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Philanthrocapitalism and the languaging of empowered women in the Global South

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Abstract: This article explores the impact of market-driven corporate philanthropy on educational institutions and their social actors, with a focus on how ideas of English and women's empowerment become institutionally entrenched with subject-making processes in the context of higher education in Bangladesh. While questions about how late capitalism as a global phenomenon shapes language education policy and practice have been raised and discussed widely within the applied linguistics and sociolinguistic literature, we argue that there has been less academic attention to how these logics penetrate institutions of higher education through partnerships between private universities, local governments, work industry and multinational philanthropic organisations. The potential social cost of accepting the offer or seeking social responsibility from the philanthrocapitalists for educational institutions, particularly for women in the Global South, has also evaded scholarly scrutiny in the language disciplines. Drawing from an ethnographic study of a group of women garment workers from socio-economically less privileged backgrounds studying in a private international university, the article addresses these gaps by examining the communicative modelling of the social persona of an "empowered woman", with attention to the affects and effects involved in the process.

Keywords: philanthrocapitalism; women's empowerment; languaging; English; higher education

সারসংক্ষেপ: এই গবষেণা প্রবন্ধটরি আলোচনার বষিয়, কীভাবে উচ্চশক্ষিাপ্রতষ্ঠিান এবং তাদরে অংশগ্রহণকারীদরে উপর বাজার-চালতি কর্পোরটেদরে দাতব্য উদ্যোগ প্রভাবতি করছে; বশিষে করে, কীভাবে ইংরজেি ভাষা এবং নারীর ক্ষমতায়ন সম্পর্কতি ধারণাগুলি প্রতষ্ঠিানগুলোর শক্ষিার পদ্ধতি এবং নারীদরে পরচিতিি গঠনে ভূমকিা রাখে। যদওি, পুঁজবিাদ বা ক্যাপটিালজিম, একটি বশ্বৈকি প্রবণতা হসিবে ভাষা শক্ষিার নীতি ও চর্চার উপর কী প্রভাব ফলে, এবং তা প্রয়োগমূলক ভাষাতত্ত্ব ও সমাজ-ভাষাতত্ত্বে ব্যাপকভাবে আলোচতি; কন্তিু আমরা মনে করি যে, এই পুঁজবিাদী প্রভাবগুলো কীভাবে বসেরকারি বশ্বিবদ্যিালয়, স্থানীয় সরকার, কাজরে ক্ষত্রে এবং আন্তর্জাতকি দাতব্য

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সংস্থার সহযোগিতার মাধ্যমে উচ্চশিক্ষা প্রতিষ্ঠানে প্রবেশ করছে, সে বিষয়ে তুলনামূলকভাবে কম গবেষণা করা হয়েছে। শিক্ষাপ্রতিষ্ঠান গুলোকে দাতব্য পুঁজিপতিদের সহযোগিতা গ্রহণ করতে হলে, বিশেষ করে গ্লোবাল সাউথের নারীদের জন্য এর সামাজিক খরচ কতটা হতে পারে, তা ভাষাতত্ত্বের গবেষণায় যথেষ্ট গুরুত্ব পায়নি। অর্থনৈতিকভাবে পিছিয়ে থাকা এবং গার্মেন্টস কর্মরত নারীদের মধ্যে যারা একটি আন্তর্জাতিক বেসরকারি বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ে পড়াশোনা করছে, তাদের উপর করা একটি নৃ-তাত্ত্বিক গবেষণার ভিত্তিতে এই প্রবন্ধটি এই শূন্যস্থান গুলো পূরণের চেষ্টা করছে। এই নিবন্ধটি একটি "সক্ষম-নারী" হিসেবে তাদের সামাজিক পরিচয় তৈরি করার প্রক্রিয়া এবং তাদের যোগাযোগের কাঠামোর সাথে যুক্ত অনুভূতি ও প্রভাবগুলি, গুরুত্ব সহকারে পরীক্ষা করছে।

কী-শব্দ: ফিলানথ্রোক্যাপিটালিজম; নারীর ক্ষমতায়ন; ভাষা ব্যবহার; ইংরেজি; উচ্চশিক্ষা।

1 Introduction

(IU) (the university) is a golden opportunity. So we must use properly. They who give us donation will assess us, so we must do well, and we need English to do well. (Yasmin)

These words were uttered by Yasmin (anonymised), a former factory worker and one of the student participants in our study, at a focus group meeting that the first author (Sudha) conducted with students to understand their experiences at an international women's university (IU, hereafter) in Bangladesh. IU, as an independent (i.e., private) university that follows an all-English curriculum, had set as its mission to empower Asian women from socio-economically less privileged backgrounds and transform them into change-makers through an education in English. All the students at the meeting were former factory workers from the ready-made garment (RMG, hereafter) industry in Bangladesh who had been carefully selected for having potential to benefit from such an education model.

At IU, the RMG students received further support from their factory employers who, as partners in their education, paid their wages during their five-year long residential education to sustain their dependent families in the villages. In exchange for the investment made in them, the women believed that they had to perform in certain expected ways to become desirable and worthy citizens of such a programme. Yasmin spoke for all her factory colleagues and articulates their experience of the struggles and challenges they faced. While expressing a deep sense of gratitude and obligation to her benefactors for providing the "golden opportunity", her words also revealed the effect the governance from above had on them: the pressure to perform well in a highly competitive environment; the fear of failure; and, most importantly, the anxiety about having to perform well through the medium of English – particularly poignant for students like Yasmin who came from Bangla medium schools and struggled to rise to the expectations of institutions where the discourse of English as

the language of social and economic empowerment and international development was taken for granted.

The factory workers' 5-year long residential education comprised three components, namely: Programme for Promise (PP, hereafter), involving a Pre-Access intensive English course; Access, entailing a bridging course in preparation for the degree course; and a three-year undergraduate course. As a whole, this education offer constituted the nexus that brought together a powerful network of institutions that included: the government of Bangladesh; the RMG (ready-made garment) industry; a group of multinational philanthrocapitalists such as the IKEA-Stichting Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Foundation, the Open Society Fund, Goldman Sachs, L'Oreal, Nike, among several other local and international business employers; and the university with its influential Board of Trustees made of international figures who also acted as the main fund raisers for the university across the US, UK and Europe, Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan. Altogether, they contributed to shape ideas and practices associated with the discourse of women's empowerment at IU, in line with the government's priorities

> on improving the condition of women and on strengthening the quality of education as means of advancing national development and desires to host and support the university in Bangladesh (The University Charter).

In return for its official support, the government of Bangladesh demanded a commitment from IU to reserve at least 25 % of the seats for Bangladeshi women students, with the expectation that they would bring about social and economic change to the country. Following a political commitment to women's empowerment embedded in "national development" goals set at the United Nations, the government played a key role in 2016 when the university set up PP, a programme considered by the Vice Chancellor of IU as a marker of uniqueness in catering to the English needs of socio-economically underserved women, unlike other private universities in Bangladesh. Indeed, PP would become the most advertised initiative of the university at the time of the fieldwork, appearing widely covered by national and international newspapers.

In so doing, the multi-million RMG (ready-made garment) sector was identified as a source from which to recruit socially disadvantaged women; this sector would not only provide the students, but more importantly continue to pay the salaries for five years as part of their so-called "corporate social responsibility" (CRS, hereafter). The factories themselves were too publicly reported as having a golden opportunity for the RMG industry to support their workforce and improve their reputation, after the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013 that killed more than a thousand workers, mostly young women, due to negligence. But not only that, besides the political backing, their CSR initiative would also gain recognition among the international corporations and, in addition, their workers at the university were deemed to serve as their "good ambassadors" in

gratitude for their financial support, as reported by the Director of PP in one of his interviews with the first author.

As for the corporate philanthropic foundations, PP became a strategic element in wider agendas concerned with the development of women in South Asia. Stichting IKEA Foundation, for example, one of the seed donors of PP, sponsored the RMG learners with full scholarships for five years through a joint agreement with the university envisioned as a pathway to "create a generation of leaders for the region" (Development aim – IKEA Agreement). The enmeshment of such corporate understandings of women as a valuable resource, rather than as victims, and particularly how this is imagined to be accomplished by the university in its endeavours to empower women through an English education, was also well reflected in speeches by the IU's Board of Trustees published in brochures and videos on the university website. Accessible to students, stakeholders in education and prospective donors, such speeches were powerful indicators of the discourse of corporate success and why, in their perspective, women were worth investing in.

One such promotional video was that of the Vice Chair of a leading international corporate firm whose powerful delivery and their sheer status as a successful strategic analyst established a firm corporate role model for other stakeholders and for the students to aspire for. As they put it:

> …Numerous studies have shown that the return on the dollar is higher for educating women than for men because women are more likely to pass on the education philosophy to their children and the rest of the community. My other passion is getting more women into the economy… using half that population more efficiently makes sense… (IU website)

Against this background, it could be argued that Yasmin's account further above demonstrates an internalisation of the promise of higher education through the medium of English as the key to unlock a better future, regardless of the specific local conditions that she inhabits in Bangladesh. Certainly, this resonates with the blooming of applied linguistic research that over the last few decades has critiqued the global spread of English in higher education settings for its effects on the loss of national languages (Ferguson 2007) and, more generally, for its impact on the pursuit of linguistic justice (Soler and Morales-Gálvez 2022; see also Jeong and Lindemann 2024). And yet it is not clear what the local ecology is that makes English such a valuable object of attention to all the above-mentioned stakeholders at IU, nor do we know the specific effects that this object has on students like Yasmin who aspire to "become empowered" through an education that is imagined as appropriate and necessary to empower women.

With the aim of shedding further light on these issues, this article examines more closely how philanthropic ideas of English and women's empowerment become institutionally entrenched with languaging practices and subject-making

processes in the context of higher education in Bangladesh. In what follows, we first trace today's focus on the empowering of women in Bangladesh back to the historical conditions that followed its independence, with a view to the enmeshment of ideas of women's empowerment, English, structural adjustment programmes for national development and the emergence of corporate actors operating globally (Section 2). With that in mind, we introduce an ethnographically-informed sociolinguistic approach that investigates how such ideas contribute to the institutional ordering of everyday practices and subjectivities at IU (Section 3). Later, we zoom in onto PP a key socialisation space for our participants to socialise each other into communicative ways of *doing* and *being* recognised at IU as emblematic of the social persona of an "empowered woman" (Section 4), followed by further discussion on the consequences of such practices and their implications for scholarly work preoccupied with the study of language, higher education and late capitalism (Section 5).

2 Development, empowerment and English – women at the centre

The conceptualisation of human beings as capital and investment in Bangladesh can hardly be disentangled from long-standing histories of colonialism and capitalism in so-called economically "under-developed and developing countries" (Stromquist 1993). As a relatively young nation-state that separated from Pakistan in 1971 and which previously had gained independence from British colonialism in 1947 as part of India, Bangladesh's independence has, indeed, coincided with a wider push towards neoliberal globalisation that has resulted in large scale privatisation and deregulation and a lure for economic development and participation in international global markets. A key engineering feature of these transformations has been the setting of the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs) for 2000–2015, and then Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2016–2030, in which women's upliftment is one key strategic area, thus drawing the attention of the international aid-givers and providing timely opportunities for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives (see also Summers 1992).

Moreover, as one of the first countries to fully avail of the Structural Adjustment Programmes, Bangladesh has also endured economic adjustments that followed the measures for global economic transformations offered by powerful international financial institutions led by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to facilitate the debt crisis. Given that the requirement to repay loans which soon proved beyond its capacity, the country has faced further economic adjustments in the form of privatisation and de-regulation

that have been widely regarded as leading to the weakening of the State (Karim 2008). As a result, Bangladesh has been reported since its independence to rely excessively on foreign aid, in addition to having powerful policy makers and privileged elites that enjoy colonial connections, being highly patriarchal, and comprising a large population of the world's poorest people (Lewis 2011). It is in such historical and political economic conditions that the weighing of human beings in terms of human capital and investment can hit women the hardest, as studies in Women's Development in South Asia have shown (e.g., Nadeam and Rayamajhi 2013).

Some of the tensions associated with such adjustments and their related consequences are well attested in the replacement of the "women's development" keyword with that of "women's empowerment" in the international circles, at the time of the setting of the MDGs, a shift in the international development discourse which has brought about the mainstreaming of gender inequalities and feminist concerns (Nazneen et al. 2011). Consequently, the concept of women's empowerment has become entrenched in the development economics discourses and policies of the local government, the donor organisations, the NGOs as well as the local women's organisations in Bangladesh. Yet, and while being increasingly assigned the centre-stage since the 1970s, the feminization of labour has also been critiqued as enabling the capitalist generation of funds and foreign currency needed to pay off the national debts accrued from the restructuring loans, as exemplified by the export of nannies, maids and entertainers from the Philippines and Thailand to wealthier countries such as Singapore and to Europe, or by the exploitation of young women through cheap labour in factories in South Asia (Alam and Matin 1984; Kabeer 2005; McCarthy 2017; Stromquist 1997).

Meanwhile, Friedman's (2013) call to re-invent philanthropy after the global financial crisis of 2008 has seen the emergence of "philanthrocapitalism" (Bishop and Green 2015) as "the integration of market motives, motifs and methods with philanthropy, especially by HNWIs (high net worth individuals) and their institutions" (Haydon et al. 2021: 371). Deeply anchored in the US and spreading across the globe, practitioners of this model of philanthropy include high-net-worth individuals such as Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and George Soros, but also mega foundations and multi-national corporations like Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Stichting IKEA Foundation, Coca-Cola, Goldman Sachs and Nike. With well-intentioned aims to save the world from poverty by making good what they perceive as the failings of governments and the welfare systems, these organisations and individuals argue that their responsibility does not stop with just giving, as in traditional philanthropy, but rather should go beyond via intervening and investing to transform and encourage international economic growth and development in the areas of health, agriculture, and more impactfully in women's education and empowerment. As such, this new model of philanthropy has been described as a "neoliberal artefact" (Mediavilla and Garcia-Arias 2019: 870), subjected to measurable objectives and quantifiable results for increased efficiency (McGoey 2012).

In Bangladesh, efforts to integrate with global market conditions and to raise economic growth standards set by the international aid organisations have led policy makers to focus, since the 1980s, on women's empowerment as the "magic bullet" (Kabeer 2005) to resolve issues that were thought to hinder economic growth – e.g., poverty, illiteracy, increasing population and poor health and hygiene. By way of echoing the type of rhetoric that was rife in the World Bank, the UN and in the government policies, women have been described as "our most valuable resource" and empowering women as "feeding a community" (Prügl 2015). This trend followed the report on Economic Development (1992) by L.H. Summers of the Office of the Vice President of the World Bank who stated that "investment in the education of girls may be the highest return of investment available in the developing world" (p. 10), a claim supported with statistical evidence of reduced fertility rates and improved children's health and education. However, and while Bangladesh may have exceeded its targets in primary and secondary education of girls (more than boys) between the years 1990 and 2016, bringing down, as anticipated, the numbers of child and neo-natal mortality (SDGs Bangladesh first progress report, 2018), the direct educational gains for the students attending school have presented a rather mixed picture of some economic gain but little improvement in matters of choice (Arends-Kuenning and Amin 2001).

In addition, the employment of young women in the ready-made garment (RMG) industry as beneficiaries of global firms' corporate social responsibility programmes at universities such as IU places factories in the country as serving as one of the partners in education. This has been widely reported as a compensation as well as an opportunity to right the bad reputation following the Rana Plaza tragedy which killed hundreds of young female workers due to exploitation and negligence. As stated by an international newspaper in Bangladesh:

> Three years on, as experts lament how government, retailers, factory owners and consumers have done little to safeguard workers, a small miracle has emerged from the tragedy and is slowly taking shape… Established in the aftermath of the disaster, [University]'s [Programme for Promise] aims to use higher education to empower women labourers to become leaders and have a stronger voice in shaping the future of Bangladesh's lucrative garment sector. (Anonymised source)

But education has not been the only signifier of women's empowerment. English has often accompanied it as a collocation, mirroring wider assumptions that have historically equated this language with economic and political progress (Chowdhury and Kabir 2014; Hamid et al. 2013; Imam 2005; Kabir 2010). Since the 19th century onwards, the association of English with access to power and prestige in Bangladesh, and its subsequent impact on language-in-education policies, are rooted in at least three key dimensions, namely: (a) the British colonial past, (b) its struggle for separation from Pakistan grounded in linguistic and post-colonial nationalism that placed English as the

official language and challenged the supremacy of Bangla as the mother language, and (c) the contemporary neoliberal drive towards economic globalisation where English is seen as the language of international trade and communication and of economic and social mobility, including a more recent lure for an American life-style (see also Hamid and Erling 2016).

This is reflected today in the increasing demand for English and for English medium education in the country, with parents who can afford it sending their children to private schools where they believe the quality of education in English is better than in the public schools or resorting to private tuition in English with the hope of finding admission in English medium secondary schools or colleges which will lead to higher employability and economic prosperity – all of it despite the growing literature questioning the direct correlation between English education and socioeconomic mobility (Hamid 2016; Kabir and Greenwood 2017). As a result, MOI (Medium of Instruction) policy has become a major contributor in the division between the public and private sectors in higher education in Bangladesh, with English only being offered in private universities while various combinations of Bangla and English are only available in the public universities, thereby creating categories of English medium and Bangla medium, reproducing hierarchies and a class structure within English education based on imagined levels of acceptable English language competency (e.g., Hamid and Baldauf 2014; Islam and Salma 2016).

As a private university that offers English as the medium of instruction and is equally concerned with the empowerment of women factory workers, IU constitutes therefore a key window into the study of how all these philanthropic meanings on the empowering of women and learning through the medium of English shape the organisation of social life and social relations within PP. But before doing so we first need to detail our epistemological approach in the exploration of such issues.

3 *Being* and *becoming* through a language and communication lens

The research collaboration that underpins this article draws on a well-established wealth of ethnographic sociolinguistic scholarship that departs from approaches to categories of language, multi/bilingualism or speakerhood as given, to rather explore how they organise social relations according to particular institutional logics (Codó and Patiño-Santos 2018; Dlaske et al. 2016; Garrido and Sabaté-Dalmau 2020; Heller 1999; Lorente 2017; Martín-Rojo 2010; Pérez-Milans 2013; Rampton 2006; Sunyol and Browning 2024). More specifically, we are interested in the packaging and regrouping of semiotic and communicative practices that are then turned into emblems of figures of personhood associated with certain ways of *being* and *doing*. This approach requires

engagement with a variety of interconnected conceptual frameworks in language and communication, and for the analytical purposes of this article we highlight two relevant ones, namely: affective regimes of language and discourse enregisterment.

Our understanding of affective regimes of language is inspired by Ahmed (2004, 2010) as she takes issue with approaches to emotions as internal states of cognition that result in response to (external) events or general social circumstances. Instead, Ahmed invites us to conceptualise them as affective orientations towards material or symbolic objects (including metapragmatic constructs about ways of doing, being and speaking) that organise social activities and social life in particular ways, with effects for the social actors involved. She argues that these orientations, far from being just personal experiences, are always embedded in wider political economic relations or "affective economies" (2004). In other words, affect should also be seen as moving among signs, subjects, and objects, and thus mediating between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and collective (2004: 119). This is the case, for example, of "happy objects" as a promise or a hope for a future happy state that does not exist at present and may or may not arrive.

Writing from a position of "sceptical disbelief in happiness", Ahmed posits that by pursuing these happy objects, we are made to believe that we attain happiness and well-being for ourselves and others, thus often involving the labour of staying on the "right" path as any deviation can cause disturbance to the self as well as to the surroundings. But they can also act as justification for oppression, she warns us. Thus, in turning our attention to happy objects as they affectively arrange and organise activities and social relations we also align with Wetherell (2015) and Kiesling (2018) as they call to analyse affect as a social practice that is semiotically mediated and embodied and which, therefore, is not just purely denotational (see also Kraft and Flubacher 2020; Milani and Richardson 2020).

As to discourse enregisterment, we follow Agha's work (2007) as he builds on the notion of "indexicality of language" (Silverstein 2003) and its focus on how "people organise communicative resources such that they produce specific meanings" (Blommaert 2008: 16). By way of incorporating a socialisation lens, Agha's take on discourse register allows us researchers to account for the processes through which members of social groups come to recognise specific sets of meaning-making practices as shared cultural models of action, with these models being indexically linked to the enactment of specific social personae and to the associated stances that such personae perform with regard to circumstances, other social actors, or institutions. Anchored in this approach, we aim to: (1) examine the institutional logics whereby a set of semiotic features become recognised as emblematic of being or doing the "empowered woman" within the PP programme at IU as well as the kinds of moral/social stances (Jaffe 2009) that are associated with it; and (2) identify the linkages between this form of discourse register and the institutional actors and networks that contribute to its standardisation and which capitalize on it.

Our attempts to engage with affective orientations through a language and communication lens such as this is also informed by previous sociolinguistic work that brought out the affective features of late capitalism. For instance, Cameron (2000) documented how besides certain established character traits expected of employees in the service industry such as being enthusiastic, hardworking and friendly with a willingness to take risks, the ability to communicate in gender-specific ways was identified as an essential skill. She described the training and scripting of call centre workers as emotional work. Focusing on the adverse effects of the Structural Adjustment policies imposed on the Global South, Lorente (2017) revealed how the state of Philippines and the private maid agencies used English as a commodity to trade Filipino women as super maids to care for the children of the wealthy in Singapore in order to sustain the families they had left behind. Pérez-Milans and Guo (2020) traced the trajectories of Chinese international students and the emotional pressures that they suffer for a 'successful' return home as a technology of hope, and how they subsequently turn to projects of religious conversion as an alternative space for hoping. Park (2017) shed light on the affective consequences experienced by students due to the imposition of an English language policy in higher education in South Korea.

Building on this strand of work, we approach our own research site with a view to understand how the affect of hope is entrenched with wider ideologies of English and late capitalist discourses of women's empowerment and how the figure of the empowered woman given the right to dream is enacted and made sense of with the participation of philanthropic stakeholders. In line with Ahmed's (2010) work, but with a lesser degree of scepticism, we take our participants' pursuit of becoming "empowered" as a "happy object" that pushes them into a particular direction in order to be prepared and develop a "technique for living well" (p. 2), this involving the acquiring of legitimised forms of education and skills at IU (e.g., English language) for an imagined state of social and economic well-being. Thus, we aim to understand how technologies of hope are semiotically and communicatively enacted in the everyday practices of the women in our research, and also how they make sense of their "happy objects" (p. 21) as they pursue the Programme for Promise at the university, despite the struggles and inequalities they experience in Bangladesh.

4 Programming the promise, becoming an empowered woman – the case of Hasina

As the first stage in the factory workers' 5-year long residential education at IU, PP constituted a key affective space for the concerned participants to begin socialising each other into desirable ways of *doing* and *being* recognised at IU as emblematic of

the social persona of an "empowered woman". In what follows, we trace two meaning-making dimensions that in our data corpus recurrently emerged as salient in making the process of *becoming an empowered woman* recognisable. These are: the institutional ordering of "keywords" (Ahmed 2012: 51–82) upon which the social life of PP was arranged (Section 4.1.); and the scripting of the desired type of personhood throughout the first year (Section 4.2).

4.1 The promise in keywords

The institutional packaging of the meanings associated with the desired "empowered woman" was articulated through a cluster of keywords recursively circulated and valued by the relevant network of institutions involved in the educational programme for the factory workers at IU – i.e. the government of Bangladesh, the RMG (ready-made garment) industry, the multinational philanthrocapitalists acting as seed donors and the Board of Trustees as the main fund raisers for the university. These were already visible in how the promise of socio-economic mobility for women garment workers was presented by each of these stakeholders as they promoted the programme at IU, with "challenges", "problems", "leadership", "critical thinking", "skills", "talented woman" and "liberal arts education" featuring in making the figure of the empowered woman intelligible. Table 1 illustrates how such keywords were arranged by the different types of stakeholders.

As a whole, this initiative at IU was emblematically associated with the promise that these empowered women would become leaders in their own communities and be able to address the main forms of social inequalities that affect their own regions (e.g., poverty, ethnic conflicts or climate change), all of it with the help of the skills and the type of critical thinking that provides a liberal arts education. Put differently, these keywords indexed the hope that these workers would become empowered women. The linkage between leadership, skills, critical thinking and the Liberal Arts curriculum is rationalised in Extract 1 by Dr T, one of the lecturers in charge of delivering the General Education Core Programme within PP.

Extract 1. The General Education Core Programme

"The Core Programme is a common foundation set of courses in the Liberal Arts curriculum. Critical thinking is embedded in the learning outcomes of the Core Program in which I teach modelled on the AAC&U. (American Association of Universities and Colleges). Yes, Critical thinking IS (emphasis original) assessed through both formative and summative assessment within a course… Overall, we look at the ability to make reasoned arguments both in written and verbal form… It means that students are able to be thoughtfully critical and reflexive about problems

that present themselves… Unlike critical thinking, the explicit development of leadership skills are not always embedded in learning outcomes. It is implied in some cases that building up academic skills including critical thinking will lead to or add to the cultivation of sound leadership abilities…" (E-mail correspondence with Dr T).

As such, the cluster of keywords captured in Table 1 get packaged within authoritative pedagogical discourses anchored in US-based educational traditions, thus providing a source of legitimacy to the promise associated with the education of women garment workers at IU. This is also attested in the official documents produced by the university which defines the General Education Core Programme as

> adher[ing] to best practice in international education, with a specific focus on the education needs of Asian women, through a purpose- designed General Education Core Program in the liberal arts and the sciences [in which] [t]he Medium of instruction is English (University Handbook, section 'Identity').

But the emblematic association of the education of women garment workers at IU with the promise of becoming leaders was not only institutionally established

Table 1: Keywords and stakeholders.

Stakeholders	Cluster of keywords associated with the education of women garment workers
Member of Parliament, featuring IU in the landscape of higher education institutions in Bangladesh	"…We thought that in Bangladesh in the garment sector where more than three million women are working there must be some incredibly talented women who would be able to, if given a liberal arts education, not just make themselves skilled, but what will happen is they will become leaders in their own chosen fields…"
Stichting IKEA Foundation, declaring in a joint agreement with the university that the sponsored graduates will be able to…	"… help address the greatest challenges facing their communities including educational disparities, poverty, gender discrimination and ethnic conflicts. By training women in leadership and critical thinking and inculcating in them an ethos of tolerance and respect for diversity, (the university) aims to create a generation of leaders for the region…"
Senior Managing Partner as Board of Trustee and CEO of multinational company, as quoted in IU's Annual Report	"When you try to treat just one issue, such as providing clean drinking water for a single community, it can get overwhelmed by all the other problems on the list: poverty, disease, violence, sanitation and climate change. We need something to treat these problems across the board – a silver bullet. For me and many others, that silver bullet is women's education…"

through the circulation of clusters of keywords, by the concerned stake holders, and legitimised by pedagogical centres of authority in the US. It also involved the communicative scripting of the social persona of an empowered woman as the garment workers engaged with the programme throughout their first year at IU.

4.2 The scripting of empowerment, and the case of Hasina

Communicatively speaking, being recognised as "empowered women" demanded from the garment workers enrolled in PP an active engagement with four "behavioural templates" (Lorente 2017) that contributed to enregister a specific set of semiotic features as emblems of such a figure of personhood . These templates were: Deserving the IKEA scholarship to enter the PP programme; coordinating groupwork in the classroom; representing PP in public events; and being the face of IU on the media (see Table 2, for a general communicative characterisation of these templates, extracted from the ethnographic observations).

The emblematisation of the empowered woman through engagement with these behavioural templates is particularly revealed through the case of Hasina, one of the 200 or so women from the garment factories who at the time of the first author's fieldwork was selected to avail of the IKEA Foundation scholarship to pursue an undergraduate education. Like all the other students, Hasina had also worked in a factory located in a large Export Processing Zone. She came from a rural suburb near Dhaka, having completed her secondary education in the medium of Bangla, with an hour per week of English as a rote-learning activity. Though the competition for a place had been very high, Hasina admitted that she had opportunities to prepare for the interview in order to show that her leadership potential and her English were better than that of the other candidates. Indeed, she soon was regarded by staff members and seed sponsors within PP as "a typical product of IU".

Through her active enactment of the key behavioural templates detailed above over her first academic year, Hasina became the social model of an empowered woman. Extract 2 below shows her entextualisation (Silverstein and Urban 1996) of one of these templates: representing PP in public events. As she had been chosen to be the class representative and was often selected to be the spokeswoman for PP, the IU management invited her to give a speech at one of the panel discussions at the university's 10th Anniversary and Commencement celebrations. Given the celebratory nature of the event, the auditorium was on the day filled with about 500 people, including university staff, graduating students and their parents as well as representatives of the university, seed donors, factory partners and the Press, in addition to various guests of honour – mainly international business individuals – associated with

Table 2: Communicative templates in the enactment of an empowered woman.

	Deserving IKEA scholarship to enter PP	**Coordinating groupwork in the classroom**	**Representing PP in public events**	**Being the face of IU on the media**
Domain	– Garment factories	– IU classroom	– Model United Nations – Women's Empowerment Summit – Talent Night – Inter-Cultural Awareness Week. – Karate and Confidence Development	– Print newspapers in Bangladesh – IU online social media accounts
Genre	– Written personal statement – Self-introductions – Test entrance examination – Oral interview with panel members from IU and IKEA donors	– Classroom groupwork – Group discussions	– Public speeches to distinguished visitors, corporate leaders and representatives of international foundations	– News reports – Social media posting
Style	– Well-rehearsed Standard English – Statement on belonging to marginalised community – Statement on previous experiences in public service – Statement on having completed a minimum of 10 years of education – Statement of future goal to bring about social change – e.g., asserting RMG women's rights, fight against forced early marriage, working for the aged destitute, social worker, and a teacher to help with poor children's education	– Well-rehearsed Standard English – Active participation in oral discussion – Initiation and facilitation of groupwork – Negotiation of agreement among group members – Asks group members critical questions – Tolerant, receptive, knowledgeable and fun approach to working with peers – Finish tasks effectively	– Well-rehearsed Standard English – Biographical narratives – Statements in favour of building fairer societies in local communities	– Well-rehearsed Standard English – Anecdotes of personal struggle – Detailed personal feelings and emotions – Statements in favour of building fairer societies in local communities

IU's Board of Trustees. A few minutes into her panel discussion, Hasina's speech went as captured in Extract 2 (see transcription conventions in Appendix).

Extract 2. "That's why I am here"

today/ I am/ sitting/ in front of you/ with a *vision/
to *change the RMG factory/ from poverty level//
I would like to thank/*{IU}/
for giving me this life changing opportunity//
{loud clapping from a section of audience mostly students,
after a brief pause}
when I came to IU/ I had faced a lot of challenges//
first of all/ when I entered to IU/
as I was working in a garment factory/
and I had break from my education after high school/
it was very difficult// it was challenging/ communicating in English//
students from abroad are from English medium schools//
I can still remember/ I used to feel shy to speak in front of public//
HOW/ the Programme made me confident enough/
to speak in front of you// TODAY// in *ENGLISH //
even I can still remember/ my family they were against me//
when I got my offer from IU//
they said/ *what↑/ is your factory selling you now↑//*
they thought/ my factory will sell me off//
WHY/ someone/ they are spending so much money//
*for a *garment worker ↑// to *educate a garment worker↑//*
it was hard/ to face everything// I somehow/ came to IU//
now/ they are really proud//
when they see me /communicating/ with others /in English//
I am the first child/ from my family/ to attend university//
{loud clapping, starting from panel members}
and I feel proud /when they feel proud//
{long pause for clapping to stop}
when / I came here// I came with a /view/ for women//
more than *80% of people in garment factory/ are female//
and every issue/ related to women/
will affect/ directly the productivity of the factory//
so// every factory/ should/ concern//
so// should/ give priority to women issues//
I have/ personally // I have suffered / there// with women's health//

*especially/*menstrual health and hygiene//
from my personal experience/ I KNOW//
I once got / untimely periods//
and I went to the health centre ↑//
I was introduced to the concept of using dirty … cloth/ instead of pads↓//
I had no option↓// and it is not my /*individual case//
most of the female worker working there/
it is *EVERYONEs case//
{Long pause. Pin drop silence in the hall}
now/ this thing is happening/ because of lack of awareness//
in garment factory// and lack of/ support from health centre//
now something needs to be done about this//
I came /*here/ and/ I/ strongly hope/ after graduation/
after completing my education in IU/
I will be in a position to/ in the future//
I will be able↑ to do *something/
for my *SISTERS/ in the garment factory↑//
{loud clapping from the floor}
I HAVE↑ to do something for THEM//
THAT'S WHY I AM HERE//

Hasina's speech was perceived as a great success, as evidenced by the string of applause and the praise she receives from everyone present, including on social media. Thus, a close look at her performance shows how the behavioural template of representing PP in public events is turned into a recognisable model of action whereby social actors at IU affectively regulate their and others' practices and feelings as they enact legitimate models of personhood while aligning with normative forms of knowledge and moral categories about the social world (i.e. what is "good" or "desirable"). Indeed, Extract 2 displays a formal speech reflexively packaged (Lucy 1993) and rehearsed for the occasion, as seen in the clarity of Hasina's speech as she slowly delivers it with regular pauses. She communicatively performs the stance of a factory worker who has developed into a liberal arts student with leadership and critical thinking skills as she prepares herself to act as a societal change-maker.

Hasina's speech is important both in terms of its content and in its narrative structure, in line with those who have long argued for how narrative language offers a view to identity work at hand and to communicatively-mediated processes of subjectification (e.g., Schiffrin 1996). While content-wise she inter-sectionally touches upon issues of gender and class through the persona of a factory woman, the narrative structure keeps the audience's attention provoking the expected response at the crucial stages in the development of the story. Hasina starts by giving an

abstract of what she intends to talk about (lines 1–4), followed by an orientation of her life and struggles (lines 5–28). Then she sets the scene of action with an example of her factory experience that leads to a climax (lines 29–44) and finally ends the story with an evaluation of the issue (lines 45–47) and a link back to the abstract (lines 48–55). Throughout the speech, it should be noted that there is loud clapping from the audience at each of these stages, signalling the interaction of the audience and their uptake of the speech.

The emphasis on and choice of words in the opening sentence, "Today", "vision" and "change", and the use of the present continuous tense in "am sitting", show Hasina assuming an epistemic stance of a leader. The tone of authority with which she sets the stage portrays her as an able activist who is determined to change the RMG industry. Her rhetoric overshadows the actual substance of the rather vague reference she makes to her goal "to change the RMG factory from poverty level". When she acknowledges the university's part in providing her with this opportunity to be a change-maker (lines 3–4), there is loud clapping signifying the audience acknowledgement of the university's achievement in producing such leaders (line 5). Then Hasina continues with a list of challenges she had overcome after joining IU (lines 7–17) attracting applause once again, this time starting from the management sharing the stage with her, in appreciation of Hasina's hard work and also IU's success in educating women from such disadvantaged backgrounds. The university's preference to recruit the women who are the first in the family to pursue higher education is proudly displayed in its admissions statistics and used in its marketing endeavours.

Through revoicing her family's concerns, Hasina raises critical questions about the exploitation of women by capitalist institutions (lines 18–22). This leads her to perform the stance of a champion for factory women's rights. She frames women's issues as a priority if factories want to see more "productivity" (lines 29–35), 80 % of the workforce being women. Linking this strategically to her concern for menstrual health, using a taboo subject, menstruation, as a stance object, she appeals to the audience by aligning herself with the assumed audience's subscription to the primacy of productivity. At this point the speech reaches its climax signified by the rising and falling intonation and loudness of voice (lines 36–43). A reference to a personal experience of being provided with improper health care in the factory using stark vocabulary – "untimely periods", "dirty cloth", "pads" – not only intensifies women's suffering but also breaks the stereotypical perception of the factory woman as shy and docile. It presents Hasina as courageous and daring. The concluding stage of the speech is denoted by Hasina's rising intonation and her emphatic announcement – "I HAVE↑ to do something for them", showing urgency and commitment (line 54). She aligns with the factory women by referring to them as her "sisters". At the same time, by using the pronoun "them" she distances herself as a university student being trained to become

a leader in the community (lines 48–52). The final words of her speech "THAT'S why I am HERE" (line 55), spoken loudly and clearly, emphasises her positioning and firm commitment as a spokesperson for the RMG women.

5 Scripts of philanthropy: transformation as self-responsibilisation of southern women

Hasina was selected by IU to showcase a model student from a factory background who transformed into a public speaking figure with leadership potential and who brough about social change. But in doing so her struggles were in turn backgrounded. In other words, the willingness to transform herself into a desired subject was the object of celebration rather than the true achievements themselves. Certainly, at IU, English opened doors to those who could speak it accompanied by the required communicative skills to persuade and lead. Indeed, the reporters from a national English language newspaper interviewed Hasina soon after the event discussed further above, and the former factory woman attracted a great deal of media publicity in the newspaper the next morning. In addition, a corporate member of one of the supporting foundations at IU described her as "a spark, turning out to be a typical product of (IU)". She was no longer perceived as a victim of social inequalities but, instead, as a resource to raise socio-economic gains.

More importantly, it seems that what Hasina was training herself to achieve was to be seen as "becoming a leader" or a change maker. However, as an emblem of this type of social persona, her frantically busy schedule soon involved having to take part in numerous activities outside classrooms, all of it along with her challenging academic studies in English, particularly academic writing, which ended up having their toll on her mental and physical health within six months of her enrolment in IU. Towards the end of the second semester, her attendance at classes started to drop and she was no longer seen in the clubs and societies where she used to take an active role at the start of the first academic year. She began suffering migraines due to stress and ultimately faced depression when she realised that she could not do all that she had wanted to. Becoming part of an international university had its challenges and she seemed to be under considerable pressure to live up to that social image that she successfully enacted in her new English-medium environment at IU (which she often depicted as Westernised) while, at the same time, meeting the normative expectations required from her as a woman from a traditional rural and patriarchal Muslim community in Bangladesh. But not only that: in addition to dealing with the consequences of realising that learning English did not stop with learning the language, she was also the recipient

of constant reminders from her teachers and her benefactors to take advantage of the opportunity that she had been provided, all of which exacerbated her anxiety levels.

As much as the other women studying with her – including Yasmin with whom we opened this article, Hasina's experiences resonate with wider debates on whether or not the affective orientation of women towards "happy objects" – such as the powerful idea of "becoming empowered" in this context – contributes to make a positive impact on those who are institutionally expected to pursue it, or if rather it brings about a moral obligation to transform that mainly has negative effects for them. Communicatively embodied through specific behavioural templates or scripts, being or doing an "empowered woman" entailed the discourse enregisterment of a set of semiotic features that emblematised such a figure of personhood and which included speaking in English and aligning with moral values of leadership and commitment to social justice through narrative language like the one analysed in Extract 2. But the constant enactment of these templates was a must for our participants to access the promised rewards that come with an international, English-medium higher education which they all had aspired and struggled to enjoy throughout their lives (i.e., social recognition, professional success and socioeconomic mobility) – or otherwise they were to be socially blamed.

The stances that "successful" students and corporate leaders display as role models in their promotional material and at university events conveys IU's expectations to prospective students and establishes the persona of the corporate leader that is envisaged. In Hasina's public speech, in particular, we see how role-modelling brings into focus the "extra-ordinariness" (Park 2010: 30) and erases, in the process, the struggles emerged from the structural inequalities and social barriers she had faced – the latter appear as her own responsibility to overcome. We argue that this risks the reproduction of class and gender inequalities and further divisions among women which women's empowerment is meant to challenge in the first place.

With due acknowledgement of the university's well-intentioned mission and altruistic efforts, empowerment becomes entrenched with a capitalist logic naturalised as a maximisation of resources and centred on economic investment and benefit – i.e., with a logic presented as a "good" form of capitalism (see also Nuottaniemi 2024, for a similar rationale linked to "green capitalism"). From the standpoint of the philanthrocapitalists and the international fund raisers, the empowerment of southern women acts as a "silver bullet" to tackle several other social and economic issues, capitalising on women's resilience as an under-utilized market value. In response to that, the university and the corporate employers aim to make the women more suited for the global market with a skills-oriented education. By supporting such endeavours, the state of Bangladesh hopes to achieve its development targets while the RMG industry strengthens its CSR strategy. The RMG women in turn, as sponsored students of IU, reciprocate reflexively

by presenting themselves as benefitting materially and symbolically from such an arrangement, as exemplified by Hasina's performance of "doing empowerment".

Although there may have been some immediate financial gain for women from socially marginalised backgrounds such as our participants, which we recognise is also essential, this is not necessarily linked to long-term socioeconomic mobility. Even when studying alongside upper-middle-class, fee-paying, English-medium students through the medium of English with exposure to international standards was envisioned as all that was needed to fill the gap, these women were still largely perceived as rural, non-fee paying, Bangla medium RMG workers. These structural forces were also hardly impacted by an educational rationale that expected our participants to act on themselves as individuals to transform into desirable bodies as changemakers, all of it underpinned by the understanding that empowerment is all about becoming independent and responsibilised subjects, and further naturalised by values of leadership and critical thinking associated with authoritative pedagogical models coming from centres of authority in the Global North – i.e., a US-based liberal arts curriculum. Against the background of these colonial forms of languaging higher education in the Global South (see also Makoni et al. 2022), our question is not if these southern women will make able leaders, but rather if they are allowed to take equal part in decision-making within larger societal configurations – including patriarchal ones.

In pondering this question, we return to the notion of "empowerment" in women's development studies where it is often conceptualised as relational and subjective, thus implying that power is not always given, as assumed in most women's empowerment projects, but also taken (e.g., Rowlands 1995). Drawing on a transformative sense of the term, empowerment is from this perspective seen as a process that assumes an awareness of powerlessness and mobility from a less powerful state or subordination to a more powerful or equally powerful state: "empowerment must involve undoing negative social constructions, so that the people affected come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and influence" (Ibid, p. 103). Zinia, another participant in her third year at IU, makes her own critical view on this clear, in the course of a discussion on what empowerment meant to her:

> I don't think just giving or doing job is women empowerment// women's empowerment means whatever I think I can do/ I can do// it's not that I am educated so I have to do job// it is my wish/ if I do not wish I should not have to do it (…) but here I saw that people forcing women to do job// **DO JOB, DO JOB* {with an angry and irritated tone}

And if women's empowerment is to be taken as a subjective process, Kabeer (2001) argues, then it is important "to bear in mind the important distinction between women as a socially subordinate category and women as a highly diverse group of individuals"

(p. 82), this requiring careful consideration of the diverse individual needs of women to achieve a collective aim of social justice. In contrast, many of the education and employment initiatives by NGOs and the government for women's empowerment in South Asian contexts, including Bangladesh, with the financial support of international aid agencies, have been projects with partial achievement since they were planned to accumulate human capital from a homogenised body of women mainly, as the literature on development indicates (e.g., Sen 1997, 1999a, 1999b). Similarly, most corporate social responsibility initiatives in the current scenario tend to be quick-fix projects with top-down mechanisms of implementation, limited funds and bound by pre-set targets and company outcomes (Edwards 2008). We hope our account in this article adds to the existing literature by shedding light on the communicative embodiment of these processes and on their effects within infrastructures of higher education.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

CR	(Capital letters) loud talking
cr	(Italics letters) reported speech
/	Short pause (0.5 s)
//	Long pause (0.5–1.5 s)
{ }	Researcher's comments
↑	Rising intonation
↓	Falling intonation
xxx	Anonymised

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