



Outside Earning and Women's Bargaining Power: Grassroots Realities from Selected Locations of Bangladesh

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Abstract:

The Paper investigates whether Sen's (1990) statement about outside earnings and women's better breakdown position, clearer perception of individuality and wellbeing and higher perceived contribution to the family economic position is still valid in present time. Through field research in some selective locations in Bangladesh, the paper attempts to reveal how far it is pertinent when women get outside earning through accessing micro credit. The study applies qualitative method namely focus group discussion for data collection. Different scholars' relevant work were also reviewed and critically analyzed to pointing out impact of micro credit facilitated outside earnings in relation to three points while keeping focus on power, agency and entitlement. The findings indicate that generally outside earning creates first step for women to go outside and opens up new horizon of opportunities. However, it is hard to conclude straightforwardly that outside earning alone will achieve all above points claimed by Sen(1990), rather basic needs differ in different context. It was found that in Bangladesh extra household factors- which not challenged always by micro credit, play crucial role in determining full result of outside income.

Keywords: Gender relation, micro credit, breakdown position, individuality, Bangladesh.

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Introduction:

Outside earningⁱ is an important means for women's advancement in many countries. The behind philosophy is economic progression will trickle down in other areas that ultimately carry just and equitable society. Nobel Laureate Economist Amartya Sen (1990) argued that outside income can give a woman better breakdown position, clearer perception about individualityⁱⁱ and well beingⁱⁱⁱ, and a higher perceived contribution to the family's economic position. As he limits himself only in the economic aspects of household in his household bargaining model, so many feminists criticized him and showed how the extra household parameters are playing significant role in determining the bargaining power as well in the breakdown position. However, although many extra household factors play significant role in bargaining game, an outside income still remains a starting point for women in countries like Bangladesh. The author argues that outside income can give the women better breakdown position and clearer perception about their individuality and well being and a higher perceived contribution to the family's economic position. However, this opportunity also brings tension for women as sometimes their men counterparts take away the income or control where and how to invest while loan burden remains at her shoulder. The paper^{iv} applies micro credit and its experience in Bangladesh as a case study to establish the argument.

Methodology and structure of the article:

The study involves qualitative method for data collection. It applies Focus Group Discussion in three different locations of Bangladesh- namely Netrokona, Bagerhat and Gaibanda. Total 30 participants (10 from each location) took part in the discussion and contributed by sharing their experiences. Bringing men's perspective to the debate, 6 men (two from each) were participated and contributed to the discussion. The paper will go through three different outcomes of outside earnings mentioned by Sen (1990) one after another with explanations and then it triangulate with findings from the FGD.

First part of the paper deals with brief introduction. Second part of it moves with findings from field research along with existing literatures on the field that have been contributing to the debate on the issue. Third part of the paper briefly discusses the missing point. Finally, it has a short conclusion.

Better break down Position:

The favour of collusive solution depends on the breakdown position of the individual. Given other things, if the break down position of one person was worse in terms of well being, then the collusive solution would be less favourable to his/ her well being. The breakdown position indicates the person's vulnerability or strength at the time of bargaining (Sen, 1990; 135). In the classical Nash bargaining model^v, as well as, other many recent refinements, the most important determinant of any individual's bargaining power is his/ her breakdown position. For household bargaining model, the

breakdown position can be defined as the state in which husband and wife will find themselves if their marriage were to breakdown (Osmani, 2007: 695).

Actually bargaining power depends on many factors of intra and extra house hold dynamics. First, the complex determinants (especially qualitative ones) of bargaining power in relation to specific resources, the differential importance of those determinants, and the extent to which these determinants themselves are subject to contestation and change- all these mediated through the lens of gender. Secondly, the short term exogeneity and long-term endogeneity of social norms and their roles of setting and determining bargaining power. Thirdly, the individual action is being motivated by the co-existence of self interest and altruism; finally, the intra household bargaining power comprise the nature of intra and extra house hold bargaining power within a wider institutional environment and the role of the groups/ coalitions one belongs to (Agarwal, 1997:37).

Though the breakdown position depends on the bargaining power, and the bargaining power on many factors, but outside income through economic interventions could play a vital role. In a research in Allahabad India, evident that greater economic role definitely improves women's status within the family. The women can spend money according to their choice, and they have greater say in how to spend their money. Most women claim to be treated better due to their economic condition. A substantial proportion of women say that, they should have recognized economic role, and an independent source of income. Their attitude clearly proves the significance of their work to family welfare and their own status within the family (Sen, 1990: 135).

Besides the working opportunity, gender division of labour is also an important factor. It has been suggested that the weakness of women's bargaining power is at least partly a consequence of traditional gender division of labour, which limits women's opportunity to engage in market-based income earning activities. If it is true then it could be suggested that by enabling women to participate market based income earning activities micro credit would strengthen their bargaining power with the household (Osmani, 2007:695). In a FGD in Netrokona, one of the female participants stated;

“I received a small loan from one of the NGOs, then I did sell puffed rice in my village. For that I started working out of home, and I got my own little earning. I felt it truly mine! First time, it was not significant but it made lot of sense to me. That time, I noticed, attitude towards me has been changed. My husband did not use slang word and did not threat to sending back me to my parental home. I found myself valuable in the family!”

It is well argued that micro credit can change the economic dependency relationship between men and women. In another study by Kabeer (2001:77) identified that loanees of micro credit programme acknowledged that their economic situation improved through micro credit. As both wife and husband worked hard for it, so the husband registered one acre of four acres lands that he had purchased in his wife's name as recognition of her contribution to household economy, but also he mentioned it will strengthen her bargaining position in the future, when he will no longer be around. The impact of participation in credit programme on women's intra- household bargaining power has been assessed by comparing the situation of women who participated in activities financed by the Grammen Bank of Bangladesh with those that did not participate. The researcher had used three different indicators of women's breakdown position as a measure of their bargaining power. The result showed that micro credit helped strengthen women's bargaining power in terms of all three indicators. The research added further that due to cultural inhibition women could not use their full potential to use the loan. Though they bring in the loan, but in most cases, their husband uses it. Even, women who are directly involved in credit financed activities, they often depend on their husband for marketing the products. The research concluded with an argument that women's bargaining power would have improved even further if they were able to involve themselves completely independently in credit financed activities without depending on their husband (Osmani, 2007:713). FGD Participants of Netrokona have proved it by their experiences. As of them stated as;

“Sometimes they (husband) take away our money and invest on something where we have no access and control. Sometimes, they also impose their decision about what to do with the credit!”

Though many factors work behind determining the women's bargaining power, but micro credit plays a crucial role. Hence, based on the above research findings, in the context of Bangladesh, micro credit, as a market based entitlement, can build a ground for women's outside income, which ultimately brings better breakdown position in intra household bargaining process for them.

Clearer perception of women's individuality and wellbeing:

People have many identities. Sex, membership of group/society/class/ nation, occupation etc are some of them. Class is the basic of the above identities. One individual can comprise a variety of such different identities. In some context family identity may apply such a strong influence on our perception that it may not be possible to formulate any clear notion of individual welfare (Sen, 1990: 126). He added further that some authors have disputed the acceptability of notion of personal well-being. They have argued that when any rural woman was asked about her personal “welfare” then she would find herself speechless, and the question might seem unintelligent, and if finally she were able

to answer then she might translate the question in terms of family welfare. The empirical problem of perception is really important on one hand. On the other, it would not be wise to draw conclusion about non-viability of notion of personal welfare. There are many reasons, Firstly, there are considerable variations in the perception of individuality even within the traditional society like India, and lack of perception of personal welfare where that holds, is neither immutable, nor particularly resistant to social development. Secondly, intra family divisions involve significant inequalities in the distribution of food, medical attention, and health care education etc. Thirdly, personal interest and welfare are not only a matter of perception, but also there are objective aspects of these concepts that need attention even when the relevant self-perception does not exist. Finally, it can be distinguished between a personal well-being and agency. Besides one's well being, one may have different goals and objectives. Though there is certain link between one's well-being and fulfilment of own's objectives. The agency aspect is most influenced by a person's sense of obligation, and perception of legitimate behaviour. These perceptions are influenced by politics and education.

In a FGD in Gaibanda, it was revealed women who travel door to door for trading items with women; they used to get good profit. They feel it enough for them as their investment was tiny. Moreover, by moving out they also have opportunity to interact with community and know different dynamism of life which gives them good lessons to identify her own direction. As one of participants in the discussion was saying,

“When I heard the story of Aleya^{vi}, I decided to do something for my own. So, I started keeping a portion of my earning separate. And I eat whenever I feel hungry. I do not wait for my husband (if he is not around) to have his meal first rather I keep his part and then have my meal with children. I have to take care myself!”

This anecdote indicates that outside income helps women's personal well-being and agency. According to Sen (1990:137)), getting better education, having chance to work outside the home, getting more “productive employment etc, may all contribute not only to immediate well-being but also to acquired skill and a better breakdown position. As Sen (*ibid*) mentioned the role of better education in perception building, so taking the case of micro credit in Bangladesh, it can be explained by research evidence. Women loanees pointed out that along with the material asset, they had other form of investment that had potential to transform gender relation in the long run relate to girl's education. It is clearly evident that access to loan and enhanced income level which it generated, made education affordable to many household who could not afford it (Kabeer, 2001:77). It was also found that women got better perception about their individual well-being. It was generalized insecurity that led women to invest some asset in their own name. One of the few loanee pointed out

that insecurity underpinned her desire to save her own name. She had adopted two strategies at the same time- firstly, investment on joint assets (on life insurance and land mortgage with husband) in her husband name for showing family loyalty, and secondly, life insurance account in her own name for creating independent resources for herself. It is creating chance or awareness about their agency^{vii} to cope with unwanted circumstances. The case study showed that micro credit is not only creating opportunity for women's economic earning, but also transforming the perception about individuality and their own well being.

A higher 'perceived contribution' to the family's economic position:

"Given other things, if the accounting of the respective outcomes, a person was perceived as making a larger contribution to the overall opulence of the group, then the collusive solution, if different would be more favourable"(Sen, 1990:136). Household economy is a very complex to understand and too easy to be confused. (Folbre,1998: 262). So, it needs more careful attention to draw any conclusion. Even though the household is a very complex unit of society, but role of micro credit and its impact on women's perceived contribution to the family's economic position could be evaluated.

In a FGD in Bagerhat district, discussion found that when women have their income, they can decide about some small issues independently. In earlier, when women did not have any money of their own, they needed to ask for it to their husband. Even the amount is insignificant; they had to share purpose of it. Sometimes, they feel embarrassed to share since everything cannot be shared to men. Moreover, when women have money at their hand, they often help children to purchase educational materials and sometimes just for snacks. One of women participants stated as;

"Gradually, my income has been increased. While I was having some money at my hand, I found I could decide about little things without consultation with my husband. Children asked me for money to purchase something like toys. Now I need not to refer them to their father rather I can give it to them. I enjoy my importance. This happens only as I have some earnings!"

Researchers Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley (1996) explored the impact of credit by a number of indicators of empowerment^{viii}. These are reported magnitude of women's economic contribution, their mobility in the public sphere, ability to make large and small purchases, their ownership of productive assets including house or homestead land and cash savings, involvement in major decision making such as purchasing land, rickshaw, or live stock for income earning purpose, the ability to visit their natal home when desired, and decision relating to sale of land, jewellery or taking up outside work, political awareness such as knowledge of key national and political figures, and law on inheritance.

Through the above indicators, they found that women's access to credit was significant determinant of the magnitude of economic contribution to family reported by women. In addition to this, BRAC^{ix} loanees tended to report significantly higher level of mobility and political participation, while Grameen's were on major decision-making.

It noted that when women's economic contribution was used as an independent variable, the effect of access to credit on the empowerment indicators was reduced but remain significant, further more it was suggesting that one important route through which women's access to credit translated into "empowerment" was via their enhanced economic contribution to the family income (Kabeer, 2001: 65).

Beyond the horizon: What needs to be considered?

Women's bargaining power is seen as a driving force for transforming gender relation. Therefore, it needs to be looked at in broader aspect rather than within household. Micro credit could be a source of outside earnings, and could lead others social transformation. But again some things are left behind. "More (1994) elaborates further upon the notion that bargaining in the household is never simply determined by economic factors by suggesting that gender ideologies are not merely cultural beliefs and attitudes which are somehow attached to economic and political processes but actually constitute of them"(Kandiyoti, 1998: 137). In addition to that, wage or money earned by women does get the same value or power as men because of the cultural practices (Hart, 1997:19). So it is essential to look back at the household. In this respect, the paper comes up in favour of some important measures to transforming gender relation in Bangladesh.

- Earning is a first step to think forward and take risks – therefore, more income generating activities need to be taken for women.
- Should have some short terms (for practical needs or measures) and long terms (for strategic needs) policies to sustain the economic achievement, and linking it to other broader socio political movement.
- Have to acknowledge the extra- household factors as important player in bargaining game.
- The idea of collective bargaining and collective action need to be taken into consideration in the whole process of bargaining.
- Besides working on improving women's bargaining power through economic interventions, it needs to identify what other options women do have.

Conclusion:

The objective of this paper is to critically look at the outside earnings as a means of women's better break down position, clear perception about her individuality and well being, and a higher perceived contribution to the family's economic positions. Acknowledging the importance of extra household factors that are playing a vital role too in household bargaining process for women, this paper concludes with the statement that the micro credit is a source of women's outside income, which is playing pioneer role in improving women's bargaining power. In addition, it creates opportunity for girls' education (though question remains about the quality of it, but it is the first step to be aware), and mobility in public domain, decision to work outside that helps to build a social network. Finally, as mentioned earlier that micro credit is a market-based entitlement for women. Women's entrepreneurship increases the household contribution that could redefine the women's position in the household, and community as well, to a certain context.

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NOTES:

ⁱ .The amount of income an elderly individual under the age of 70 has earned outside of his or her social security benefits. In this essay, it means the income people can earn from outside their household by doing any work or trade. <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/o/outsideearnings.asp>, Accessed on 26th March, 2008

ⁱⁱ A habit of thinking and acting in one's own distinctive manner and as one believes appropriate, not being heavily influenced by options of others; - of people.
<http://www.webster-dictionary.net/definition/individuality>, Accessed on March 25, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Well being may be analyzed in terms of a person's "functioning" and the capability to achieve these functioning (i.e what the person can do or can be), involving evaluation of the different capabilities in terms of person's ability to live well , and to achieve well being , and there are other objectives a person may pursue (value pursuing if he or she had the opportunity to think freely and act freely)." (Sen. 1990: 148.

^{iv} Originally the paper was academic -written as academic essay for the course of "gender, poverty and social protection" for pursuing MA in Development Studies 2008 at Institute of Social Studies, The Netherlands. This paper bases on this academic paper as well as field research carried out in 2011 in some selective locations in Bangladesh.

^v . The **Nash bargaining game** is a simple two-player game used to model bargaining interactions. In the Nash Bargaining Game two players demand a portion of some good (usually some amount of money). If the two proposals sum to no more than the total good, then both players get their demand. Otherwise, both get nothing

^{vi} Anonymous. Her marriage was broken down due to her poor health. Husband got married with another woman.

^{vii} Agency means the degree of free will.

^{viii} .“The conceptualization of empowerment in an understanding of the relationship of dependence, interdependence and autonomy which characterise gender relations in different cultures the structure of risks, incentives and opportunities which they generate and therefore the particular trajectories which process of empowerment are likely to take”(Kabeer, 2001: 80).

^{ix} BRAC (Building Resources Across Community – the new name, once it was Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) is the largest (in terms loan disbursement, total staff, area as well country coverage) Bangladeshi NGO in the world, working in Asia Africa with different development issues along with micro credit.

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