, within a specific context, rather than to need to conform to pre-defined donor standards.
- Continued advocacy by NGOs to wider decision-making bodies such as governments and international organisations for an approach to poverty alleviation which focuses on social context and equity rather than broad economic indicators.

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